

Don't Forget the Marginalized

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Luke 4: 16-30 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers^[d] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

When I was in college, I attended a church in downtown Birmingham, Alabama that met in an old store front and about ½ of the congregation were people who were homeless. Now, many churches have ministries that feed the homeless or provide clothing or even housing – really important things. But what was unique about this church is that, while it did all of those things, it also was a congregation where the majority of the people worshipping were homeless.

I attended their weekly Bible study and I'll always remember one session in particular. The study was being led by Terry, who was a homeless man himself. And he told us that we were going to read the Be-attitudes. Now, I was a church kid. I spent my whole life in church and I had a pretty good knowledge of Scripture so I immediately opened my Bible to Matthew 5 where we find a passage of Scripture known as the Be-attitudes where Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

But I opened my Bible too soon. Terry continued, “Now the most well-known Be-attitudes are in Matthew, but we’re going to look at the ones in Luke 6.” You see, Luke also has a version of the Be-attitudes, but they are slightly different. Instead of “Blessed are the poor in Spirit,” Luke says, “Blessed are the poor.” And instead of “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Luke says, “Blessed are those who hunger. Blessed are those who thirst.”

I had spent my whole life going to church and had never been to a Bible study or heard a sermon preached on Luke’s version, but I had heard countless sermons and studies on Matthew’s. And all of a sudden, I realized why. Until I joined that church, I had never gone to church with poor people before. I had never gone to church with hungry people before. For a church made up of middle class people, Luke’s version was a little too challenging, a little too uncomfortable. But for the homeless community of Birmingham, it was profound good news.

You see, what we’ve experienced impacts the way we see and understand the world around us and it impacts our faith. Who we are, where we live, our race, our gender, our social class – all of these factors impact the way we live out our faith, the way we understand our theology, and the way we read Scripture.

Today, we continue our sermon series Don’t Forget as we consider our call to Don’t Forget the Marginalized. And I wonder if because so much of American theology has, at least historically, been developed not from the margins (like most of the writers of Scripture were) but from places of power, that we sometimes lose sight of just how radical our faith is, especially when it comes to justice for the oppressed and good news for the poor. But remembering the marginalized is not some new liberal progressive idea. It is the very heart of our gospel and the very heart of our Scripture. There are over 2000 verses in the Bible that talk about caring for the poor, justice for the poor. Time and again, Scripture commands that the reader to care for the widow and the orphan – the most marginalized people of the day. Leviticus commanded the people to love the immigrant just as they love themselves. And in our Scripture today, Jesus’ first sermon in the gospel of Luke, he proclaims that he has come to free the oppressed, bring release to the captives, and good news to the poor. Caring for the marginalized is as central to our faith as it gets.

In the gospel reading, this is a passage that many scholars say function sort of as Jesus’ mission statement in the gospel of Luke. Jesus’ language echoed the Jewish year of Jubilee that you can read about in Leviticus 25 and that the prophets often would proclaim. Jesus’ words that he has come “To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” were words that had become synonymous with the Year of Jubilee and it meant something very specific. It meant land reform and debt relief and freedom from slavery. Debts would be cancelled, land returned to the original land owners, and slaves set free. That was the specific policy that the year of Jubilee initiated. And this is what Jesus came proclaiming in his first sermon.

Jesus’ mission here is social justice, plain and simple. And it was really good news to the audience who were themselves oppressed by the Romans. Luke tells us that “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But then something strange happens. The crowd that is so happy about what Jesus is saying, only a few verses later, that same crowd wants to throw Jesus off a cliff.

I mean the first sermon I ever preached was really bad, but nobody wanted to kill me.

What happened?

How could such good news change so quickly? Well, Jesus started talking about foreigners and God's love for them. He told the story of a widow from Sidon, a foreigner, who God provided for. But Jesus goes even farther than this. He not only talks about this widow from Sidon that Elijah healed, he also tells the crowd about Naaman, the Syrian. Naaman was a military commander, and not only a military commander, but a Syrian commander. The very first people who conquered Israel were the Assyrians. This man was the hated enemy of Israel; he was the one that led the enemy into battle against Israel. He exemplified everything the people struggled against. And Jesus reminded the people that God healed even this man, an enemy of Israel.

And suddenly Jesus is no longer so popular with the people of Nazareth precisely because he refused to play the us and them game. Jesus came to not only bring good news to Israel but to the whole world. And just because he came to bring good news to the whole world does not mean that he loved Israel any less. But that's a really hard lesson to learn. It is so easy to think that for one group of people to be free, another group has to suffer, for one group of people to find justice, that another group of people must be defeated. We live in a world that tells us there's not enough for all of us. If something good happens to them, then we're going to lose something.

You hear that in the rhetoric about immigration right now – they are taking our jobs. They are costing tax payers money.

You hear it in the rhetoric around police violence and the shooting of unarmed African Americans—that if you protest unjust killings of African Americans at the hands of the police then you somehow hate all police officers.

You hear it in the conversations around nationalism – you can either care for America First or you can care for refugees, but you can't do both.

So often, what gets in the way of us doing justice for the marginalized is when we operate out of this mindset that we have to choose between groups. But Jesus tells us something completely different. Israel was still Jesus' country, but he was able to love his homeland and he was able to love the whole world at the same time. He was able to bring good news to the poor Hebrew people and good news to foreigners like the widow and even good news to Israel's enemies at the same time. For Jesus, there's enough good news for everybody. We don't have to pick and choose.

But that's a hard lesson to learn. Writer Chris Boeskel says, "When your accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression." It's so tempting to think that there's not enough for all of us and so we have to hold on to what we have. And then there's that really difficult word – privilege. It evokes really intense, and often defensive responses. So let me say that being

privileged – whether it’s white privilege, or male privilege, or straight privilege, or income, education, or a whole host of other things – being privileged does not mean we are bad people. It doesn’t mean that life has necessarily been easy for us. It doesn’t mean that we individually cause injustice in the world. But it does mean we benefit from those injustices.

Let me give you a few examples:

- I’ve never been pulled over by the police when I wasn’t breaking a traffic law. Most of my African American friends have – that’s white privilege even though I wasn’t doing anything bad.
- I’ve never been looked at weird when I was holding my wife’s hand in public – that’s straight privilege.
- When I once told church leaders that I needed a ministry placement that takes into account my family situation, they told me, “You’re a great example of being a dad.” When female clergy ask for the same thing, sometimes they are told, “I hear you but that may limit your ministry possibilities.” – That’s male privilege.

In each of these scenarios, I didn’t do anything wrong or bad. But things did work out better for me because of my race, my gender, and my sexuality. That’s a privilege I have. And so if I’m going to remember the marginalized, I need to be aware that I have privileges that other people don’t.

And that leads me to my next suggestion – it’s so important to believe marginalized people when they tell us about their lived experience. In 2011, Alabama passed an anti-immigrant law. I was a part of a group of clergy who protested that law. We held town hall meetings in churches across the state and in one meeting, there was a group of people who were angry about what we were doing. One of the provisions of that law required law enforcement to detain anyone they suspected of being in the country illegally. We felt like that could easily lead to racial profiling of the Hispanic community and so we said as much. One person, a white person, said, “The police are good people. I’ve never been detained when I shouldn’t have been. They wouldn’t do that.” He was assuming that everyone had the same experience as he did. I had had the same experience he did. So I asked the people of color in that room if that was their experience, and every single one of them had a different experience. Every single one of them had been stopped for no reason.

Remembering the marginalized means that we need to believe marginalized people when they tell us what they experience and just because we may not have experienced the same thing does not mean it isn’t true. Each of us is only the expert about our own experiences and none of us are the experts about someone else’s. We must believe what marginalized people tell us.

Thirdly, remembering the marginalized means that we work with and alongside, not for. We cannot assume to know what the marginalized want if we’re not in relationship with them. And if we are not working with and alongside, our efforts, even well-intentioned efforts, can become patronizing and sometimes do more harm than good.

And finally, may we all remember our faith, and especially, may we remember the words of Jesus – that he has come to bring good news to the poor, freedom for the oppressed, and release to the captives. And as we are called to follow him, we too are called to bring good news to the poor, freedom for the oppressed, and released to the captives.

We are called to never forget the marginalized.

It doesn't get more gospel than that.