

“Customary Practice”

A sermon based on Luke 4:14-21
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, January 27th, 2019
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Next Sunday, this congregation held its annual meeting of the corp. Like most congregations, and all Presbyterian ones, we meet annually to report on the fiscal aspects of the past year. This church has done this, I would assume, just about every year since its founding in 1856. And I anticipate that it will continue to do this into the foreseeable future. It is customary, a good custom, part of our practice of the faith.

As we pick up Luke’s telling of the Good News in chapter 4, four words should jump out at us about the practice of Jesus. In verse 16, Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, “as was his custom.” The one in whom “all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,” as Colossians tells us, gathered with his neighbors on the Sabbath to worship.

Where some say today, “Oh, I can worship God on the golf course,” the one who is God incarnate made it his habit to come to synagogue to worship. Where others say today that it is possible to be spiritual without maintaining any visible connection to a religious community, the one who promised to send the Holy Spirit made it his practice to gather regularly in community worship. And where still others decline to come to worship because so many churches are filled with hypocrites, the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the one who was always exactly who he represented himself to be, that one did not see it beneath himself to gather with hypocrites. Jesus made it his custom to go to synagogue on the Sabbath.

Why would the Lord of Life do such a thing? Certainly, one reason was Jesus was an obedient Son. Like most good Jewish parents, Jesus was raised to practice his Jewish faith, both at home, and with the community in the synagogue. It was engrained in him.

Now that he had fulfilled the obligation his faith imposed on him, to care for his widowed mother until his thirtieth year, and now that he had been baptized

by John, and tested in the wilderness, now that his ministry had begun, he continued to live as a faithful son of the covenant. Why would he change because he had reached maturity and was making his way in the world?

He was a loyal son of his Jewish mother, Mary. In his obedience, he honored his mother, thus fulfilling the 5th commandment. Jesus was also an obedient Son of his Father. As God's Son, he loved God, with all of his heart and his soul and his mind, fulfilling the first 3 commandments. And in keeping the Sabbath, he fulfilled the 4th commandment.

With four simple words, "as was his custom," Luke meets one of the goals shared by all of the Gospel writers. All four Gospels strive to show us how Jesus fully kept the faith. Where the Hebrews continually failed to keep the faith, where they failed time after time to keep the covenant, where they broke commandment after commandment, Jesus fulfilled all the demands of the covenant. In his faithfulness, he established the pattern for all of his disciples.

As our Confession of 1967 declares, "The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church's mission...The church follows this pattern in the form of its life and in the method of its action. So to live and serve is to confess Christ as Lord." (9.32 & 33)

In other words, we gather for worship for the same reasons Jesus did, and for this additional reason: it is part of the way that we confess Christ as Lord. Keeping the Lord's Day, the eighth day, our Sabbath, is a practice. It is a habit, one of our customs that shows that we belong to Christ.

II

About ten years ago, Dorothy Bass wrote a book called, *Practicing the Faith*, in which she briefly discusses the nature of practices as social activities, and then presents 12 practices which are manifestly Christian. Some of the practices include honoring the body, hospitality, testimony, and discernment. And as you may be anticipating, another practice is keeping Sabbath.

Here is what Bass writes about this practice: "Sabbath keeping is not about a day off, but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for

God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to the captives, and overcoming the powers of death."

Wow. That sounds very much like what Isaiah foresaw, and what Jesus read from the scroll that day in the synagogue, and which he declared was fulfilled in the assembly's hearing.

What a great first text, according to Luke, for Jesus' first sermon back in his home town of Nazareth. Since his baptism, and fast in the wilderness, Jesus had been worshipping and teaching in the synagogues in Galilee, to much acclaim and wonder. There must have been anticipation that day, as the scroll was given to him to read, and then following the reading, as he sat down to speak. Would he speak so well, here, in his hometown synagogue?

Then when he began to speak, the people were indeed as moved as those in the other towns. Jesus did speak as well among them. His words were as gracious.

"Didn't he read those words from the prophet Isaiah so well? And what is this? He says they are fulfilled, today? Here in lowly Nazareth?" They were initially so impressed. Their hometown boy had come home, and done well. And it happened at the regular Sabbath gathering.

III

That is the power that beloved, true words can have. Think of another custom, much closer to home. Each year, on the 4th day of July, we do customary things. Fundraising races, 5Ks and 10Ks. Most of us take part in cookouts, stuffing ourselves, and enjoying family and friends, before finding a good spot to watch the fireworks. It is all so customary, and so deeply satisfying.

One other aspect of the 4th doings happens on the radio. Each year, National Public Radio broadcasts a full reading of the Declaration of Independence. It is so customary. We hear words that we've heard and read many times. And it never fails to move me deeply.

More often than not, on that morning, as I listen, I stare out the window, or sit outside in the shade, listening with gratitude for the freedoms we enjoy, as

well as remembering the many who paid the ultimate price for those freedoms. All of that emotion, just from hearing beloved words read.

Now, maybe, we can understand why the people gathered around Nehemiah in Jerusalem so long ago wept, as they heard their scriptures read publicly for the first time in a long time. We can understand how the people gathered around Jesus that day in the synagogue we so moved as Jesus read Isaiah and preached on it.

The good news for us is that this is regular Sunday fare for us. Each time we gather for worship on Sunday, we gather in the same power of the Spirit, in the same holy, uncreated light of the resurrection. We hear the same scriptures broken open, read and interpreted. Each Sabbath for us is a day of fulfillment.

IV

In Martin Luther's last sermon in Eisleben in February of 1546, he expressed bafflement at the way people still traveled around the landscape to see relics of dead saints, and other things, like supposed pieces of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. He said, "In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could have heard God speak." But instead of running to hear God speak in the scriptures and sacraments, people were saying, "Oh...what is that? After all, there is" always preaching, every Sunday, "so that we soon grow weary of it." Instead, the people continued to buy indulgences and to seek out the relics as if they possessed some sort of magic.

Luther marveled at this. "How highly honored and richly blessed we are," he said, "to know that God speaks with us and feeds us with his Word, gives us his baptism," communion and forgiveness. Indeed, we are so blessed.

Each Sunday gathering is a day of fulfillment for us. In this place, there is good news for the afflicted. Liberty for captives is freely offered. The blind can have their sight restored. The oppressed find freedom. Here, we proclaim the time of the Lord's favor. Such experiences are how the customary becomes extraordinary.

I close with one final observation. None of the Gospel writers were casual in the way that they went about writing the story of Jesus. I suspect Luke wants us to understand something important about the way Jesus begins this first sermon.

Think about it. Jesus has just spent 40 days in the desert, praying, contemplating, preparing for his ministry. He has just read scripture for the first time in his hometown synagogue and taken his seat for preaching. Of all of the words that he could say, what is the first word he speaks on that occasion?

“Today...”

“Today, the scriptures are fulfilled in your hearing.”

That is indeed good news, the best news. For Jesus proclaims a religion that is not about nostalgia. He doesn't talk about O how great things were back when. Nor is it some sort of hankering after a fantasy of the future. He doesn't say, “In the sweet by and by, God will fulfill God's promises, and we will be at long last, the kind of people God longs for us to be.”

Today.

Many of us were not around back when. Some of us might not be here on that great day in the future. We are here today. Jesus proclaims that is precisely where God meets us.

Many times, the present can seem very customary. One Sabbath morning seems not that different from another. But sometimes heaven itself breaks open, and the Lord of all creation meets us face to face. When those times happen, how awful it would be to say, “Shucks! I missed it because I chose to stay home so that I could watch “Meet the Press.”

May God help us, through our customary practice of Sabbath keeping, to be ever ready for Today. Amen.