

“Hard News/Good News”
Luke 4:16-30

Last month our daughter, her six-month old son, and I experienced first-hand the challenges of traveling over the holidays. Our flight to Charlotte the week after Christmas was delayed for an hour, but otherwise had been uneventful. The return trip the next day though, was an ordeal for us and other passengers, but most of all, for one airline employee in particular.

We had learned with our outbound travels that an infant required more time at the airport so we arrived at 5 p.m. for a return flight leaving three hours later. A ticket agent helped expedite the process as we waited to check one bag and soon thereafter, we were enjoying dinner. While eating, we received our first notice of an hour delay in departure and thus took our time getting to the gate. While sitting there, Jaxson was getting fussy so I decided to take him on an airport tour in his stroller. I learned the boy is an extravert and night owl as the more people he saw the more he smiled and perked up. At one point, the two of us passed a gate where others were boarding their flight to Philadelphia. I hoped we would be following them soon thereafter.

It was not to be. There was another delay and now passengers started to grumble. A few minutes later, a gate agent, the same woman who had helped us with luggage, got on the intercom. By this point, our flight was the only one left in that terminal and thus we could hear clearly. “Your plane is about to leave Trenton,” she said “and I will give you updates as I have them.” An hour later, we received text notice of a gate change to Terminal F and she came on again. “Someone is messing with me as there is no Terminal F in Charlotte. Stay where you are. Your flight will leave from here.” Everyone cheered. She gave regular updates afterwards and finally word when our plane had landed. “Don’t leave the area,” she said, “we will board soon.”

45 minutes later, she returned. “There has been a problem. The plane was hit by geese after take-off and we have to make sure it is safe to fly.” As the minutes passed, the terminal grew very quiet. My daughter noticed that the door to the jetway remained closed and then saw the agent receive a phone call. Suspecting what she was about to say, the three of us began to head in the opposite direction as the agent announced the flight had been canceled. Even as we walked away, you could hear the anger erupt from tired passengers. She calmly answered them adding, “No one wants to get home more than I as I have to be back at work at 3 a.m. tomorrow” It didn’t help the mood. As we kept moving, the flight crew, who I suspect had not used the jetway, but a much less noticeable entry into the terminal, moved quickly past us. The next morning, we took a different flight home on a different airline and that afternoon all of us took a long nap!

I thought about that airline employee when I started reflecting on the Biblical passage before us this morning. It makes no mention of flight delays or FAA protocols, of course, but does tell of one who brought a hard message to what had been a friendly audience. Yet by the end of our narrative from Luke, that room erupted, too, and reacted with anger.

Those verses recall a moment early in Jesus’ ministry when he stands up to speak in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. Historians tell us that even then the synagogue was more than just a place for worship as it was also a school and community center. These were Jesus’ people; the very congregation where he had learned the scriptures and been nurtured in faith. Prior to our passage, Luke noted Jesus began his ministry by speaking in other synagogues in the same region and that “everyone praised him.” The day finally comes when he visits Nazareth.

Jesus stands up and is handed a scroll containing the scriptures. The words he reads are from two different passages in the book of Isaiah and after he finishes, Jesus sits down, the position for teachers. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” Luke recalls as Jesus

says to the congregation, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” From our perspective, it sounds as if Jesus could be acknowledging that he is the embodiment of God’s promise made centuries before. If that was his point, it is doubtful the congregation grasped the broader meaning of his words. Whatever they understand, the early reaction is a positive one.

“All spoke well of him,” we read “and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’” I hear a kind of civic pride in those words; joy over a local boy who is doing well and their excitement of basking in his growing fame. It changed quickly. “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb,” Jesus continues, “‘Doctor cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” He recalls two Biblical events involving Elijah and Elisha. In both accounts, those revered prophets of the past had been sent to Gentiles—the non-Jew—to carry out God’s purposes. Those stories were certainly well-known to Jesus’ audience, but for some reason they react poorly. “When they heard this,” Luke goes on, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” They forced him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff just on the outskirts of Nazareth, but somehow Jesus escapes by passing back through the mob. Yet as far as the gospels record, he never comes back to his hometown or the synagogue that had shaped, but now turned on him.

Why were they so upset? Was it because they understood he was not going to offer the same signs of power that he had done on the road, and thus felt cheated? Was it because they heard him to say God’s grace would go to the Gentiles as they would be unreceptive to it? Was it because he was demonstrating clearly that he was a man who had claimed his mission and was far more than they suspected in watching him grow up? The gospel writer doesn’t explain and perhaps it was a combination of all those things, but as one commentator point out that, “Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth.” (Craddock, Fred. *Luke*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 63). Perhaps that is the root explanation.

Whatever evoked that fury, what strikes me about the scene is how Jesus deftly mixed good news and hard news. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he began “because he has sent me to deliver good news to the poor...release to the captives...to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus’ interpretation that followed left no doubt that an old pattern of reaching out to the Gentiles would eventually begin as well and that something new would be revealed about the nature of God. The same words that brought hope and encouragement to some proved to be challenging, even threatening to others. Still, Jesus spoke the truth that he knew.

It’s with his example in mind, that I’d like to share some news with the people of this congregation. While we have lived here for eighteen years, in the classic way we define the term, it’s probably not accurate to call Doylestown my hometown. Yet even so, it is to you, a body of faith who, for nearly two decades, has blessed my family and this ministry in ways too numerous to count that I wish to share news that will be hard for some to hear. It is a word that might cause some to grow defensive or angry, too, but a truth I believe needs to be spoken even so.

As most of you are aware, we conducted a generosity initiative here last fall called Be Renewed. Like the efforts that preceded it, this one was developed and led by an amazing team of your fellow members who creatively told our story, spelled out the need, and invited your response. Like the other generosity efforts, this one sought a commitment to fund the ministries of DPC for the next two years. We are now at a place of sharing final results as 279 households have made commitments for 2022 and 2023 totaling just over \$3.4 million. By any measure, that is a wonderful response and in fact is the third highest amount pledged for a multi-year campaign in DPC’s two+ centuries of existence. Yet those results also represent some hard news.

The amount pledged for Be Renewed is a half million dollars lower than our goal and 450,000 less than what was pledged to the previous generosity initiative. Even with that reduction, our Session will act on a reduced budget in eight days that funds all of the current ministries, provide raises to the amazing staff with whom I am privileged to serve, fully service the renovation loan, and when the two years end provide more than \$350,000 to mission causes outside our walls. Still, the impact of such reduced giving will be felt moving forward.

While that result is disappointing, what is more concerning to me is that the number of pledges made is 79 less than the total offered in the previous campaign. I do not know what anyone here commits financially unless they tell me, but I am privy to the names of those who pledge, those who do not, and those who make a significant change in their giving either way. I consider such information critical in offering pastoral care as financial giving is not the only indicator of spiritual health, but can reveal a change in a parishioner's life that needs attention.

In looking over the list of those who pledged before, but not this time, there are some who have left DPC since the last campaign and some whose life circumstances—health and job security primarily—make them uncomfortable in offering a pledge this time around. I know of others who are not happy with decisions made by our Session or me and suspect many more of those households are revealing the impact of a two-year pandemic on their connection with our church. Lots of potential reasons, but collectively adding up to significantly fewer pledges than two years ago, thus continuing a trend in which fewer and fewer households are giving more.

Another piece of hard news is that the results for Be Renewed continue another pattern of a generational gap in pledging. Clearly, the financial wherewithal and expenses can be vastly different for individuals just out of college and young families, empty nesters and retirees. One would expect those place-in-life realities to be reflected in the amount pledged and they are, but I'm speaking of the number of pledges made. Individuals who are 58 and older--characterized by sociologists as Baby Boomers, the Greatest Generation, and the Silent Generations--such persons make up less than half of our membership, but offered 82% of the commitments to Be Renewed. The other 18% of pledges come from members who are Gen Xers or Millennials and those generations represent 35 % of our membership. And friends, that kind of generational disparity and diminishing numbers of overall pledges is not sustainable for us in the long run.

I share this news not to make anyone feel guilty or upset, nor to overlook the fact that we also have faithful members who give regularly without pledging. Yet like that sermon in Nazareth long ago, I offer such news in the hopes of starting a conversation with me or your loved ones, with fellow members or with God. It is not a word I relish sharing either, but do so because of something else a preacher in the first century said as Jesus also declared "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." I remain convinced of that potential here as well.

As the good news is that once again the people of DPC have entrusted their treasures with us in ways that will bless lives within these walls and persons we will never meet over the next two years. And the good news is that changing any disconcerting trends in financial stewardship is well within our collective ability. Which is why on this day I remain hopeful that even this news can set us on a new path with new trends of growing faithfulness moving forward.