

Nehemiah 8:1-3

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Luke 4:14-21

1/26/2025

Sermon:

OUR CHURCH

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The setting for our gospel reading this morning is in a little synagogue – what we'd call a church – in Nazareth, the town where Jesus was raised, the very same church where he would have attended Sabbath service all of his life. It would be like Steven or David or Evan or Shaun coming back to visit this church some Sunday.

Synagogues in those days didn't have regular pastors like we do. Instead somebody from the congregation might be asked to deliver the message, or perhaps some distinguished visitor, especially if that visitor was regarded as having some religious authority, a traveling rabbi, perhaps, or the student of a rabbi.

Now this is still very early in Jesus' ministry, and he has returned to Nazareth after having spent some time traveling around Galilee and preaching in the synagogues

in some of the other little towns. That preaching has started to earn him a regional reputation, and that reputation has preceded him back to his hometown. So naturally enough, when he comes to church that morning, he's asked to provide the message.

Just as we do in our Sunday service, in a synagogue service a passage from the holy scriptures would be read, and the speaker would base his remarks upon that passage: in fact, would do exactly what I'm doing right now.

In that service in Nazareth, the passage Jesus chose to read was the opening verses from the 61st Chapter of Isaiah. Let me read them again:

4:18 "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,

4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The year of the Lord's favor was another way of referring to what the Jews called the Year of Jubilee. What was the Year of Jubilee?

We read about it in the book of Leviticus. Every fifty years, the Jews were to set aside one full year, and in that year, all debts were canceled, all slaves were given their freedom, and all property was returned. The Year of Jubilee, was a year full of releasing people from their debts, releasing all slaves, and returning property to those who originally owned it. It was also a year of rest, during which the Israelites were not supposed to reap or harvest, and so that the land itself could rest, and it

was a time for people to return to their families and loved ones, and enjoy a year in peaceful celebration of the joys of family and community.

We can think of it this way: as the Sabbath day was supposed to be a day of rest and celebration from the work and difficulties and problems of the week, so the Year of Jubilee was to be a year of rest from the preceding 49 years (7X7).

When Jesus had finished reading aloud those verses from Isaiah about the year of Jubilee, we read the following:

4:20 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.

In the synagogue, when the reading was finished, the preacher would sit down. That was the position a teacher would take: sitting down. So that's why the eyes of everyone were now on him, because he was ready to preach, ready to explain the passage. And here's what Jesus said:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Clearly one thing Jesus was saying here was that He himself had come to introduce the true Year of Jubilee, the era of human history of which the ancient Jewish law of the fiftieth year had been a symbol. He would be the beginning of that portion of the life of humanity whose culmination would be perfect peace: the good news for the poor, for the imprisoned, for the blind, for the oppressed.

But for this morning, I'd like us to think about something else Jesus was saying. Sitting there in that little church, on the holy day of rest, with Jesus in their midst, he was saying that today, here, in this synagogue, is the fulfillment of that scripture. Today, here, with Jesus in their midst, we find heaven on earth.

In our particular Christian tradition, we gather together on Sunday to honor the Sabbath, not as the Jews do on Saturday, but the point is the same.

When we gather here together as we are gathered this morning, in this lovely little church, this sanctified place, at this sanctified time, we are really experiencing a taste of heaven, an earthly foretaste of the eternal peace of heaven.

The poverty from which we are freed is not the lack of material well-being, but the spiritual poverty of attachment to that material well-being, rather than the true and lasting wealth of being at peace with God.

It's the wealth Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount in this way:

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust[a] destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

That's what we're doing as we meet here today, whether we realize it or not. The psalms that we sing, the prayers we offer, the fellowship we share, are like the coins the widow woman tossed into the temple collection plate: they are not being given away, they're being invested in heaven's savings account.

The imprisonment from which we are being freed, here, today, is not the physical bars of a prison cell; it's the release from our own fears and apprehensions about the future, both our own and the future of those we love.

30Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.

The sight that is being restored to us is not the inability to see the physical world around us, it's the inability to see and hear and experience the spiritual glories and beauties of God with which we are surrounded. The lovely music we hear, the quiet charms of our little sanctuary, the coffee in the narthex, are all small and local points of light illuminating our fallen world, as Jesus himself will one day be the light of the whole world.

Luke 17:20-

21 Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed;[a] 21 nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

The oppression which is being lifted from us is not some political system, it's the oppression of our isolation and self-dependence.

"Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20), Jesus tells us.

The neighborliness we experience here on Sundays, the shared concerns, are nothing else but the very Spirit of Christ within each of us, binding us together with each other and with our Lord, in earthly fulfillment of that promise.

I stopped attending church when I was twelve or thirteen or so, and never set foot in one again for many, many years. Then as I travelled around the country, I started attending whatever church was handy in whatever city I happened to find myself. Each was different, each was a learning experience, but none felt exactly right.

When I moved into my house on the Ridge here in Gaines, thirty or so years ago, I happened to notice a little country church just down the street, and one Sunday when I was in town, I decided to attend its service. And after that, I started attending whenever I could.

Even after all these years, I remember many things from those first visits. I remember Linda Hollenbeck's unaffected friendliness. I remember Chuck and Gwen Hughson's kind neighborliness. I remember Nancy Guenther's warm and welcoming embrace. And I remember many other things about those of you who were here then, and those who are no longer with us.

But most of all, what I remember was a sense of belonging here, as if this was a place that had been prepared just for me.

Sunday, and the church service that provides its foundation, has fallen from its place of honor and reverence in much of our modern society. Many small country churches now stand empty.

But from time to time, like this morning, as we begin another year, it might be good to remind ourselves that this little church, our little church, is a place Jesus went to prepare for us, that all of us here are the heavenly Christ's true neighbors and family, and that today is a day the Lord has made, for us, as Jim always adds. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that you help us always remain mindful of the true blessing of this place and this time, to remember that our divine spirits are **in** the world, but **of** this church and other churches like it, and that, in heaven, every day is a church-going day, a day to rest in our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray.