

Today we celebrate the Feast Day of your Patron Saint, Saint Luke – a few days early. The early church fathers ascribe to Luke the authorship of the Gospel according to Luke, as well as the Acts of the Apostles. In Paul's epistle to the Colossians he is referenced as a physician. It is evident that he was a companion of Paul's, and maybe even ministered medically to Paul. Perhaps he understood Jesus through his lens as a physician, given his account of Jesus emphasizes preaching, physical healings, and exorcisms.

The passage from Luke chosen for this Feast Day is story which comes early in Luke's Gospel. Jesus has been baptized; the Holy Spirit has descended upon him like a dove, and Voice has proclaimed, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." And then Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

And then – the beginning of today's passage – "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit," returns to Galilee. A report about Jesus spreads throughout all the surrounding country, so he is gaining a reputation already. He begins to teach in synagogues, and he is praised by everyone.

Then, he comes to his childhood home (Nazareth), goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, stands up to read from the scroll from the prophet Isaiah the following: "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down. All eyes in the synagogue are fixed on him. And then, instead of saying "here ends the reading," or "the Word of the Lord," Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's where the story ends today, but if we keep reading, things go downhill from there. Everyone gathered starts praising the hometown boy, and they begin to imagine what the hometown boy can do for them. After all, he is Joseph's son.

And to make a long story short, Jesus informs them that his mission extends beyond the hometown, and they don't understand what he just read anyway, and besides, "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." And in a rage, they get up and drive him out of town.

Jesus rolls up the scroll, and declares: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In effect, Jesus is saying, "Isaiah is talking about me. I am the one anointed by the power of the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to restore sight to the blind, and to liberate the oppressed." He's telling the gathering in that synagogue, "This is my mission statement."

And just as Jesus and his mission was misunderstood by his hometown, he has been misunderstood ever since. And even on our clearest days, we – like the hometown crowd, and even like Luke – tend to see Jesus through our own lens, the lens of our experience – which, if we are honest and a little humble, may not be a total understanding. I dare say, that's why there are four gospels.

We do know that Jesus was anointed for a purpose which extends far beyond the time, and place, and culture of his historical setting. And we believe that when Jesus brings good news to the poor, it goes beyond the economic poor literally. There are other ways of being poor. We know that when Jesus proclaims release to the captives, it goes beyond those locked in prison literally. We can be held captive in ways other than behind the bars of a prison cell. We know that when Jesus proclaims recovery of sight to the blind, he means something in addition to physical blindness. We all have blinders that prevent us from seeing.

And when Jesus says that he has been anointed to liberate the oppressed, we know that oppression takes on forms beyond a particular political or economic system. The proclamation of good news exceeds the poor literally, the captives literally, the blind literally, the oppressed literally. We know that, because we've experienced the Good News in ways beyond those literal possibilities.

And yet, we need to make no mistake, Jesus means every word of it, literally – the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, literally; not limited to "literally," but certainly, literally. As our Presiding Bishop reminds us, "This brother didn't come into the world to leave it the way the he found it. He came to change it." Today, I would add, "literally." (Maybe we can make the biblical literalists happy; we are taking something in the Bible literally!)

Our Presiding Bishop says Jesus came to change this world, but that's not all he says. He doesn't leave it at that. He says, "It's all about love. If it's not about love, it's not about God. And we are called to make disciples who will change this world by the power of God's love. Love changes hearts. Love changes lives. Love changes this world.

In the last three months, we've seen devastating hurricanes, and deadly violence at a white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, and a horrific massacre in Las Vegas. And I would suggest that the victims of such events welcome this good news as something literal.

It won't "do" to suggest this good news is limited to the spiritual life, or the inner life, or to heaven someday – however much it includes them. To such victim's love shows up in real water bottles, and real food, and real people who risk their own lives, and real people who devote their own lives to changing hearts, lives, and this world.

On a Saturday in August in Charlottesville, Virginia, we witnessed a day of violence and death. All people of "good will" are appalled by the events of that day. We condemn the obvious bigotry and hatred, and as baptized people we are called to stand against it, and called to work to change it.

It's going to take love to do the work of racial reconciliation in this country. And my appeal to all of us today (and the preacher is preaching to the preacher, too) is to believe in the power of God's love; to trust that God's love has the power to change hearts, lives, and this world; to have faith in the power of God's love reconcile all people to God, to one another, and to our truest, best selves; and to believe that the love of God can change anybody.

The horrific images of what happened in Charlottesville may challenge our faith in the power of God's love to change those hardened by hate, so I'm going to tell a story. I heard the story on NPR as I was driving from Abilene to Lubbock on the following Monday. I know I needed to hear this story of hope.

It was an interview with a young man who once led a hate-group called the Chicago Area Skinheads. His name is Christian Picciolini, and he now runs an organization called "Life after Hate."

“Life after Hate” helps people leave hate groups, particularly white supremacy groups, and hundreds of lives have been changed since its founding in 2011. In the interview Picciolini says: “I think ultimately people become extremists not necessarily because of the ideology. I believe people become radicalized, or extremists, because they are looking for three fundamental needs: identity, community, and a sense of purpose.”

Those are three good things, by the way; three things found in baptism: Identity, Community, and Purpose. This is “love and desire gone wrong,” as they seek these human needs in hate groups. “Love and desire gone wrong” is the classic Anglican understanding of sin. Picciolini describes these young people as marginalized, disenfranchised people with not a lot to believe in, with not a lot of hope – tending to search for black and white answers.

So, Picciolini was asked, “What do you tell them?” meaning, “How do you do it?” He said, “I listen more than speak.” He listens for what he calls “potholes” – abuse in their life, addiction, abandonment, and so forth, and then he arranges for the appropriate treatment.

And then after working on the person, he challenges the ideology. And he does that by immersing them in situations which challenge their narrative. If a person is anti-Semitic and hates Jews, he might pair them with a Holocaust survivor. If a person has been making attacks on mosques, he pairs them with an Imam. If the person is homophobic, he pairs them with someone who is LGBTQ.

He immerses them in a situation that challenges their narrative, and opens their eyes to see a human being. And it when it works, they cannot justify their prejudice any longer.

And all of this is most transformative, he says, when “they receive compassion from people they least deserve it from when they least deserve it.” That’s the most transformative process, and it’s the one experienced by Christian Picciolini himself.

Receiving compassion and love from someone “we least deserve it from when we least deserve it” will change lives. From the cross Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” From the cross, the love of God is revealed in undeserved forgiveness, unmerited grace, and unconditional love – literally.

It's the same love which has the power to change hearts, change lives, and change this world. It's the same love that appealed to a physician named Luke, and inspired him to write – healing love. It's the same love all baptized people are called to proclaim and embody in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.