

“Engaging Life”

Luke 4: 14-21

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+4:14-21)

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“What other people think of you is none of your business.”

Charter member and long time friend John Birdsong loved to tell the story of his baking pies in his Arkansas home. He laughed when he told about eating a whole pie before supper. That’s an entire pie eaten before the meal! John used to follow that Southern tradition at church potluck dinners. While everyone else was in line for the main course, John was at the desert table grabbing a piece of pie.

Pie brings out smiles in us. We can remember pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving. We can almost taste the pecan pie at Christmas. During the summer cherry pies are favorites. In the fall fresh apple pies are great! I love pie. Most of all, I love the memories associated with eating pie. Family dinners, laughter, and home are all associated with pie.

This morning I want to challenge you to grab a piece of the pie that Jesus is offering you in Luke’s gospel. I am not going to ask you to do something new. I am not going to challenge you to learn something that is novel. Rather, I want to appeal to you to let what you already know come alive within you. I want to urge you to live your tradition, grow in your faith, and become daily involved with God. I am challenging you this morning to allow yourself to be open to God! Watch out! That which you know about Jesus is already dangerous.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did not come preaching something new; he came shouting something we already knew: “*You have said in your own Declaration of Independence, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, are endowed with certain inalienable rights.’ And I insist, that you either live by what you already know-or else be unfaithful to your own Constitution.*”

And we killed him, because King told us what we already knew. Others have preached to us, but when King preached *for* us... You may be surprised to hear a preacher say this, but here it is: You already *know* all you need to *know* about religion.

G.K. Chesterton said of his rediscovery of religious tradition at the beginning of the Twentieth Century: *I freely confess all the idiotic ambitions of the end of the nineteenth century. I did, like all other solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the age. Like them, I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it...I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before*

Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah and his lifelong friends almost tossed him off a cliff. He challenged them to actually live God’s Word. Let’s look at what he said. With **Isaiah** he proclaimed:

“*The year of the Lord’s favor*”

Jesus told his friends that God’s Jubilee year had arrived! According to Holy Scripture the jubilee year was a time when God’s presence was among God’s people. Debts were forgiven. Slaves were set free. Jesus was telling them that he would bring into being the Jubilee era. The Kingdom of God is present, says Jesus. Heaven and earth are brought together by Jesus’ presence. In fact, Jesus reminds them in verses **25-27** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=isaiah+25-24) that Elijah and Elisha were able to heal the gentiles. Thus, he implied that the Jubilee Era is for all people, not just the Jews. His former neighbors did not want to hear this message. Jesus does not worry about what they think even though these friends and family members considered his words blasphemy.

Then Jesus went one step farther! He said:

“*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*”

Jesus' family and friends have not heard this statement before. This is a radical assertion by this young carpenter who grew up in their village. Matthew and Mark tell us more of the reaction of the Nazarenes. "... So they were astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?' And they took offense at him." (Matthew 13:54-57) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+13:54-57)

The people of Nazareth who had known him as a young boy and seen him grow into manhood were not prepared to acknowledge that God was at work right in their midst with one of their own! They did not want to hear his message. Jesus does not worry about what they think even though these friends and family members considered his words blasphemy.

Jesus was in touch with a far greater power than that of the people of Nazareth so Jesus continued to read from Isaiah the prophet defining his mission and the mission of all God's people. Jesus used action words like:

"anoint...proclaim...preach...send...release...recovery"

Jesus was talking about actually living God's love, doing God's work, sharing in the very life of God. The Jubilee Era is not about playing religion. We are not talking about just obeying God's law, so that we can get by doing our own thing. Jesus is not just saying give a tenth to God and the rest is yours to do with, as you want.

Jesus was challenging his neighbors, friends, and family to live their faith every day. Jesus was suggesting that a one-day a week tipping of the hat to God is not enough. Jesus was questioning their faith. Jesus was challenging them to become dangerous! By Jesus' very presence with them they are moved outside their comfortable little Nazareth boxes. No wonder they want to throw him over the cliff. They already knew what God wanted. They already knew that God was going to bring about God's Kingdom on earth. They just were not prepared to accept God's presence in their backyards.

Jesus wanted to first give his hometown an opportunity for a piece of God's wonderful pie. They did not have the faith or the creativity to accept God's gift. Do we? This morning I am going to risk getting thrown off the cliff and suggest that Jesus is offering you a piece of God's pie.

The Christ-Centered P.I.E.

Christ's pie is the symbol of God's abundant life. It is power to overcome evil. It is strength of character that is victorious over the world. God's pie enables the Apostle Paul to face death and write: "*Death has been swallowed up in victory. ...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*" (I Corinthians 15:54&56) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+15:54&56)

I want to challenge you to grab a piece of the P.I.E. this morning. The "P" stands for participation. The "I" stands for Interactive. The "E" stands for Excitement! Will you grab just one piece? Or will you be like John Birdsong, and take the whole pie!

"P" Participation

Even though we know that the so called reality shows on TV are not reality at all, millions of people still watch them. Media research suggests that Americans are attracted to reality shows. It's a good thing since "Reality Shows" are cheaper to produce than a regular "sitcom"! Right now this generation of Americans wants to participate! Out with escapism! In with participation!

The younger generations are not interested in coming to church and sitting still like a bump on a log. They want to do something meaningful!

Jesus knows the more you share God's love, the more you will experience God's love. Jesus knows the reality of God's economy. You cannot out give or out love God. Therefore, Jesus says his ministry and the ministry of every one of his followers is a five fold process:

- Preaching the Good News of God's grace.
- Helping people to be free to really live God's abundant life.
- Performing acts of mercy.
- Working for justice and fairness in all social structures.

- Celebrating God's grace by giving unconditional love to disheartened people.

If we are going to know the full and abundant life God desires for us to experience then we are going to follow Jesus' leadership and become participants in God's kingdom living. We cannot walk by on the other side of the road and expect to know God. The ancient Biblical wisdom is as true today as it was centuries ago. Speak gently, act swiftly, share with Godly hospitality because the stranger you met may be Christ!

Greg O'Leary shares how God's abundant grace can surprise us when we decide to get involved and participate. He writes about an experience on one of our American city streets:

"I was walking down a dimly lit street late one evening when I heard muffled screams coming from behind a clump of bushes. Alarmed, I slowed down to listen, and panicked when I realized that what I was hearing were the unmistakable sounds of a struggle: heavy grunting, frantic scuffling, and the tearing of fabric. Only yards from where I stood, a woman was being attacked.

Should I get involved? I was frightened for my own safety, and cursed myself for having suddenly decided to take a new route home that night. What if I became another statistic? Shouldn't I just run to the nearest phone and call the police?

Although it seemed like an eternity, the deliberations in my head had taken only seconds, but already the girl's cries were growing weaker. I knew I had to act fast. How could I walk away from this? No, I finally resolved, I could not turn my back on the fate of this unknown woman, even if it meant risking my own life.

I am not a brave man, nor am I athletic. I don't know where I found the moral courage and physical strength—but once I had finally resolved to help the girl, I became strangely transformed. I ran behind the bushes and pulled the assailant off the woman. Grappling, we fell to the ground, where we wrestled for a few minutes until the attacker jumped up and escaped. Panting hard, I scrambled upright and approached the girl, who was crouched behind a tree, sobbing. In the darkness, I could barely see her outline, but I could certainly sense her trembling shock.

Not wanting to frighten her further, I at first spoke to her from a distance. "It's ok," I said soothingly. "The man ran away. You're safe now."

*There was a long pause and then I heard the words, uttered in wonder, in amazement.
"Daddy, is that you?"*

And then, from behind the tree, stepped my youngest daughter, Katherine. (from Small Miracles by Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, p. 6-7.)

Decide today that you are going to participate in Christ's life right here and right now! Grab a piece of God's pie and God will surprise you! Participation is linked to the next piece of pie:

"I" Interactive!

A Native American proverb goes like this: *"Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I will understand."* Jesus wants to involve you in the life of God's Spirit. If we stay aloof from God, then we miss all the joy God wants to share with us. God wants to communicate with us. God wants us to regularly worship and commune with the Holy Spirit. There is no expectation of us except that we become as a little child and interact with God on that basic level. We can drop our ego defenses, let go of our excuses, and turn aside from our habits of negativity and blaming, so that we can interact with God. Let me suggest what level of interactivity God desires. These "letters to God" have traveled around the internet so you might have seen them, but not actually understood that this is how God wants us to be when we talk with God.

Dear GOD,

I read the Bible. What does begat mean? Nobody will tell me.

Love, Alison

Dear GOD,

Is it true my father won't get in Heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house?

Anita

Dear GOD,

What does it mean You are a Jealous God? I thought You had everything?

Jane

Dear GOD,

Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother. Larry

Dear GOD,

I want to be just like my Daddy when I get big but not with so much hair all over.

Sam

Dear GOD,

I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.

Nan

Dear GOD,

Of all the people who work for You I like Noah and David the best.

Rob

Dear GOD,

My brother told me about being born but it doesn't sound right.

Marsha

Dear GOD,

The bad people laughed at Noah—"You make an ark on dry land you fool." But he was smart, he stuck with You. That's what I would do.

Eddie

Dear GOD,

I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool.

Eugene

Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus went to worship in the synagogue as was his custom. The Scripture tells us that Jesus regularly prayed. If Jesus maintained that daily degree of interactivity with God, can we imagine that we can live with less?

Decide today that you will prepare your heart and mind to worship God each Sunday for the rest of the year. When you are interactive with God on Sunday, you have a much better chance of developing a relationship with God during the week.

Decide today that you will become involved in regularly connecting with God through daily Scripture reading and prayer. The devotions provided by the church are designed to help you ponder on the subject of the sermon that is coming up the next Sunday. You can prepare for Sunday while being open to God's Spirit each day when you set aside time to be with God through the devotions we provide for you. Grab a piece of the pie! Become interactive with God this year!

Better yet, take the first two pieces and enjoy the third as well.

"E" Excitement!

We become excited about a football game. We get passionate about a basketball game, a favorite movie, a shopping trip. What about developing a deep life time passion for following Jesus. What about a passion for celebrating each day the way God provides us with opportunities to make this world a little better?

- We can bury ourselves in all our problems, negatively attacking the world and everyone in it and miss God's nudging us toward life.
- We can squander our time through frivolous and trivial pursuits and think God is dead.
- Or, we can get excited about God. We can get excited about how God transforms lives. How God can give us the vision to see what we could not see before.

Tim Dearborn in his book, *Taste and See* (1996) tells the story of seeing with intelligent, God given eyes.

“David and I were driving across the Scottish countryside early one Sunday morning to lead the worship service in a rural church. David was a fine theological student with a fascinating background. He had been a shepherd for twenty years and now, in his forties, following a dramatic conversion, was preparing to become a pastor.

As we crested a hill, the sunlight broke through onto a green pasture where dozens of sheep grazed. I said to David as we passed, “That must bring back many memories.”

All David said in reply was “Tim, please stop the car.”

I stopped, and he asked me to back up to a point opposite the field we had just passed. David quietly opened the door, walked across the road and climbed over the stone fence. As I watched, he walked to the far end of the pasture. A distressed sheep was stuck on its back, and he gently shoved it upright so that it could scramble away.

I didn’t realize this until David later explained what he’d done, but unshorn sheep are so top-heavy that they can get stuck on their backs and suffocate. Unless they are set right, they will die.

David and I had seen the same field. I had admired its pastoral beauty. He had seen the one sheep out of a hundred that was in danger. He viewed the sheep with the experienced eyes of a shepherd. I viewed them with the eyes of a lifelong city-dweller. Without his sight and his touch, the sheep would have soon died.

Let’s get excited about the eyes that God will give us, the ears that God will provide for us, when we get excited about living everyday in a constant relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Grab a piece of God’s P.I.E.

The challenge is before you. You can ignore it. You can toss me off a cliff. If so, then God will work no miracles here. We read that because of their unbelief, Jesus choose not to share God’s power with his own hometown.

The challenge is before you. You can grab a piece of God’s pie and enjoy it. You can begin to live a participating, interactive, exciting life following Christ Jesus.

What other people think of your choice to be different and follow Jesus is their problem.

What other people think of our choice to follow Jesus as a church is their problem.

Let’s choose life! Let’s choose to be transformed by God’s power. Let’s choose to be a source of light and hope for Livingston County. Grab a piece of pie and enjoy life with Christ!

“What other people think of you is none of your business.”