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So, to be honest, when you all chose this to be one of our 13 scriptures, what most of you wrote down was only verses 18-19, which means that what we actually chose was a neat little passage from Isaiah and it's one of those passages that's just both really inspiring and really depressing. It reminds me of a Mark Twain quote (according to the internet) that says: "Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand." These verse aren't tricky, this isn't a parable, and yet ...

Although I wasn't here for Julia O'Brien's message on Micah 6:8 two weeks ago, I did enjoy listening to the recording, and one of the things that impressed me was that, despite her "expertise" on the passage, as a Micah scholar, she essentially told us it's up to us to figure out what acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly look like in this day and age. We have to do that work ourselves & these words in Luke from Isaiah make a pretty good primer for identifying just and merciful acts.

If what you're saying sounds like good news to poor folks, you might be living justly, mercifully and humbly; if what you're saying or doing opens eyes (yours or others'), you might be living justly, mercifully and humbly; if what you're saying or doing releases people from the traps they're stuck in, you might be living justly, mercifully and humbly; if what you're saying or doing frees people from oppression, you might be living justly, mercifully and humbly.

But when I hear these, I very quickly begin to hear that Greek chorus of Mennonite guilt, which Garrison Keillor so humorously called Mennos out on during last nite's Prairie Home Companion. And it spawns a curious kind of arrogance, because all that guilt presumes that we not only know the right thing we should be doing, but that that action we're guilty of not doing, is the very lynchpin action that would change the world. If only I were being a better person, racism and poverty could be solved ... No pressure there!

But I learned this annoying thing in seminary, which is, to get even the beginnings of a proper read on a text you need to identify the verses around it that complete it finding the "periscope," I think it was called. And in this case, our sweet little nugget from Isaiah, comes in a rather interesting periscope in Luke In the NRSV. The little headline they give this passage is, "The Rejection of Jesus". In the book of Luke, this story takes place at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. He was baptized, he was tempted in the wilderness, he (apparently) was already out there healing and then Jesus goes back to his hometown, & here we are. He hadn't even called his disciples yet. The very first thing he does, is get himself kicked out of his home community and church.

In the story we read that going to synagogue was a routine part of Jesus' life. The people seemed proud of him, one of their own, out there doing successful ministry, healing people, doing great things, now back home, reading the scripture in their own service. It's an interesting scripture to be looking at on the day that we honor our high school seniors

– the very ones for whom Lancaster may soon be simply, their hometown, and us, “the church they grew up in”. Thinking of that synagogue, or church, and how it was able to hear one of its own, all grown-up, with something to say. Jesus spoke hard words. He redefined the “us” and “them” of following God. The “us” had been all about shared history, heritage, worshiping together in the same building, following the same rules, speaking the same language, calling God by the same name.

Jesus breaks out this Isaiah passage, which didn’t seem to bother his home church. They were probably used to hearing it, and probably had their own definitions of how they were, in fact, doing the work of that passage. Their church probably had charity they were supporting, they were probably quite law-abiding. But Jesus says, if not in so many words, “This is the work I am here to do; these are the people who I am sent to be with, these will be my people: the poor, the oppressed, the captive, the blind.” He cites the history of God reaching out to Gentiles, (citing Elijah and the _____ widow, and Naaman the Syrian). He’s saying, God has never been just your God. For God, the circle has always been much broader, or at least differently narrow than you thought. You will only find these words comforting, if you yourself realize yourself to be in need of comfort (if you realize the ways in which you fit these categories of need – walking humbly, anyone?)

As people of action and means, as I think most of us here consider ourselves, we’re used to jumping to the conclusion that such words are about what we should be ready to do. And participating in this work is great. But today’s passage is all about who Jesus came for, who the Spirit anointed him to come for. This passage is about who can receive God, not how to be godly. And Jesus’ home church got furious. They chased him to a cliff, and would have hurled him off of it (this is how you excommunicate someone in Biblical times). Jesus became a Gentile in this story – or at least his community let him know that’s what they now considered him. But their label slid right off him. He wasn’t hurled off the cliff. He was able to walk through, unharmed.

Jesus proclaimed that he was here for humans in need. God is the God of us all. God is the God of them all, too. The us isn’t what we thought it was. I think there’s a word here for the us that’s CMCL here, too. I’m guessing most of us liked the Isaiah reference here, because that’s the kind of kin-dom work we aspire to do. But what if our work is to accept the companionship and help of Christ, and accept our blindness our poverty our captivity our oppression? This past week, I know that I’ve felt frantic to figure out, what I can DO, how I can BE Christ-like to our neighbors in Baltimore. How can I and we reach out from our predominantly white relatively well-off situation to the Baltimore protesters who are predominantly black and in a highly impoverished situation?

But, you know, churches in Baltimore are pretty busy right now. They have more to do than help a Lancaster church figure out how to get in on some do-good action. I’m not saying that there isn’t important work we can’t support and even participate in, but I feel like today’s passage has reflected back to me that there is PLENTY I can be doing even if I’m not picking up trash in Baltimore or handing out water bottles or signing over a check.

I can work on me, I can help us work on us, I can get in uncomfortable, intimate touch with my blindness – preach though I might about white privilege, the very concept tells me that I'm blind to many of the ways I manifest it; get in touch with my need to be freed from captivity, the captivity of being entwined in systems that so benefit me that make it so easy to dip in and out of anti-oppression work, because I can get in touch with the reality that my own salvation and well-being are caught up in and entwined with my brothers and sisters of color here in Lancaster, in Baltimore, in the US and in the world

This is not the sermon I thought I'd share when I first looked at today's scripture. But I do think that so much of what needs to happen, for the world, and we all see a world aching for change and we all see our complicity in its current state and we all want to be agents for change. BUT, the biggest thing, and honestly, perhaps the only thing we can do for the world, is for us to be transformed. Be open to the incarnations of God who come to our church & say, Hey, the us and them you think you know, nope you can't help them, without realizing you are them. And by the way, God is them, too ... Be open to the kids who have grown up here, for whom this is their hometown, being open to what they come back to tell us being open to what these senior youth have to say, and what they will come back to tell us.

But also, I invite you to hear this passage today for the freedom it offers – throw off the Mennonite or fill-in-the-blank guilt you carry: the work of transforming the world is not on your shoulders. You are part of the world in need of transformation – your job is to be as open as possible to it. There is no shame in your blindness; we are all blind. Jesus came because love can open our eyes. There is no shame in being caught, we are all caught from time to time, paralyzed and held captive. Jesus came because love can free you. There is no shame in being oppressed; we are all caught in systems of oppression: oppressor and oppressed. Jesus came because only love can transform individuals and systems. There is no shame in poverty, we are all caught in the game of enough; we are all in debt, whether to a bank or a credit card, or to people who bankrolled our prosperity through no choice of their own. Jesus came because only love can inspire the kind of Jubilee that will end all cycles of poverty There is good news today, for those who need it.