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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss1/9

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CHRISTOPHER CHESNUTT

Introduction
On July 18, 2010, I delivered this sermon at my home congregation, the University Church of Christ on the Pepperdine University campus in Malibu, California. Since this sermon fell on my “homecoming Sunday,” following a lengthy absence, it pays close attention to the “homecoming motif” in Luke 4.14–30.

Scripture Reading
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord’s favor. Today, this scripture stands fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke 4.18–19, 21b)

A Hometown Boy Comes Home
This is a great text! These are powerful words pregnant with possibility, promise and hope! And if you and I didn’t know what was coming up next, what lurked just around the corner, we’d assume we were being set up for a scene of great joy and fulfillment right here in our own front yards. You see, right from the very outset, well before we’re into the thick of things, we know exactly how this story will turn out in the end. With his rising Hollywood-like celebrity status, supported by his campaign message of hope and change we can truly believe in, Jesus has taken this show on the road to Capernaum and other places: healing the sick with a touch and telling everyone who will listen that they are released from their sins and their bondage.

Finally and at long last, old Randy’s boy¹—excuse me, old Joseph’s boy—the congregation’s own rising, messianic, prophetic, preaching star, a most beloved son, a hometown-boy-made-good—has come home! In keeping with tradition, he goes to church on—you guessed it—the first day of the week. The congregation meets inside a nice, air-conditioned auditorium with a state-of-the-art sound system and perfectly padded seats. It is situated upon a hill with steep cliffs and a large body of water at its base. He’s granted the privilege of participating in the greatest of our beloved acts of worship: reading from our dearly-beloved, greatly-admired, readily-accepted friends—you guessed it—the Prophets. In this instance, it’s a Jubilee text from the prophet Isaiah, chapters 58 and 61, about bringing good news to the poor and the outcast, about healing and releasing the captives from sin, blindness and everything that oppresses: in fact, the very kinds of things he’s been doing out there in Capernaum and all those other places.

And now, we’re ready for the big, dramatic, WWF, UFC wrestling showdown: messianic firepower, miraculous wonders, knockout blows, spilled blood, crushed skulls and broken bones. Are you ready to rumble? We’re ready for some of that prophecy to be fulfilled right here at home! Folks, this is what it all comes down to! This is the moment we’ve all been waiting for! It’s the scene of the last battle in C. S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia! It’s the final battle in Middle Earth in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings trilogy! It’s the

¹. Randy is my father’s name.
waning seconds in Game 7 of the NBA Finals against those despised Boston Celtics when we Los Angeles Laker fans get to hear the legendary Chick Hearn† say, “Folks, you can put this one in the refrigerator. The door’s closed, the lights are out, the eggs are cooling, the butter’s getting hard, and the Jell-O’s jiggling.”

And the good news—at least, in our story—is that we know exactly how everything’s going to turn out after all is said and done! After all, since this son of Joseph is one of our very own, we’re right to expect that this Spirit-anointed prophet of God will do some great things for us because we are God’s covenant people; unlike those pagans, we keep God’s boundaries, laws and rituals firmly intact. We’re ready for our rags-to-riches story in which we all live happily ever after in five-bedroom, six-car-garage, beachfront mansions, with their state-of-the-art Brinks Home Security Systems! We’re ready for release from Roman oppression and bondage, and good riddance to all those despicable IRS agents who steal from us poor and oppressed American citizens! We’re excited for this fine young preacher who’s been preaching acceptable, five-minute, three-point sermons in those other churches out there to do so right here in his own home church! And when all is said and done, we—the chosen people of God—finally and at last, will rule the world that we know! You can just feel the thrill of anticipation, excitement and joy on this great homecoming Lord’s Day!

An Unexpected Turn of Events

Now, at this juncture in my reading of Luke 4.14–30, I recall a French phrase from my middle school and high school theatre days: coup de théâtre. This phrase means: “an unanticipated and sensational event, one which negates or reverses a prevailing situation; a dramatic, all-of-a-sudden, unexpected turn of events.” And that’s exactly what we have here in Luke 4. After the big, dramatic set-up of Jesus’ return to his hometown, things go horribly wrong, and our story takes an unexpected turn for the worse—and oh, how the tables do turn! Jesus says to the church, “No miracles today.” Signs and wonders, or three-point sermons? No, not here, not on this day. And in a split second, in the blink of an eye, the adoring crowd turns into a ruthless mob. All of a sudden, we want—indeed, attempt—to kill the man who, only moments before, had been our most beloved preacher-boy! Ironically, it turns out, this “acceptable year of the Lord’s favor” isn’t so “acceptable” and “favorable” after all! And what was supposed to be a great “welcome-home” celebration for this up-and-coming preacher whom we’ve all taught so very well and who’s made us all exceedingly proud is anything but welcoming!

Why? Why this all-of-a-sudden, out-of-the-blue, unexpected rejection? It can’t be the lack of miracles alone; after all, Jesus hasn’t been doing them in his hometown for some thirty years. But here’s where Luke’s account differs from the other accounts of this story in Matthew 13.53–58 and Mark 6.1–6. In Luke’s version of the story, Jesus does not comply to his disciples that their lack of faith prevents him from performing miraculous signs and wonders in his hometown. Instead, he narrates stories from the Hebrew scriptures themselves to his complaining friends and neighbors. These stories imply that it’s not his primary mission to help the people whom he’s closest to, the people just like him. Or let me put it another way: “This isn’t just about you! God’s ultimate, saving purposes, unfolding in Jesus Christ, are far too great to be securely confined within human-made geographic, gender, sexual, ethnic, nationalistic, religious and institutional boundaries! And how arrogant of you to think that all of eternity has been about you and your little group?” I know we would never have this problem! It would never occur to us to think that God’s salvation is the exclusive property of our little group! But just in case it ever would, let’s move deeper into the world imagined by Jesus in Luke 4, so that we might discover “the rest of the story.”

In explaining himself, Jesus recalls two familiar stories about Elijah and Elisha, greatest of the Hebrew prophets, each of whom uses his gifts to aid strangers and outsiders—a widow from Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, respectively—instead of the people of Israel, the very people of God (who are equally in need of relief)! In telling these stories, it’s not that Jesus means he can’t or won’t care for his own people. It’s just that God doesn’t want him to do so, at least, not right here and right now. No wonder we want to throw this prophet off the hills and cliffs upon which our church and institutional buildings stand! It’s bad enough that

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2. Chick Hearn was a longtime broadcaster for the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team.
3. This well-known line comes from the late broadcaster/comedian Paul Harvey.

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Jesus says that God has a bias toward the stranger, the outsider, the other, rather than toward "God’s chosen people.” But to take matters from bad to worse, to add grave insult to injury, Jesus audaciously backs up his claims by quoting from the Hebrew scriptures themselves! This is a point readily picked up on by his audience! And let’s not for a second think that this will be the last instance in which Jesus makes the very people who ought to embrace him with open arms mad enough to want to kill him!

**Strangers and Outsiders in Luke-Acts**

This theme of God’s concern for strangers and outsiders runs throughout Luke’s gospel and its sequel, the Book of Acts. Recall the *Magnificat*, that great song of unexpected reversals, in which Jesus’ mother Mary sings about God, the “Mighty Re-Arranger,” during her pregnancy:

> His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1.50–53)

Then, when Joseph and Mary present the infant Jesus for his dedication in the temple, the righteous and devout Simeon sings:

> Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people: a light for revelation unto the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2.29–32).

Like a good leadoff batter, Luke is setting the table for the things that are to come. He’s giving us a sneak peek, a preview of coming attractions in Luke-Acts. The broad arc of Luke’s vision of Jesus’ life and what his followers do after his death, resurrection and ascension is the story of how the good news of God’s love and salvation—as proclaimed in Jesus Messiah—begins with teaching to a small group of Jesus’ Jewish friends and extends into a Holy Spirit-empowered missionary movement that embodies the welcoming of strangers and outsiders of every kind imaginable. When we start thinking about Luke-Acts in this way, the most memorable moments—from Mary’s and Simeon’s songs, to Jesus’ birth as a poor stranger in a humble and unwelcoming context, to the conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, to Peter’s vision from heaven, and to Paul’s mission to the Gentiles—form a mosaic of support for the dangerous idea that almost gets Jesus killed in Luke 4.

And what is this idea? That it is not Jesus’ mission—and therefore not our mission—to care primarily for those within our own community, people who are just like us. Not just people from our campus, dormitory, social club, political party, neighborhood, nation, or tribe; not just people who share our gender or sexual orientation; not just people we like; and not just Christian people. Rather, through the empowerment of God’s Spirit, Jesus’ mission is to extend the hands of healing and welcome. It is to preach and live out God’s kingdom reign for the sake of the international student, the migrant worker, the illegal immigrant, the refugee, the victim of sex-trafficking in Burma, the child soldier in Sudan, the homeless, the unemployed, the uninsured, the recipient of welfare, the divorced, the homosexual, the orphan, the widow, the atheist, the skeptic, the drug addict, the prostitute and the terrorist. As William Tyndale states, “The church is the one institution that exists for those outside it.”

In Luke 4, Jesus raises a serious question for us as a church: are we fulfilling God’s mission for the sake of a broken and lost world? It’s a question we must continuously ask ourselves as a church family. What portion of our time and resources is devoted to serving our own needs, compared to that portion of

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4. This line comes from Robert Plant’s song “Mighty Re-Arranger.”
our gifts that we use to reach and care for those outside our community? And if we are truly following in the footsteps of our Lord and Master— "in lowly paths of service free"6—how are we doing at reaching those outside our comfort zones? But we must ask this question not only as a body of believers but also individually. How much time, energy and money do I, Christopher Chesnutt—do I, fill in the blank with your name—devote to caring for my needs and the needs of those who are closest to me compared to the gifts I share with outsiders and strangers?

I believe that in Luke 4, Jesus invites us to put our commitment to all those beyond our walls, boundaries and borders before our commitment to those within them. Both as a body and as individuals, we’re a very generous group, and I don’t intend to discount this for one minute. Yet many churches I’ve visited have a tendency to be generous with the “leftovers,” and sometimes we too fall in this category. After we’ve taken care of everything that needs to be done “in-house”—Capital Campaign funds, maintenance work, ministerial salaries and “members-only” benefits—we determine the best way to be generous with whatever free time or extra money remains to help those who are outside. But Luke 4 calls for a shift in our theology and praxis.7

Even if we devote the same portion of our time, talent and treasure to the world’s needs as we always have, let me challenge us to do so first and foremost. When you write a check to support global relief efforts in Haiti and elsewhere, write it before you write a check to cover your monthly utility bills and student fees. If you’re going to get involved in community service this month—at the Malibu Labor Exchange, Standing On Stone, the Union Rescue Mission,8 the International Justice Mission and elsewhere—don’t wait until your calendar is full and squeeze it in when it’s most convenient for you and when you have the time to do it. Put it on your calendar first and foremost. As Bono, the lead singer of U2 and founder of the ONE Campaign, says, faith in Jesus Christ that is not aligned with the poor is nothing. He points out that those who read scripture and don’t come away with God’s concern for the poor are blind; that over two thousand verses in scripture are about the poor.9

When you next throw a dinner party in your apartment or home, do not invite your closest friends, colleagues, those within your academic divisions and social clubs, and so be “repaid” by dinner at their homes. Instead, invite the international students, the campus maintenance workers, or people from the local homeless shelter; although they cannot repay you right now, you will be repaid when the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness.10 I believe the church should always be a “guess-who’s-coming-to-dinner”11 community.

When we say our prayers, whether here in church or at home, we should certainly pray for our family and those who are closest to us, whom we deeply know and care about. But before we do that, let’s pray just as passionately, if not more passionately, for the larger world, strangers, and even our most despised enemies. And instead of just praying for God to bless the people of North America, let’s also pray that God will bless the people of all the nations of the earth, all of whom are under his sovereignty and gracious care: that all might come to experience his unconditional salvation, release and love. Remember in Genesis 12, God chooses Father Abraham and his descendants—including you and me—to be a blessing to all the nations and peoples of the earth, not just to our own.

If we truly are a fellowship committed to the authority of scripture, then we are a people committed to a kingdom in which there is no male and female, in which the Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, and both our daughters and sons shall prophesy.12 So let us be ever vigilant in working for that day in which gender is, once and for all, irrelevant as a consideration for faithful service in God’s kingdom. Let us affirm all whom God calls, both female and male, to faithful service in his kingdom.

6. This line comes from Washington Gladden’s hymn, “O Master Let Me Walk with Thee.”
7. Theology is what we believe about God and praxis is how we live out that belief.
8. The Malibu Labor Exchange, Standing On Stone and the Union Rescue Mission are three local mercy and justice ministries that my congregation actively supports, both through financial giving and manual labor.
10. This sentence and the one preceding it re-envision Jesus’ words in Luke 14.12–14 for our present context.
11. This is an allusion to the 1967 movie Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner; starring Katharine Hepburn, Sidney Poitier and Spencer Tracy.
My friend Randy Harris says, “Our churches would be a whole lot healthier if we held our meetings in our bars.”13 Because when we’re meeting inside our nice, comfortable church buildings with their four walls and perfectly padded pews, it’s awfully easy to forget who we are and what we’re called to be about for the sake of the world. So as a community committed to going and meeting people wherever they are, as those who no longer assume an “if-we-build-it-they-will-come”14 posture toward the world, let’s partner with Khad Young, my twenty-eight-year-old “outlaw preacher” friend, to support Metamorphisis, a Christian gathering in the Saints & Sinners Bar in downtown Los Angeles.15 As Khad says:

Throughout Luke’s gospel, Jesus is either going to a party, He’s at a party, or He’s just come from a party. Like Jesus, I’m called to party with sinners and outcasts, not “religious people.” I’m not trying to compete with nor steal people from other churches. I’m reaching out to people who desperately need Jesus, but wouldn’t get caught dead inside a church building. After all, Jesus throws the best parties. Dare his church do anything less?

As people who largely work, study, live and play within a university setting, let’s keep before us the words of Todd Bouldin:

Churches that are in step with Kingdom values are a welcome place for those who don’t share our values. Christian universities and institutions don’t get a pass from this either if they are serious about branding themselves “Christian.” …It is impossible for an institution to call itself Christian and only welcome those that are like themselves. That’s a contradiction in terms. To be Christlike in our welcome means that strangers can join us in our common service to our community, they can become our true friends and colleagues, and they are invited to share their views with us openly and without fear. They genuinely are invited into our lives and as a part of our community. Christian organizations and churches should be known primarily for who they include, not for those they exclude. That’s just basic to being Christian.16

Conclusion
I realize what I’m challenging us to do may seem small and insignificant, but it’s really not. God’s kingdom, as illustrated by the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, is one of small, insignificant beginnings and large, grand endings (Luke 13.18–21). “Little strokes fell great oaks,” as Benjamin Franklin’s saying goes. You’ll recall that simple acts of civil disobedience and defiance by people like Jackie Robinson and Rosa Parks had a rippling effect that spread like wildfire throughout the United States. They inspired Dr. King to lead a movement for justice and equality and, years later, gave birth to the historic presidency of Barack Obama. Making such seemingly insignificant decisions as these may just begin orienting us in the direction Jesus is going and inviting us to join him in welcoming strangers and outsiders for the sake of his great and boundless kingdom. As Norvel Young used to say, “You just never know how much good you’re doing; you’re always doing far more good than you’ll ever realize.”17

And why should we be concerned with strangers and outsiders anyway? Because all of us were once alienated and estranged from God in Egypt, outsiders to the blessings of God’s salvation and love, before God graciously welcomed us into his new surrogate family through the cross of Jesus Christ. This is a family in

13. Randy Harris, an instructor at Abilene Christian University, preaches widely in Churches of Christ.
15. For more information on Khad Young’s work, see http://www.khad.com/
17. Norvel Young served as the president of Pepperdine University from 1957–1971 and as a preacher and elder in the Churches of Christ for many years.
which the old distinctions of Jew/Gentile, male/female, master/slave, rich/poor and countless others are rendered irrelevant. It may be quite difficult, with the current state of world affairs, to see God’s promised future breaking in even now, much less to even imagine that it ever will. But as former United States Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy once said, “There are those who look at things the way they are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’”

As Christian disciples, who no longer view reality from a human point of view (2 Cor 5.16), let’s dare to imagine reality as God intends for it to be. And then let’s commit our lives, through the anointing power of God’s Spirit and to his glory, to making it happen. Focusing our lives on strangers and outsiders of every kind brings us closer to that day when no one will be a stranger, an outsider, an outcast, or an enemy to us any longer, for we will all be one, gathered around that great messianic banquet table in the kingdom of God in the new heavens and the new earth. Then, in the words of Dr. King, “the descendants of slave owners and the descendants of slaves will be gathered together around a table of brotherhood and sisterhood.”

Focusing our lives on strangers and outsiders brings us closer to that day when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream, and all God’s children—black and white, Asian and Latino, male and female, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, gay and straight, Americans and West Texans, Laker fans and Celtic fans—are truly free at last. It brings us closer to that day when the prayer Jesus has taught us to pray will permeate the whole of reality: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let’s pray: For the times we are afraid of the stranger, for the times we refuse the stranger because we think our resources are just too meager—Lord Jesus, have mercy upon us. For the times we stereotype the stranger as enemy, as threat, as somehow inferior—Lord Jesus, have mercy upon us. For the times we are too busy trying to impress others, the times we think we are being hospitable, but instead serving only our own needs—Lord Jesus, have mercy upon us. Empower us to be like Jesus, a man for others. Empower us to be full of compassion, loving, forgiving, tender and kind, helping the helpless, cheering the fainting, seeking the wandering sinner to find. May your kingdom come and may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We pray in the name of the One who, though we were formerly aliens and strangers in Egypt, freely welcomes all to the great messianic banquet table in his eternal kingdom. Amen.

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18. Kennedy’s words echo those of the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw.
19. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have A Dream.”
20. Amos 5.24, quoted in Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have A Dream.”