

**Seeing Jesus and Claiming Jesus' Mission**  
**Sermon 159 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 6, 2022**  
**Luke 4:16-21**

Shane Claiborne was invited to give a sermon at a major youth rally several years ago. Innumerable hours and dollars had been poured into this major assembly and the young people had gathered from all over the country. There was a band leading worship, and the sound, lights, and projection were all perfectly cued up to create an amazing experience for all in attendance. Everything was planned with precision and excellence leading up to the moment when Shane would take the stage and deliver his sermon.

As the preaching moment arrived Shane approached the pulpit, pulled out his Bible, and began to read the Sermon on the Mount. After 18 minutes of reading, he came to the end of Jesus' sermon. He closed his Bible and stepped out of the pulpit, returning to his seat.

In an interview after the event, Shane was asked about why he simply read from the Bible and sat back down. *Well, he said, this was one of those conferences that was led by amazing people and really well done, but it was one of those places with a little too much clutter. Sometimes we have a tendency to layer too much Christian stuff and sometimes I think, just the words of Jesus are best left (you know) sort of on their own.*<sup>1</sup>

Shifting in his seat a bit, Claiborne paused for just a second and said, *I gotta admit, I sort of stole the idea from the Dalai Lama (I believe) who was speaking at a big Ivy League convocation and you know, everyone had come from everywhere to hear him speak and he just stood up and held a flower for half an hour and sat down.*<sup>2</sup>

I was not aware until I heard Shane Claiborne reference it, but the flower sermon is actually part of Buddhist lore dating way back. There is a tradition - or at least a long tradition of stories - about wise spiritual leaders, in Buddhism, who simply took their place behind the podium and held up a flower. As the original story goes, only one person in the audience understands the message wordlessly conveyed as the teacher gazes upon the beauty of the flower and beckons the students to do the same.

It is the simplest lesson, and yet in a crowded room, only one is moved by it.

There is another spiritual leader who behaves similarly and whose story is told in our reading for today.

As Jesus emerges from his trials in the wilderness, he returns to Galilee and begins his teaching ministry. His message is welcomed in the Galilean synagogues and things seem

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dailyedify.com/shane-claiborne-explains-why-the-sermon-on-the-mount-needs-no-explanation/>

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to be going well. He makes his way to the synagogue in Nazareth and all the readers of the Gospel know that this is his hometown; this event is a big deal. It is the stage at a youth rally where everyone has come from everywhere to worship, grow, and learn.

Jesus stands up - the young prophet whose reputation is spreading like wildfire - and finds his place in the scroll. He begins reading from the scroll, adding no fluff, just reading from the text itself:

*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.*

After reading from the scroll, he rolled it up, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

Knowing that sometimes Jesus' sermons were long - like the Sermon on the Mount which takes up two full chapters in Matthew's Gospel and which took Shane Claiborne 18 minutes to read - I wonder if, when Jesus was worshiping in Nazareth that day, if he felt the same way that Shane Claiborne felt at the youth rally.

Did he appreciate the intent, the planning, the beauty, and the preparation... but at the same time, did he get the sense that there was just too much religious stuff layered on top of God's words that maybe the mission had been lost in all the stuff?

I saw a quote on Instagram this weekend. It was from Jesus Scholar, Robin Meyers' book, *Saving God from Religion: A Minister's Search for Faith in a Skeptical Age*. He writes: "Consider this remarkable fact: in the Sermon on the Mount, there is not a single word about what to believe, only words about what to do and how to be. By the time the Nicene Creed is written, only three centuries later, there is not a single word in it about how to be — only words about what to believe."

It got me thinking about all the time, all the traditions, all the advancement and progress, all the research, all the liturgies, the hymns, all the theologies and practices, all the sermons, all the words and ideas we have added as faithful layers to an ongoing conversation between us and God... each one a beautiful expression of love of God in a certain time and place. And yet each one another layer of stuff built as a hedge around the original words that Jesus himself used to tell us what his mission was.

Even here today, this morning just in the last forty-five minutes we have joined together in prayer, in song, and even in seconds of silence all with the purpose of gaining clarity about who Jesus was and what his mission was about. All of it is good and faithful and yet I wonder if even we have covered up the text with so much stuff that we can no longer receive the very thing we seek: the will of God made incarnate in the person of Jesus.

And yet here it is, plain and clear, in just 51 words, Jesus tells us who he is and what his mission is about.

Maybe it should stand alone so that we could peel back the layers and see Jesus as Jesus presents himself.

And as disciples, followers, and imitators of Christ, maybe we too could claim *this* mission as our own.

*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.*

Now go and do likewise.

Amen.