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First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange
3 February 2019
Luke 4:21-30

Gracious Words?

Six verses—it only takes six verses for the Nazareth congregation to go from amazement at Jesus' gracious words to rage at what he was saying.

Six verses.

This morning's text picks up the thread of Jesus ministry announcement at the synagogue in Nazareth. The words that Jesus speaks proclaiming the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy is so important that we hear it for a second time.

Jesus has proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor. He is speaking good news to the poor—before a gathering of the poor. He is speaking freedom for the oppressed—before a gathering of the oppressed. He is proclaiming God's compassion and announcing his identity as God's Anointed Messiah before a gathering of those desperate to hear this good news.

He chooses his own hometown in which to go public—and for a brief and shining moment, the people who saw him grow to manhood respond. With a tear in their eyes and a catch in their voice and awe in their hearts they say—"Wow!" And then they ask, "Isn't that Joseph's boy?"

This is where the trouble begins.

Theologians and biblical scholars root the problem in this question of identity. The congregation has "missed the point" of the proclamation and is now blinded by familiarity—unable to see the Messiah of Israel standing before them. Or perhaps the congregation has "missed the person" and they react to what they expect but do not find in Jesus—a power to overthrow and punish their foreign oppressors.

I can't pinpoint the source of the narrative undercurrent—I can only point to the reaction that rises from it. Jesus anticipates what is to come: quotes from scripture that question his authenticity, demands for signs and wonders done here in the town of his father.

Jesus remembers—out loud—that prophets find honor **except** in their hometown.

In her reflection on this text, Outlook Editor Jill Duffield used one of my favorite phrases, "Jesus" she says, starts by preaching then "goes to meddling."¹

Jesus tells the stories of God's prophets—Elijah and Elisha—anoointed by God's Spirit but sent to those outside the covenant family. This is an inconvenient family story that Jesus tells. This is a reminder that God sends aid and healing to THOSE kind of people—a widow woman on the wrong side of the border; a foreign-born commander of an enemy army.

Jesus is the Anointed of God—sent to proclaim good news to ALL the poor, release to ALL the captives, recovery of sight to ALL the blind, freedom to ALL the oppressed.

In examining the text, Blair Monie—wondered if “the all-inclusive character of the grace Jesus proclaims explains the people’s anger...”²

Personally, I wonder if the anger comes from what isn’t promised—God’s vengeance against the Romans; comeuppance for the collaborators; shame and dishonor on those who’ve brought harm. If Jesus had read one more phrase from the Isaiah scroll, he would have proclaimed both “the year of the Lord’s favor” and “the day of vengeance of our God.” But he didn’t.

Isn’t that the voice of lament we hear throughout the Psalms—Lord, save me and preserve my life; AND make THEM pay.

Six verses—from awe to rage—because his hometown heard the radical inclusion of *their enemies* in the circle of God’s grace and mercy.

I would like to say that I can’t understand this, but that would be untrue. We live in a time of polarizing division—with its fair share of oppression and poverty, captivity and physical diminishment.

We are able—and often choose—to shape our interactions with the wider world so that we are surrounded by circles of like-minded media sources and like-minded friends. We have grown up understanding the church as a voluntary organization of like-minded people.

I have watched with dismay as people I have respected and admired demonize those outside their circle and make personal attacks on insiders who violate this unwritten code of sameness.

The need to defend our tribes supports our worst instincts of conflict—including two of my favorites: “go ugly early” and “scorch the earth.”

I have watched friendships abandoned and family gatherings strain under the burden of maintaining territorial defense. Perhaps you have too.

We live in a world divided into “US” and “THEM.” And it skews our perception such that we hear “good news” for THEM as necessarily “bad news” for US.

There are barbarians at the gate—let us dance a victory boogie when THEY are repelled. There are barbarians at the gate—let us sing a tear-filled dirge when our defenses are breached.

Have you found yourself dancing and singing? I know that I have.

How do we hear a word of grace and mercy and good news that seems to be aimed past us—at those in this world whose poverty is greater, whose oppression is deeper, whose imprisonment is unjust, who lead stigmatized and marginalized lives? How do we come to understand that the liberation of one of us is the liberation of us all? How do we receive the proclamation of the Lord’s favor that is not accompanied by the Lord’s vengeance, or by retribution or judgment or shame?

How do we hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and respond to his call to live as if all the world has been adopted into the family of God?

This week, I had opportunity to listen to a commencement speech that Father Gregory Boyle gave a Pepperdine University last May—the whole of it is on YouTube if you want to hear it. Father Boyle works with formerly gang-involved and incarcerated men and women who with support are redirecting their lives and becoming part of the community.

In his speech, he calls these Pepperdine graduates to build up bonds of kinship, to participate in acts of justice, and to cultivate lives of peace. He challenges them with these words:

You go from here to create a community of kinship such that God in fact might recognize it. In fact, that is God's dream come true. No us and them, just us. You imagine, with God, a circle of compassion. And then you imagine no one standing outside that circle.

And you know that God does not share in the demonizing in which we all engage in. So you choose to go from here and you dismantle the barriers that exclude.

You go out to the margins because that's the only way they'll get erased—if you stand out at them. You stand with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. You stand with those whose dignity has been denied. You stand with those whose burdens are more than they can bear...

You go from here to stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. And you stand with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.³

I have been part of three organizations and two professions that have—in living memory—opened their ranks to “outsiders.” The university from which I graduated, the US military in which I served, the vocation that brings me here this morning: all were once closed to women.

The closed circles of participation were opened by those who had power to do so. They were opened to the dismay of those who claimed women's presence would destroy the institution or denigrate the profession. Some of those voices still speak—and in their questioning—I hear the unspoken question of Nazareth.

What is the value in being chosen if there is no exclusivity in it?

Is it redemption if everyone is being redeemed?

What I can tell you is that Jesus Christ has come to the margins. He has come to the margins to stand with us by becoming one of us and he calls us to follow him.

When we are strong, we are called to be with those who are weak. When we have resources, we are called to share with those who lack. When we hold honor and respect, we are called to lift up those who are marginalized and denied their full humanity. When we have faith, we are called to support those

whose faith is tattered by circumstance and to be the face of God's love to those who have yet to believe. When we have nothing, we are called to cling to each other in the sure and certain knowledge of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

We are called to open the circles enclosing our hearts and enclosing our lives so that all people may come to know God's compassion, God's mercy, and God's grace.

As Jesus begins his ministry, he reads from the scroll of Isaiah—words that share his identity and purpose. In the last act of ministry, he sits at table with his closest friends and enacts a sacred promise—sharing of bread and wine.

This is the sacrament we will celebrate this day.

He ends his ministry in the way that it began, in resonance with the prophet Isaiah, who wrote:

...the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines... And he will destroy... the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth... It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (Isa. 25:6-9).

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

How shall we receive these gracious words?

¹ Duffield, Jill. "Looking into the Lectionary: 4th Sunday after Epiphany." *The Presbyterian Outlook*. 28 Jan 2019.

² Monie, Blair R. "Luke 4:21-30: Connecting the Reading with the World." *Connections*. Year C, Vol 1. Louisville: WJK, 2017. 221.

³ Boyle, Gregory. "How Working with Gang Members Changed My Life." *Commencement Speech at Pepperdine University*. <https://youtu.be/AC5c7VQoARc>. 3 May 2018.