

Sunday, February 3, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30

Hometown Boy

We pick up where we left off last week. Jesus is in the synagogue of his hometown. He's read from the scroll of Isaiah, basically answering the question, "What do you do?" and he's told the people that "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing." And at first, things seem to be going alright. The people say good things about Jesus, have their moment of either hometown pride or astonishment, "Is not this Joseph's son?", and all seems to be understood and accepted.

But then something happens. The situation takes a turn and by the end of the passage the people are driving Jesus out of town and trying to hurl him off of a cliff. That's a pretty big shift in attitude. From welcoming Jesus into the synagogue and inviting him to teach to running him out of town and trying to send him off a cliff. What in the world happened? How do the people who knew Jesus, knew his family, probably watched him grow up, reach this point of no longer wanting him in their synagogue or even in their town?

The answer to those questions can be found in what Jesus has to say in the preceding verses. We read that Jesus tells the crowd, "The truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." And we're told that when the people heard this, they were filled with rage.

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Wait a minute? When they heard what? Jesus is referencing two different stories out of the Hebrew Bible--their own sacred text--about God offering healing and that's what makes the people so furious?! Wouldn't that be something they'd want to celebrate? On the surface it might seem that way. But when we start to dig a little deeper, we might begin to understand why the people were so upset with their hometown boy.

During the two situations that Jesus references--the famine and the number of lepers--there were many people who were suffering. It wasn't just the widow at Zarephath that was struggling. There were many, many Israelite widows who were struggling. And the same was true of leprosy. It wasn't just Naaman who was dealing with the disease. There were many Israelites dealing with it at that time as well. And therein becomes the tension--that at those times there were many Israelites suffering and needing God's help and what Jesus is pointing out is that God's help at those times was offered to foreigners. As N. T. Wright explains, "Elijah was sent to help a widow - but not a Jewish one. Elisha healed one solitary leper - and the leper was the commander of the enemy army. That's what did it. That's what drove them to fury. Israel's God was rescuing the wrong people" (*Luke for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2004. 47).

Imagine the scene. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of the crowd gathered at the synagogue. One of our own has returned. A child we watched grow, and perhaps helped teach, has been doing things all over the land to the point that news of him, this hometown boy, is spreading like wildfire. And so of course, when he comes back to Nazareth we must go to the synagogue to hear what he has to say; to see what he might do in this place where he grew up since he's done so many things elsewhere. And then not only is he not doing anything to help anyone here in the town that nurtured and loved him but he's reminding us of times in our

history when God chose the outsider, when God helped people who weren't Jewish, or even
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worse, when God helped an enemy of the Jews. I don't know about you, but I'd probably be pretty furious myself. This is not what I'd gone to Jesus to hear; learning again of how God offered healing to others, and not just any other, but someone my people considered to be an enemy. As Wright goes on to add, "That's like someone in Britain or France during the Second World War speaking of God's healing and restoration for Adolf Hitler. It's not what people wanted to hear" (Ibid., 48). And that's what the people heard that made them so angry.

Blair Monie explains:

The people were "filled with rage" because Jesus proclaimed a grace that was wider and more generous than they were. Grace is more difficult to really embrace than we often assume. We are happy when the "right" people are forgiven, accepted, or healed, but we're not so sure that we want those things extended to people outside our favored circles, or that we want to extend that grace ourselves. (*Connections: Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 222)

Of course it's infuriating. This boy they watched grow up--the carpenter's son--is now teaching them, schooling them, on who God favors and how far God's grace extends?!?! I don't think so. That's not going to be allowed. Especially since it means the people of Nazareth do not receive any special treatment or grace--even though they're the ones with the connection to Jesus--their hometown boy.

Yet it doesn't have to be that way. As Robert Dannals writes:

Jesus' revelation that the good news is for the whole world, not just those of us who have known Jesus all our lives, shouldn't offend us or make us want to run Jesus off a cliff. It's not a threat but an invitation. Jesus is indeed bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, all of this, today in our midst--and we can be a part of it, spreading his good news

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all over the world. (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2016. 185).

We can tell all people the good news! It's not something we have to worry about keeping hidden. Or worry about telling the wrong person. Jesus is telling those who knew him best, that he brings good news for everyone. Not just the people with the connections but for all people, including people they might not like or agree with or think deserve to hear the good news.

This is how we get from last week--Jesus sharing his mission with the people of his hometown--to this week--those same people trying to run him off a cliff. All Jesus told them was that the good news was for everyone. And that was something they just weren't ready to accept. Are we ready? Are we ready to hear of God's grace for all people? To hear of God saving the refugee children from Colombia or Syria instead of just saving the children that look like us? For this is what Jesus is bringing to the world. God's grace and rescue and favor for all people. And we can either prepare ourselves for that news and be ready to proclaim the good news to all people--including the refugee, the foreigner, and everyone else--or we can continue to be like the people of Nazareth and run Jesus out of town. The decision is ours alone.

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