

Of Love and Courage

Luke 4:21-30 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today's assigned lectionary Gospel Reading is actually a continuation from last Sunday's passage, also from Luke 4. In that text, Luke writes that Jesus declares that he is the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's words that the Spirit of God has anointed him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. We explored that this is Luke's overarching understanding of Jesus' ministry, representing the primary reason Jesus was sent by God. Therefore, it serves somewhat like Jesus' mission statement, if you will. That brings us up to this morning's biblical text, which presents the dramatic response to Jesus' comments by his hometown synagogue folks in Nazareth.

~ READ: Luke 4:21-30

The initial response to Jesus' ministry and message is awe. Those in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth were "amazed" at his grace-filled words of compassion in describing the purpose of his mission. This is followed by the comment, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" This question is often misinterpreted as a put-down of Jesus. Instead, it's not intended to belittle Jesus, but rather as a compliment to point out that Jesus is a hometown boy, one of their own, a member of their clan – he's family, and they are proud of that. This point is absolutely crucial to having a fuller understanding of this story. Here's why.

Cultural and societal norms dictated that being a member of a particular clan or tribe involved certain obligations. Most prominently, it was customary for any person to give preference and show partiality to one's own family and village. The local folks have heard about the great things Jesus has done in the nearby fishing village of Capernaum, located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. They expect, therefore, even greater things from Jesus now that he is back at his home village of Nazareth, about thirty miles to the southwest. Yet, when Jesus reveals that playing favorites isn't going to happen, they feel shamed and things get ugly.

Luke has Jesus quoting to them what was a common and familiar proverb that prophets are not accepted in their own hometown. Instead of performing miracles for his own people, Jesus cites two examples from their own Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. When there was a famine in the land during the time of Elijah, the prophet was sent to a widow *not* in Israel but at Zarephath in Sidon. And when there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha, only one leper was cleansed and healed: Naaman, in Syria.

In these two instances, God chose foreigners over the faithful. Upon hearing this, the people in Nazareth become enraged and turn to violence. They run Jesus out to the edge of town with plans to hurl him off a cliff. This near-tragic story ends with the announcement that Jesus somehow slipped away and escaped harm. And according

to the gospel of Luke, Jesus never returns to his hometown of Nazareth. Who can blame him?

Luke makes a very strong point here. **Jesus does not go elsewhere to minister because he is rejected by the local insiders; Jesus is rejected by the insiders because he tells them he is going elsewhere to minister. Since they feel abandoned by Jesus, they decide to abandon him.** Luke warns us that since God's work of grace *necessarily* involves reaching out to outsiders, there will be some insiders (whether it be church members within a congregation, up to nationalists within a country) who might get perturbed from time to time, perhaps because they feel abandoned or aren't getting the attention they want or demand.

Here's how this applies to us. **Do we really want a gracious God? Certainly we do – for ourselves. But can we have a gracious God if we don't believe that the same grace is given to those sinners outside our church doors, outside our faith tradition, outside our boundaries of acceptability, outside our border walls?** If we start fearing and ostracizing the sources of perceived danger from those outside our own tribe, thus dehumanizing them as "other", we become part of the problem. That is a very big part of what is happening right now concerning current issues around immigrants and refugees and caravans. **We learn that God's love and grace for all people means that we must never devalue others or write them off.**

So what, then, are we supposed to do? The biblical answer, which may seem obvious, is to love one another. You may have wondered why the lectionary paired this story of Jesus being rejected by his hometown folks with the apostle Paul's famous words about love in 1 Corinthians 13. This is the famous "love chapter", one that is most often heard during wedding ceremonies. **In contrast to Luke's story of how insiders turn to rejection and even violence, Paul reminds us to act in love in all things.** Now, this doesn't mean, especially among us social justice and equality types, that there isn't a place for righteous anger. Anger has its place in social justice movements. But it must not stop there, which is so often the case. Therefore, Paul reminds us of a "still more excellent way," the way of love. Biblical commentator Verity A. Jones explains:

Love, in Paul's understanding, doesn't replace anger. Love rejoices in truth, and sometimes the truth is infuriating – especially when it reveals suffering and loss, discrimination and inequality. What's more, love outlasts everything. 'It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.'

It's good to remind ourselves that **while these beautiful and lyrical words do have meaning for a couple in love, Paul did not have a wedding in mind when he wrote these words to the congregation in Corinth.** The kind of love Paul describes isn't the same as loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Nor is it the kind of love that is connected with passion or affection. Instead, **agape, is the love signified in the moral principles of charity, fellowship, good-will, and friendship. This is the love that leads to unity within a diverse community of faith.** This is the love that reminds us that **our well-being is bound to the well-being of one another.** Writes one commentator, "I owe you. Not because I like you. Not because you have been kind to me or favored me in any way. But because we are one."

In this context, **love for one another is a responsibility.** It is perhaps the most important element in our calling as children of God, and as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. Here are some questions to ponder. How, then, do we, as a

community of faith, express the love for one another described by Paul? Do we feel bound by responsibility and commitment to love one another, with patience and kindness?

Yes, it is crucial that we cultivate things like knowledge, faith, and charity, we must pray, contribute, and march for social justice. But **if we fail to approach our fellow human beings with a loving heart, Paul suggests that it means nothing**. For if that is the case, then we, too, are nothing more than a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

This kind of love for one another takes **constant work**. Like any spiritual discipline it **requires practice**. And no, we will not always do this perfectly. That's where grace and forgiveness from God and each other come into play.

Let us have the courage, the will, and the stamina to keep practicing love. And let us remember, **Paul's words about love are not meant as a pretty lullaby, but as our marching orders**.

Amen.