

Pushing Boundaries: Opposition with Love

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
January 30, 2022

Today's assigned lectionary Gospel reading from Luke 4 is a continuation from last Sunday's passage. 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' mission and ministry, representing the primary reason Jesus was sent by God. Therefore, it serves somewhat like Jesus' mission statement, if you will.

We then explored how College Hill's Mission Statement bore similarities in the understanding of our calling to build an inclusive community of faith, receive and openly share the love of God, and to reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.

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.

Luke 4:21-30

²¹Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' ²³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Did you notice the initial response to Jesus' 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 and ministry. 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 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 show partiality and give preference 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 had strong expectations, therefore, that even greater things would come to them 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, that charity doesn't necessarily begin at home, 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 poor widow *not* in Israel but at Zarephath in Sidon, located in modern day Lebanon. And when there were many who suffered from leprosy in Israel during the time of Elisha, the only one cleansed and healed by the prophet was an enemy army officer named Naaman, in Syria, also in pagan Gentile territory. In these two instances, **God chose foreigners – outsiders – over the faithful insiders.**

Upon hearing that the gospel message is not based upon Jesus choosing to favor them over everyone else, which meant their own self-interest, sense of entitlement, privilege, and personal gain, the people in that Nazareth synagogue become enraged and turn to violence. A form of this is often the case among those whose expectations go unmet. **There will be opposition when boundaries are pushed and the status quo is challenged.** (Our response to that opposition is something I'll address in just a moment.) Therefore, the locals 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 and reconciliation necessarily involves reaching out to outsiders, there will be some insiders who will get upset from time to time, perhaps because they feel ignored and aren't getting the attention they want or demand.** And while Jesus' message is great news for the vulnerable, it becomes unsettling news for anyone attached to and supportive of the inequalities and privileges of the social norms.

Insiders might represent people within a particular congregation, a particular faith tradition, a particular political party, a particular race, a particular social economic status, a particular educational level, a particular age, a particular gender, a particular sexual orientation. 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 and loving God if we don't believe that the same grace is extended to those outside our church doors, outside our faith tradition, outside our political party, outside our social economic

status, outside our particular educational level, outside our own age, outside our own gender, outside our own sexual orientation? What about those outside our own 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 in our country right now. Like the hometown folks in Nazareth, **many today are feeling anxiety, fear, and anger about the possibility of being passed over, left behind, and pushed out. And it appears that White, Christian, nationalists are leading this charge.**

Leading to the old adage of “you’re either with us or against us,” has risen not only to extreme divisiveness and partisanship but also to violence. The January 6 Insurrection on our nation’s Capitol Building is an extreme example of this, as are the attacks on our voting rights.

We learn, however, that God’s love and grace for all people means that we must never devalue others or write them off. Why? Because God doesn’t. So yes, this applies to us, as well. Even with our faithful commitment to social justice, it is possible to sometimes be so consumed with our outrage that it fails to heed the apostle Paul’s equally important call to act with love in all things, including in the face of those who oppose us. That is 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 with anger and rejection of the opposition, 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 important to remind ourselves that while these beautiful and lyrical words do have meaning for two people in love, **Paul did not have a wedding in mind when he wrote these words to the community of faith in Corinth.** In the Greek, the kind of love Paul describes isn’t the same as the kind of love connected with romantic passion or affection. Instead, **agape** is the love signified in the moral principles of charity, fellowship, and the good-will of others. **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** – that when one suffers we all suffer. In this context, **love for one another involves both responsibility and accountability.** It is perhaps the most important element in our identity as children of God, and as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. Here are some questions to ponder.

- How 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, kindness, and mutual forbearance?

• Yes, it is crucial that we continue to cultivate things like knowledge, faith, and charity; and we must pray, contribute, speak out, and sometimes even march for social justice and equity. 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 from 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 sweet sentimentality, but as guidance for our daily lives and our interactions with others – all others.

Amen.

Resources:

Verity A. Jones, Commentary for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, christiancentury.org, 1-20-16.

Brian Stoffregen. Faith Lutheran Church, Marysville, CA., crossmarks.com

William Loader; www.textweek.com

Feasting on the Word