

Ministry with “Outsiders”

Luke 4:16-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today's Gospel reading from Luke 4 is partially a repeat, then a continuation from last Sunday's passage. As you will hear again, 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.

[Read Luke 4:16-30.]

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 shame 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. Jesus declares that his role as a prophet will not be governed by giving special treatment and preference to his own people. **In an ironic twist, Jesus, as an insider, suddenly becomes an outsider.** In essence, Jesus is stating that his mission is broader than in-group/insider loyalties. We learn that Jesus is governed by the broader purposes of God – to **minister to “outsiders”**.

This story exposes quite a dilemma for organized religion today, and begs the questions: **Does the church primarily exist to serve its own members (an inward-focus), or outsiders (with a prominent outward-focus)?** Or, using the language of family systems therapy, is the church a closed system or an open system? **Where would you put the life and ministry of College Hill along that continuum of being closed or open?** Perhaps, for us, this is more of a both/and issue than an either/or, putting us somewhere in the middle.

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. But Jesus will not place himself and his ministry under the control of his hometown people and religious community, or even his own family.

When it comes to church work there is often a similar dilemma. There is always a struggle to balance what we might term "pastoral" work and "prophetic" work. It's a delicate balancing act, and not without risk – especially for clergy when a congregation feels their pastor isn't giving them all of his or her time and attention. I am aware of that delicate balance, the dance between pastoral and prophetic work.

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 at the margins of society, 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 community of faith, like in Luke's story. But it can also represent a particular faith tradition, a particular political party, a particular race or ethnic background, 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 own race or ethnic background,
 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 nation's borders?

If we start fearing and ostracizing the sources of perceived danger from those outside our own tribe, thus dehumanizing them as "other", then we become part of the problem. That is a very big part of what is happening in our nation right now. Like the hometown folks in Nazareth, **many have felt anxiety, fear, and anger about the possibility of being passed over, left behind, and pushed aside. And it appears that White, Evangelical Christian Nationalists are leading this charge. Many white, Christian, heterosexual men are now feeling that they are the ones being oppressed and discriminated against.** The old adage of "you're either with us or against us," has risen not only to extreme divisiveness and partisanship but also to abuse, including verbal and spiritual abuse. We see this in dramatic fashion in Washington DC right now.

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 at the opposition that it fails to heed the apostle Paul's equally important call, from 1 Corinthians 13, which we heard last Sunday, to act with love in all things, including in the face of those who oppose us.

Our mission and ministry is all about extending God's love and grace and compassion to others – both inside *and* outside this community of faith – so that each person is seen as a valued and beloved child of God. And yes, sometimes this is risky business, especially when certain "insiders" turn us, like Jesus, into "outsiders" and wish we would fall off a cliff.

Yet even with this risk of being prophetic and speaking truth to power, we also believe this is our calling.

Amen.

Resources:

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

William Loader; www.textweek.com

Feasting on the Word