

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 30, 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

We pick up in our Gospel reading right where we left off last week. The hometown boy, Jesus proclaiming through the words of the prophet Isaiah what he has come to do, “bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” The crowd talks among themselves and are amazed at his words. They seem favorably disposed to Jesus. However, their comment about Jesus being Joseph’s son might reveal what Jesus pre-emptively responds to, that they are expecting him to do what he has already done elsewhere here, in his hometown of Nazareth. In fact, won’t he do more here? Because he’s Joseph’s boy, one of us, and as such we deserve more than anyone else gets, right? Because we are his people.

Now Jesus apparently can see what is coming and moves quickly to head off this line of thought. To make clear that like Jeremiah, he is sent not just to his hometown, but to all nations. He does so by pointing out two times in the past when God has looked past the needs of God’s own people and responded instead to the needs of others, foreigners, a Gentile widow woman hungry and in distress and a Syrian Army Officer struck with leprosy. People who were outside of the chosen of God, Israel. People who were not in God’s “hometown”.

As author Jana Bennet writes, “In other words, Jesus may indeed be proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor in Nazareth, and he may be proclaiming that it is now

– but he is also and offensively saying that while the Lord’s favor is now, the people God favors are not necessarily the people we expect God to favor.”

The issue is not to pit cases of injustice against one another (mine is real and yours isn’t! Mine is worse than yours, more deserving of help). The issue lies in the Nazoreans view of themselves and of Jesus. They see themselves in the Isaiah passage, a people needing justice (and they do need justice!) but then they go one step further and say, because you are the hometown boy, because we are your peeps, we deserve it more than anyone else. We are the chosen ones of Israel! As Bennet writes, this turns “what should be a proclamation about God and God’s goodness to those in need... (into) a proclamation about the goodness of people” into a fight about who deserves it more. Do you see the problem there?

It is a trap that too often we all fall into. An understanding that because we have done X, Y, or Z God must surely favor us over everyone else. That we get to go to the head of the line. That because I... give generously to the food bank, or am in church every Sunday, or have been a member here for 35 years God will surely favor me over anyone else who has been less apparently “righteous”. Or who is not even apparently a believer at all. Because... I’m better, chosen, in the family, more deserving, whatever the reasoning might be. The focus is on us and not on the God who extends goodness and mercy to those in need.

This way of thinking goes off the rails in at least two ways. First, that way of thinking tries to throw a loop around God. To domesticate God’s power and

privilege and keep it for ourselves. It imagines that we control who and how God helps. We decide who deserves it and who doesn't. In effect it usurps God's sovereignty.

Second, it fails to account for the fact that God's way of thinking and acting is not our own. As Bennet reminds us, "God is different from us. God does not seek a relationship with us because we are good (or think we are) but because, ... we're simply us, and God loves us. We do not have to try to be the widow or the leper that we hope God will save – because God already seeks and loves us as we are."

We are reminded in this passage and the reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians about the sheer strangeness of God's way of thinking, of God's love. A love that relies on the goodness of God and nothing else. A love freely given to those who we would heartily agree, don't deserve it. A love that is not some resource to be hoarded and doled out to the deserving, but an unending stream of grace that will be extravagantly "wasted" on even the foreign widow and the Syrian army officer before "our own people".

And this offends those in the synagogue. It offends Jesus' friends and neighbors. Those who saw him grow up as a boy. Upon whose knee he sat as they spoke of the stories of the faith. Who knew him. This idea sparks in this crowd a rage so immediate it is like a cinder landing among dry brush. They rise up, throw him out of the synagogue and carry him to the brow of a hill to cast him off, if not to his death, then to harm him.

Why? What has this touched in them? Is it because Jesus has said, yes God may do these things elsewhere before they happen here? Is it because Jesus seems to reject their understanding of being in a special relationship with God and therefore more deserving? Are they afraid that they will lose out, that God's favor is a scarce commodity, limited? Or is it the very fact that Jesus points out that there is more than enough for all?

I think it goes back to that basic issue of identity and from what viewpoint we look at this. Jesus is who Jesus says he is, not who we want him to be. That is as true for us today as it was in the first century. Despite having the Bible, this Book of Faith in front of us, I wonder if we don't too often base our understanding of Jesus and God on what we want them to be like rather than on who they say they are. And, as anyone with children knows when someone's expectations aren't met, they can get upset. Angry.

There is a wideness in God's mercy. One that makes us wonder what it means for us that Jesus is doing those things there and not here. Does it mean God cares for them more than us?

Can you identify with that feeling? If not on the cosmic scale of God but within your own life? What is that about, in us?

Ultimately, it is a lack of faith, trust in God and God's promise. God loves you not because you are good, not because you are in church. God loves you not because you are hungry, or battling an addiction, or suffer from cancer. God loves you

because you are created by God and bear God's image. Because God formed you in the womb and knew you, and God knows and loves you still for who you are at this moment, right now. And always will.

Paul reminds us in his letter to Galatians that love is the response of faith to God. The same love he describes in 1 Corinthians. Love that is long tempered, that is service oriented to others, that does not try to jealously hold onto the beloved for oneself. Love, the response of faith, trusts in the one who loves us just as we are. Love acknowledges that now we see only dimly. That we cannot peer into the mind of God. Love trusts in the one we follow, even when what God does or doesn't do, pisses us off, when it goes against our expectation, when we don't understand.

Love. What Jesus embodies for us, God's love for this world. God's love for us. God's desire not to condemn the world but save it. Let us trust in this love. That it is boundless. That it is without discrimination. That it is for others as well as us.

Let us live out this love towards God and one another every day. Let it fill our lives, so that in our work, and in our play. When we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise it is all suffused with that Godly love. So that we might not be just so much noise in the world, but instruments by which people encounter the love of God. Instruments playing in the music of our lives a love that is long tempered, service oriented to others, that is kind to everyone (even the people who want to throw you off the cliff).

So that, bathed in the boundless love of God for us, and playing that love, pouring that love onto the world we might be a means for others to know our joy, that God so loved them that God sent God's only Son Jesus not to condemn them, but to love them into life, fuller and more abundant. Thanks be to God.