

Third Sunday After Epiphany January 27 2019

Luke 4:14-30

Well, that escalated quickly. From amazing gracious words to being taken to the hill to be tossed off in 8 verses!

Let's start at the beginning, the 4th chapter of Luke picks up just after Jesus has successfully defended himself from the three temptations of Satan in the wilderness. Now, filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus preaches in the synagogues of Galilee and those who hear him sing his praises. He's gone viral.

Jesus heads home to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Saturday) as he was raised to do by his parents and the people of his hometown. Asked to serve as the teacher for the day Jesus would have read from an appointed text from the Torah (the first five books of the bible) but also have freedom to choose another text. He chose the Prophet Isaiah starting with Isaiah 61. Now, there are some parts from this text that he omits and things he adds from elsewhere in Isaiah. Looking at those can be instructive to Jesus' emphasis, but suffice to say that what he omits and adds is not out of the ordinary for a teacher of the day.

Then he sits down to teach and tells them, in effect, the one being spoken of in this text is me. I am the promised one. The Messiah.

The crowd is amazed by what they have heard and say, "This Joseph's boy?" Their response is a bit ambiguous, but there is an undertone that Jesus seems to catch.

He responds with the proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself”. It seems to have been one that would have been used to insist that you can’t refuse to do to one’s own relations the things you do for others. This makes sense with his next statement, where Jesus anticipates that they are assuming he will do for them as he did for Capernaum. Works of power, healing, casting out demons. That he, as Joseph’s son, will be especially for them a source of God’s favor. Instead, he speaks another aphorism- that Prophets often meet resistance, rejection, even death at the hands of those they are sent to, even their hometown.

Finally, Jesus speaks the truth to them. He brings up the stories of the Prophets Elijah and Elisha. Stories where both reached beyond the people of Israel to bring welcome and blessing on people who were most representative of those who were other... the most marginalized of Gentiles. A poor widow in Sidon and a Syrian Leper, leader of the Syrian army that was a tangible threat to Israel at the time.

The message is clear- Jesus will not be parochial, he has come for Jews and Gentiles alike. His work is not just for them alone. Others are worthy, too.

The truth that the crowd now faces is one that says their own sense of the status quo, of what is right, the stereotypes of themselves and others that defined their religious and social boundaries is now up ended. They are made to see that they might not be the poor, or the captives, or the oppressed that Jesus has come for. That they might be the ones giving something up, returning it to its rightful owner in the year of the Lord’s Jubilee.

Their reaction to this truth is anger. One that, as implied by the word used, is a rage that goes from 0-60 in a split second.

They go to throw him off the cliff. Perhaps for blasphemy, perhaps just in plain anger. One thing I learned is that stoning, which was an acceptable punishment, could mean bringing stones to the accused (rocks in hand), but it could also mean bringing the accused to the stones. This is what they were doing in taking Jesus to the cliff to hurl him to the stones below, killing him.

But, in a foreshadowing of the crucifixion and resurrection to come, Jesus passes safely through them. Escaping what they had hoped to do, silence his truth. And living on to proclaim that truth again.

I am one who does not anger easily. It's pretty hard to get me that kind of upset. But I do have some sense of what that anger might have felt like to those listening in the synagogue in Nazareth that day. I was a senior in high school. I was pretty stressed with playing football, keeping up with my grades, and was working in all my extra time on a show for our High School Theatre. I had been having a heated conversation with a classmate about something and was headed out the door, still in a bit of a huff, when she said something. I cannot recall what it was, but without any conscious thought I was back in the room and mouth open, ready to shout some things at her I normally wouldn't consider. Her words had sent me from 0-60 with no thought on my part. Thankfully, I came to myself. Shut my mouth. And left without embarrassing myself further.

I've been thinking about those people in the synagogue that day. People secure that they know who Jesus is. Who God is. Who God is for and against. That they know the truth of things. Then Jesus comes along and using the texts on which their own certainty is built, pulls the rug out from under that certainty. Shows them the truth of their own self-deception, the falsity of their own certainty. And

they get angry. I'm sure they thought it was a righteous anger, rooted in their right interpretation of what God was up to, what God wanted. I'm sure they felt they were protecting their faith from a dangerous person...a dangerous idea.

I've been thinking about those people in the synagogue as I've watched the ever-evolving furor this week over the encounter besides the Lincoln Memorial of a group of High Schoolers, a retirement age Native American, and four middle-aged African Americans part of a group called the Hebrew Israelites. I saw the righteous indignation rise first among those on the left at the initial video clips of the encounter; then on those on the right as the initial videos, reports, and reactions were found to only be a part of a more complex story. I heard assumptions being made about people, their motives, their facial expressions based on what they were wearing, upon their ethnicity, their age. I heard stories from the participants that spoke of a singular story seen through many different lenses.

I have seen this kind of rage too much in recent years. A rage built on assumptions, often long held. Just like the ones held by those in the synagogue that day. A rage, an indignation that is based on what we know to be fact, not necessarily based on actual knowledge of what is going on. Certainly not based in the basic understanding that God's image resides in that person over there as well. The one with the brown skin beating a drum, with the white skin and a Make America Great Again hat, with those who we don't think deserve that honor. But who God has chosen to bestow it upon.

Do we even consider that when we do such things to other people, that we are dragging Jesus to the cliff to throw him off? Do we even think to ourselves that

the image of God resides in that person and to destroy them, even verbally, is, in a very real way, to crucify Christ again?

Do we not remember the 8th commandment, do not bear false witness? And remember Martin Luther's admonition that it meant not only not to lie about our neighbor but to look at what they do in the best possible light? Do we not assume that means getting as much information as possible about the person and their situation before deciding we know what is happening?

Do we forget so easily the command of Jesus to love one another in the same way that God and Jesus love one another?

I understand those people in the synagogue that day. I get the easy appeal of standing firm in our convictions. The joy of righteous anger at those who just don't get it. The thrill of the tribal response, us against them with God on our side!

But it is not the truth. The truth is that God's love in Jesus Christ came for everyone, that when I draw a boundary line for God's love that Jesus is automatically on the other side of it. The truth is, that those who God came for look just like the high schoolers in the ball caps, the retirement age Native American, the middle-aged African American men.

I understand those people in the synagogue that day and I give thanks that God does not work like we do. That every time we try and kill Jesus for telling us the truth he passes through us, continuing on the way, only to return telling us that same truth. I give thanks that God does not work like we do, and God sees God's

image in us and God is merciful. That God sees God's image in us and loves us. Enough to send his Son to tell us the truth.

My siblings in Christ, we are in the midst of a year of striving to grow in our love towards one another. To remember that we are all created in the image of God. That we should live by that commandment that calls us to look at what others do in the best possible light. To wait, listen, and seek to understand the truth of a thing before we act; even knowing that only Jesus has the full truth. To strive to love one another with a self-sacrificial love that looks first to the care of the other, not of ourselves, our group, our tribe... and trust that they will do the same for us.

In a world that can be so dark with our rage and our indignation. Where we seem to want to divide ourselves into tribes and groups. What a gift of light! To see others with generosity and compassion. What a gift of light, to see others not as enemy, but as just like me...created in the image of God. To strive to listen and understand.

Jesus Christ, is the light of the world. A light that we receive into ourselves each week. As we gather around the Word that is truth. As we take him into ourselves through bread and wine. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, strengthened by the light of Christ, may we set aside our anger and indignation. May we seek to understand as much as to be understood. May we be given the grace to see others as God sees them, created in God's image, and worthy of love and respect. May we be a means this week for the Light of Christ to shine upon a weary world.