

Sunday, February 3, 2019
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)
1 Corinthians 13.1-13; Luke 4.21-30
The Rev. Michael Fincher

Today we have the continuation of last week's Gospel reading, where Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth. He is in the synagogue where he grew up, and has just read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4.18-19). We pick up where last week's Gospel reading left off, with Jesus preaching a one sentence sermon: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4.21). The remainder of today's reading is effectively a response to Jesus' profound statement in which he succinctly states the nature of his ministry.

Admittedly, what is presented is a bit difficult to track. Some of what transpires in his interaction with those present in the synagogue seems to be missing, so we kind of have to read between the lines. We have to interpolate based on what the crowd says, based on Jesus' response, and based on the words that Jesus seems to put in the mouths of the Nazarenes.

Essentially, the chain of events goes something like this: Jesus preaches an awesome sermon, filled with hope—that Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled, bringing the hope and promise of liberation, that the people will be lifted up and be healed. The people are amazed at what they are hearing, what they are promised. They are ecstatic. This is what they have been waiting for. But then, a little skepticism starts to arise. "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Lk 4.22). In other words, "Wait a minute. This is Jesus. A local boy whom we have known since he was a baby. He's one of us. How could he possibly accomplish the things he is claiming?"

Almost as if wanting to pick a fight, Jesus responds somewhat defensively, "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'" (Lk 4.23). He's putting words in their mouths, giving voice to what they must surely be thinking. While lost on us, this cryptic proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself," combined with reference to what he has been doing in his adopted home of Capernaum, is an indictment that he should bring the relief promised in Isaiah to his own people. Not to THOSE people. How could a boy from Nazareth allow a place like Capernaum to get the benefit that the hometown crowd should have? Where is his loyalty to his own people?

Why they were against Capernaum benefiting from Jesus' ministry is anyone's guess. It was a Jewish town, just like Nazareth. Perhaps because Capernaum was considerably larger and more prosperous, the people of Nazareth thought they were more in need or more deserving of liberation and healing than the people of Capernaum. They seem to think they should be the chosen, just because Jesus is one of them.

For some reason, Jesus then adds fuel to the fire beginning to burn within the Nazarenes. He cites examples of how God chose to work through prophets such as Elijah and Elisha—some of whose more famous actions of healing and liberation were not among their own people, but among outsiders. Among Gentiles. This really upset the Nazarenes. They seem to think that Jesus is saying a bunch of outsiders is more deserving of God's grace than they are. The people of Nazareth seem to view the liberation and healing that Jesus promises as a limited resource. They are looking at God's promises as a zero sum game. That there are those deserving and those undeserving. That there are winners and losers. That there is "us" and there is "them." And if God's grace and mercy are extended to them, there won't be any left for us. They are so narrow-sighted in their views, so upset that they might be missing out, that they see blood. To the point that "They 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" (Lk 4.29).

This account of Jesus being rejected is one of the most stinging rebukes found in Scripture. Of course, the irony is that the violent rejection is not by "others," those who do not know or follow God. Quite the contrary. This rejection comes from within the assembly of the faithful. These are not bad people. They are just misguided and have developed their own ideas—perhaps their own agenda—of how God operates and what God is doing, or is supposed to do, among them.

It is clear that the people of Nazareth need a little attitude adjustment. Something along the lines of what we hear in our Epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians. In this passage, Paul is finishing up his assessment of the issue of spiritual gifts.

To fully understand what Paul is getting at, we must first understand that the Christians in Corinth were pretty impressed with themselves and particularly prided themselves on the abundance of spiritual gifts they possessed—gifts such as the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 12.8-10). All gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit for the uplifting of the Body of Christ. But the Corinthians had become so enamored with the gifts themselves that they developed the perception that some were better than others. That the gifts received somehow determined how faithful and pious a person was. They were so ecstatic about having received particular gifts that they lost sight of the most important fact: that the true foundation of our faith is not the gifts bestowed, even if they are bestowed by God, but rather, confession of Jesus as Lord. They lost sight of their calling to humbly follow in the way of Jesus in living out the Gospel in their lives.

In Paul's assessment, he boils it all down to essentials. That the purpose of the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit is not to indicate the relative worth or faithfulness of the individual. Rather, that the purpose behind spiritual gifts—ALL spiritual gifts—is love. The unconditional love that is demonstrated in Jesus Christ himself. That all spiritual gifts are merely tools to be used in faithfulness to that spirit of love. That the gifts bestowed are to be used as a way of demonstrating our love, Christ's love, and God's love.

Paul is trying to convey that our lives of faith are not about being impressed with what we have received. Or about being upset at not having what we think we deserve because of our own

sense of worthiness or faithfulness. But rather, that it is all about living into the love of Christ and sharing that love with others. No matter who they are. No matter where they are from. As Paul tells us, if we do not have love, if we do not use our gifts out of love, if we do not engage in ministry out of love for the other as a demonstration of our love for God, we are nothing. That we are doing it for the wrong reasons.

Admittedly, we do not see this clearly. We do not see our motivations as clearly as God can see them. As Paul notes, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13.12). As we grow in our faith, we do the best we can in living Christ’s message of love. This side of the end of the ages, what we can hope for is, at best, a pale imitation, a dim reflection, of what it means to convey, to share, God’s love. But we continue to have faith. We continue to hope. And we continue to move forward in love, sharing what we have been blessed to receive. Sharing it with all God’s beloveds. Because we are assured that God’s love is unlimited and unbounded in its scope. And the more we share it, the more there is to go around.

This is the fundamental message Jesus is seeking to convey to the Nazarenes. The idea that we are called by God to care not only for our own—those among us whom we like and who are like us—but also for those who are, for whatever reason, outside our circle of concern. God’s love, mercy, and healing extend beyond the confines we have drawn for ourselves. To do the work of God is to tear down the boundaries between us and those we often view as different, as other. Because from God’s perspective, in God’s eyes, there is no us and them. There is only us.

As Biblical scholar Susanna Metz aptly notes, “When we lose sight of the inclusiveness and the giftedness of love, we join those who’d throw Jesus off the cliff because: ‘Isn’t this *only* Joseph’s son?’ Today we might hear: It’s *only* a woman; it’s *only* an immigrant; it’s *only* a group of teenaged students. Those words diminish our grasp of love—devalue our relationship with each other. God *knows* each of us. God *consecrates* each of us. God offers us words of love to share. None of us is *only* in God’s eyes; all of us are called to proclaim love” (*Synthesis*, Epiphany 4, February 3, 2019).

May this message of God’s unbounded love and our part in spreading that love be fulfilled in our hearing AND in our actions.