

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

I Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

21Then [Jesus] began to say to [all in the synagogue in Nazareth,] “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 hometown 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 hometown. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up 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.

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

May the word of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Prophets

Good Morning! It's an interesting Gospel reading we have today... During seminary the pastor from my home congregation asked me to preach the Sunday after Christmas while he was away for vacation. As the day approached he left me an email that read "May the good folks of First English Lutheran Church give you a warmer welcome than the people of Nazareth gave Jesus." Basically, "I hope they don't try to throw you off a cliff." Thankfully, the good people of my "home" congregation decided not to chase me out of town and I survived. I have always laughed when I remember the email, but the reality of the text today had for years been more likely to leave me scratching my head than laughing.

The text today overlaps with the Gospel lesson from last week. It's really a story that should be kept together, but they don't ask my opinion about those types of things. After several readings, I was often still confused about how everyone ends up so upset. Things start out on a positive note; the people are amazed at what Jesus shares. They even speak of the graciousness of his words. Remember, he had spoken of the Jubilee year that is mentioned in the scroll of Isaiah that he had read from. Things are fine, and then here is what I noticed: Jesus is the one who becomes antagonistic. He launches into three different condemnations, all of which served to confuse me for many years.

The commentary *Feasting on the Word* speculates that the phrase “Doctor, cure yourself!” in vs. 23 is used to point a finger at Jesus. He needs to “deal with his own shortcomings before attempting to speak of the shortcomings of others.”¹ The next saying about healing in Capernaum and a prophet not welcome in their own town are an attempt on Jesus’ part to explain that what people often desire is not what they actually need. They want displays of power, not the convicting words of a prophet. His story about Elijah and Elisha are told to support his argument.

It’s this second point that I think holds the key for us today. To sum it up in a basic way, Jesus calls out the community in his hometown on their own mistakes. The words of Isaiah can sound like wonderful news... as long as you’re not sitting in a position of privilege and power. Jesus’ words hurt because he probably knows more than anyone else the truth of the town. If someone is passing through, the things below the surface can often be overlooked, but Jesus has been around long enough to see everything that is wrong.

It’s the position of privilege that I want us to think about today. Jesus is confronting both the audience in the text and anyone who ever hears this story. *“The problem is when that grace, that divine favor, meets up with privilege... The questions preachers should ask is how that prophetic grace, offered in the person of Jesus, sounds in terms of our own sense of privilege and entitlement today. Good news is bad news is good news,”*² writes David Jacobsen. It’s easy when we think we’re the ones who have been hurt. It’s a lot different when we turn out to be the ones inflicting the pain, whether we intend to or not.

¹Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 311.

²https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3955

I share a few brief stories to talk about my own place of privilege. When I got to seminary, one of the requirements was that we couldn't use masculine pronouns for God. Basically, we couldn't call God a "he." I was angry at first, "who are they to tell me how I refer to God?!" My initial reaction was the same as the crowd in today's text, anger and frustration. It wasn't until I slowly realized the many ways that masculine language for God was something that was so ingrained in my behavior that I was unable to even see the ways it could be damaging to others, or the stereotypes that it perpetuated. Now, unless I'm specifically talking about Jesus or the first person of the Trinity, you won't hear me use masculine language for God.

Another place of my privilege was my financial security. It was easy for me to believe that anyone who tries hard enough can make it in this society, it was after I realized the many ways I had been given a boost that I began to see that where one comes from plays a huge factor in where one can end up. Yes, there were outliers, and they had convinced me that anything was possible too. But the reality of poverty would never be something that was purely self inflicted.

Now here's my challenge for you today. I'm going to stop for a few minutes and let you talk to each other. I want you to pair up with someone you feel comfortable sharing with and talk about a time when you were confronted with your privilege and how you have since changed, or maybe share how convinced you were in the past that you were the one that was right and how you've grown. If none of that is comfortable, share a time where you saw someone else grow through their own privilege.

Pastor takes 5 minute break for congregation to talk

Ok, let's come back now. I wrap up this sermon with a quote from David Jacobsen's commentary. *"The good news of the gospel in Luke is tied to the person of Jesus, who is still both crucified and risen. We are not promised any easier fate than is our Lord, who preached prophetic grace, dealt with rejection, and still managed to be on his way. You've probably heard that the great preacher and activist Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was frequently fond of paraphrasing Reverend Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."2 The way King uses it, of course, is not for the sake of resignation, as if we could sit back and let historical determinism have its way. It is, however, from King's prophetic mouth a balm to those in the struggle. For all the difficulties of preaching prophetic grace, it bespeaks a purpose larger than our own, one capable of passing through rejection and still being on its way."*³

We could take the easy way, but God calls us towards more. When confronted with our privilege, whether it be our gender, our skin color, our financial security, our country of origin, it's natural to be angry at first. Our first reaction will be the same as the crowds. But what we do after is what truly defines us. We could be angry, or we could instead stop and listen. God is at work in our hearts in amazing ways, if we only took the time to stop and pay attention. Amen.

³https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3955