

Sermon on Luke 4:21-30; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Last Sunday we heard Luke's story of Jesus preaching his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. We left the story with the words that begin this morning's gospel reading: "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.*

It looked like a triumphant return. Hometown boy leaves home, begins his public work, word spreads, and he comes back home to preach. People marveled at his gracious words. He had spoken well. Then, before the congregation gathered for the coffee hour, people began to talk. Some asked each other, "Isn't this Joseph's son (the carpenter's kid)? Sure he can speak well, but we heard he could heal people. Is he going to do that here, among us? The murmuring began.

I guess Jesus heard it, and responded. He mentioned some old proverb that went something like this, "Hey, if you're a doctor, how about healing *yourself!*" Jesus said what some of them must have been thinking, "Do here also in Nazareth what we have heard you did in Capernaum (like change water into wine)!" The situation deteriorated from there. If they wanted to see miracles, how about this one, Jesus said? How about when there was a severe drought that lasted for three years, and people were starving, but God sent Elijah to a widow who wasn't even a Jew, but a *foreigner*. And how about all the lepers who suffered in Israel, but only the foreigner, Naaman – a Syrian of all persons, was cleansed?

Oh, boy, that went over well! The congregation was enraged, forgot all those nice things they had just said (and their coffee and donuts), and got up to drive Jesus out of town, dragging him to the edge of a cliff, to throw him down. It makes the shouts of Republicans or Democrats complaining after a president's state of the union message pale into insignificance, doesn't it? What made the congregation of Nazareth "go ballistic" on Jesus? I'm not sure, but I think it was because Jesus didn't do what they had heard he was doing other places – perform miracles of healing – in their town, his own hometown, and then so directly challenged them with the idea that God's mercy was shown so clearly on behalf of foreigners. Nazareth wouldn't know a prophet if he came and preached in their own synagogue! (And I guess Jesus' words came true, didn't they!)

Well, I think we all know why the people of Nazareth got so mad, and I think we can relate to their emotions. We Lutherans know why people get mad at pastors and preachers who challenge us with God's Word of grace. Because we all get mad sometimes when we are challenged by the truth about ourselves (a truth we find hard to accept). Jesus challenged his own people, in his own hometown,

with the truth that their view of God's mercy and grace did not include people from outside their own circle. He had come to proclaim a new truth, that God's mercy and love reaches out to all, including and especially the foreigner, the outsider, the outcast, the poor, and the "unclean".

But here's a question I don't know the answer to. *What stopped the people of Nazareth from throwing Jesus off that cliff?* It wasn't unheard of. Death by stoning was a common sentence for crimes like adultery, and those who committed murder or some other crime were quite possibly cast off that same cliff. Prophets and blasphemers were usually dealt with harshly, and capital punishment was not unheard of. So why did they stop?

Maybe the men of the town (who were the ones who would have heard Jesus' sermon, and so were the ones enraged) heard the screaming of their wives and mothers that this was Jesus, Joseph and Mary's son, and they had no business treating him this way. Maybe calmer heads prevailed. Maybe a wise elder said that this was no way to welcome home one of their own, no matter what he had said. Maybe they told him they'd let him go if he promised to get out of town and never come back. We don't know. Luke doesn't say. He lets us speculate. Thank you, Luke, you give us preachers a reason to preach!

Well, I'd like to think, I'd hope to believe that the people of Nazareth had a conscience that overcame their feelings of rage, just in time, before hurling the Savior of the world off a cliff. I'd like to think that the people of Nazareth came to their senses, remembered who they were as God's people, remembered God's mercy for them and God's call to have mercy on others, and stopped just in time. I don't know, but this gives me hope that even in our worst moments in the Church today, when we get angry and come to the brink of destroying what God would love to build in us, that even we can come to *our senses* and stop. And look. And listen to the new, more excellent way to live that God lays out before us by following Jesus, his Son. It's the good news of God's love for all people, particularly for those whom we in the Church are most inclined to leave out, like those "outside" the Church, non-believers, sinners, foreigners and outcasts. That *perfect love of God which casts out all fear*, even that fear of others, or an unknown future, that would lead us to cast others out, as well as our own prophets.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this love in our second lesson, chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians, the famous "love chapter" commonly read at weddings. Paul wrote this to a Church in conflict, a church he had founded as a place for the good news of God's grace and love in Christ Jesus to be proclaimed, which had descended into arguments about who had the greatest spiritual gifts and who was welcome at the Lord's table. Last Sunday we heard Paul write how all members of the Church were part of one body, Christ's Body, and all were equal

members and parts of that body, regardless of gift. So now he would show them a more excellent way to live within that body, with love for God and one another.

Paul's point is that we can have all the spiritual gifts in the world, even enough faith to move mountains (figuratively or literally), but without love even our best gifts and talents are nothing but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. You can do all kinds of great things in your life, we can do all kinds of wondrous things as a congregation, but without love it's all for nothing. This is a great question to ponder today as we, and other congregations throughout the Church, gather in annual meetings to reflect on the work we have done in Jesus' name this past year, and what we will do in the future. How has what we have done and what we will do in the name of Jesus reflect God's love, and our love of God and for one another? Or is it all just noise?..... Listen to the kind of love Christ calls for:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...so faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

So please take a moment and ponder this yourself. How in your life have you reflected God's love in your words and actions? Has what you have done or said been consistent with what you believe? When we're honest, I guess we can say "not always", and so we come to confess our sins – what we have said or done, or left unsaid or undone, and bring them to God, who promises to forgive us. Today we have all received absolution – the spoken words of forgiveness of our sins – for our failure to love God or neighbor as we have been called to love.

Next, think about how we have shown love as a congregation this past year. I guess in this we also have been inconsistent! But the question "*how have we loved God and neighbor*" is the best way to "evaluate" our work as the Church! Now, we can say we have done a number of good things this year, maybe even great things! But usually our evaluation is done "by the numbers"! Have we balanced the budget? Have our offerings matched our expenditures? Now, as "where we put our treasure" is a good test of where our heart is (Jesus said that!), I guess asking where we put our money is one way to measure what we love! But in annual meetings our zeal for financial accountability sometimes is out of proportion to the real test for the Church, which is "*how have we loved?!*"

Maybe another way to ask this is "how have we grown as a Church this year", and how have we grown and learned to love one another by following Christ and hearing God's Word? For we didn't start or end this year knowing everything about love! Paul writes that we only know in part, and are growing in knowledge, faith and love. "When I was a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." When we are children, we

reason and love in one way, and as adults, we reason and love in other ways. We hope as Christians that our knowledge and love will increase and mature, without losing those childlike gifts of faith, hope and love!

I think that we as a congregation have grown in faith and love, by realizing that some of those basic things of showing love for each other, showing mercy for the suffering and the poor, seeking direction in our lives from God's Word are at the heart of being Church. Yes, we have succeeded in raising enough funds to make some improvements in our building's appearance this year, but the real purpose of this is to better show hospitality to our neighbors and guests – many of whom struggle with recovery from various addictions. We have shown great love by opening our doors for temporarily homeless families to sleep at night during the months of March and October, simply because there was a need and we were asked. So, yes, we have learned how to love as a Church in ways that we didn't imagine just one year ago! We have been challenged as God's people to love our neighbor as ourselves, and we are responding (not perfectly, but faithfully!). So we are learning how to love more and more each year, in the name of Jesus Christ, which to me is the most critical evaluation of all for the Church!

So I am so glad that in this congregation we are not finding ourselves in a time of conflict or rage (like some congregations), ready to cast a pastor or member off a cliff, or voting whether to leave or stay in the ELCA. We are not pondering survival this year as a congregation, like we may have in some years. God has been good to us this year, so good that we are instead pondering how we can better love one another or share the love of God with our neighbors in the world outside our doors, in the name of Christ. My friends in Christ, this is a far better place to be, learning how to love as God has first loved us! Thanks be to God!