

Sermon on Luke 4:21-30
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 3, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Truth be told, I would have preferred that Jesus stopped speaking after he read the lesson from Isaiah 61 in his first sermon in hometown Nazareth. When we left off last Sunday, Jesus had just read those powerful words 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.”* He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on them, *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

That’s where we left off with the lesson last week. If only Jesus would have stopped there! Luke says that all spoke well of him at that point, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. It’s like when preachers today preach a gangbusters sermon on Easter or Christmas about the God of love who sent us Jesus as a gift, and after Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, raised him from the dead. Good news of God’s power, love and mercy – and after preaching this good news, we hear people say, “Good sermon, pastor, about the best you’ve ever done” – and everybody is happy (especially us). We all go home, enjoy the day and the game, and sleep peacefully into the night. Game over!

But that’s not what the gospel is that God gives us to preach, and that’s not where Jesus left his sermon in hometown Nazareth, with everyone amazed and speaking well of him – hometown boy comes home, does good! I had a time like that about 30 years ago, when I went home to Richfield to preach at Oak Grove Lutheran Church where I had been confirmed, to preach my first sermon during seminary. I can’t remember what gospel I preached, but everyone was happy and greeted me afterwards, and no one threw me out onto Lyndale Avenue, tied me to a pickup truck or dragged me out across the 494 freeway strip to leave me stranded in Bloomington (far across the Jordan)! It all ended well - so I guess the gospel really wasn’t preached! I didn’t make anybody mad! What a waste!

Not Jesus. He wasted no time saying “thank you” to all those who loved his words in Nazareth. He could have. “But no” – Jesus had to make trouble for himself, because he couldn’t let sleeping dogs lie. Jesus couldn’t stand letting everyone off the hook in their complacency and self-congratulation, when they had missed the point of the gospel he had preached! So he told them what they were thinking – no doubt they thought Jesus should be doing in Nazareth for his neighbors what he had done in Capernaum and other Galilee towns: healings and

miracles, signs and wonders! So Jesus upped the ante even more, with stories they knew well! He said “the truth is, there were many widows in the time of Elijah, when there was a great drought and famine everywhere, but God sent the prophet Elijah to save a widow in Zarepath in Sidon, a foreigner in a foreign land, and NOT to any widow in Israel. There were lepers everywhere, but the prophet Elisha cleansed the Syrian general Naaman, not the lepers of Israel.”

Well, that did it. The praise of the elders in the synagogue in Nazareth was changed to rage. Jesus had managed to grasp defeat from the jaws of victory, or so it seems. They got up, dragged him out to the edge of town, and would have flung him off the cliff to his doom. But it was not Jesus’ time. Luke says that Jesus passed through the crowd, and went on his way. That’s a miracle! In the land of lynchings of innocent people, we know the power of mobs to do evil deeds. But that day, the worst didn’t happen. Jesus left Nazareth to continue his ministry of the gospel, and never preached in his hometown again. He went right back to Capernaum to teach with power, where he did miracles of healing and exorcisms.

But beyond resisting the temptation of merely accepting praise after his sermon at home, Jesus did more – he rejected any possibility of resting on the platitudes of proclaiming how he himself fulfilled God’s promise of freedom for all captives, the sole bearer of good news, or doer of miracles. Because if preaching good news, giving freedom to others, and healing was only to be done by Jesus alone, all was lost, and the promise of the gospel is empty! It had to go beyond Jesus alone, the gospel had to also be proclaimed by his followers, and the good news of compassion, healing, and love for neighbor has to be done by every disciple, by the Twelve and by you and me today! Otherwise it’s all a fairy tale!

So, what was the offense in Jesus’ words of good news that day, that made his listeners NOT hear good news, but to become enraged? What was the risk that Jesus took, leaving the good feelings and positive response, to strike a nerve with the people that day, and make them turn on him? I think it was that he preached a gospel of good news for *others* – not just his own people, but *foreigners* – *neighbors whom they had never imagined* – *Samaritans, Syrians, Phoenicians, even Romans* – *not just other Nazareens, Galileans, Israelites or Judeans!*

It were as if Jesus were telling you and me to be MORE concerned with migrants crossing our southern border, rather than our own distant relatives coming from outstate Minnesota or North Dakota, whom we know and value more dearly. Jesus dared to challenge the assumptions of his own people, those chosen by God.

Luther Seminary professor Karoline Lewis, whom I have quoted before, said this to preachers: “*No one is saved by our concerns to play it safe. No one here is saved by my decisions to protect you from the challenges of believing. None of you are saved when I ameliorate that which is inherently meant to disturb and disrupt.*”

It's the gospel of the Lord, after all, and who here thinks that Jesus thinks you and I are better off if he, or any preacher of the gospel, whitewashes the truth? But too often, we are guilty of holding back, because we have congregations to hold together, people we love, and pastors have pensions we'd like to keep...not that anyone's threatening to take them away, but it's human nature not to push too far when jobs and institutions are at stake. But we are saved by having our assumptions, prejudices and beliefs challenged and stretched, which is Jesus' gift!

Often we take a lot of pride in our mission statements, in the values we profess, because they are consistent with our values as Christian people of faith. Most church mission statements declare our intent to "*proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and God's love for all people; to show that everyone is welcome, and do acts of love and compassion for our neighbors*". I don't think there's a church anywhere that wouldn't affirm this! Our own Redeemer mission statement says something just like this. But the "devil's in the details", and we don't all agree all the time! There are times when we find ourselves having to choose between holding to those values, or holding the church together. We sometimes find those things in conflict, and having to "rationalize", not only about what we can afford, but what or who takes priority. Is Church "for the stakeholders" or for others?

Like when we "love" hearing how Jesus brings "good news to the poor" – but some call preaching public policy that actually raises the minimum wage or "health care for all" – bringing "politics into the church"! We love setting captives free, but draw the line at ending mass incarceration in communities of color, detaining immigrants, or restoring the vote to felons who have served their time, because these issues make us uncomfortable. We love "Black History Month" – but nobody wants to deal with the racism that lies underneath everything! I hear the arguments today, not in this congregation but out there in the world, in state legislatures and Congress, when I proclaim that God loves the refugee and the immigrant, especially those undocumented, living in fear, and those seeking asylum on our southern border, in the heated, angry responses. *Why don't we take care of our own first? We have our own poor in America! They should wait in line and come legally, like my grandparents did! Why do you care so much about foreigners and immigrants?* Well, the Bible tells me so? Have you read what God said about caring for immigrants and strangers in the book of Leviticus, and through the prophets Isaiah, Amos and Micah, and about the doing of justice? Have you heard the words of Jesus? God's Law – the Torah – and the gospel is very clear about justice and compassion - and how to treat your neighbor: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Love is the fulfillment of the Law!* So love them ALL!

Years ago there was a great debate in the Lutheran church about ordaining women (in some Lutheran churches, the debate is still going on!). So about 40

years ago in our predecessor bodies of the ELCA, we agreed to ordain women, and now, I think, our rostered leaders (our pastors) are about half women, and there are now women who are Lutheran bishops. Some Lutherans (women as well as men) got mad, and left our Lutheran Church. So the ordination of women is still a controversy in some Lutheran churches, in the Roman Catholic church, and in many denominations. But sometimes the gospel requires facing such conflict.

In the year 2000, we held at Redeemer an “unauthorized ordination” of Pastor Anita Hill. It was a great controversy. Her church, St. Paul-Reformation, was censured. Then, in 2009 we had a vote in the ELCA about the ordination of GLBTQ clergy in committed relationships and same-gender marriages – not just about being welcome, but *full participation as pastors* in this Church. We studied and argued about this issue for decades, over and over, and people on all sides were mad! Our church decided to ordain GLBTQ clergy that year, and in 2013 the state of Minnesota voted to legalize same-gender marriages – because it is up to the persons being married to decide “who they love”, and because *love is the fulfillment of the law*. We had to be willing to take the consequences – of losing whole congregations throughout the country, relatives who left the ELCA over the ordination of gay clergy. But we are still here. God is still God, and Jesus is still very much present in this place, with us. With such faith, we do not fear – just as Jesus was fearless in Nazareth, even though he knew full well how the people of his hometown synagogue would react to his declaration of God’s love for *all people, not just Israelites, but also Syrians and Phoenicians and other foreign neighbors who were not like them*. Jesus knew what would set them off, and he still had the courage to speak the words of God’s unconditional love and mercy.

So speaking of love, today we heard from the apostle Paul a response to all the controversy going on the Church of Corinth a long time ago. They argued over who had the better “spiritual gifts”, and were divided over the eucharist, of all things (the “feast of love”) - some were even excluded from the Lord’s Supper! They had problems? The solution, according to Paul, was simple – but so hard – it’s *LOVE – the love from God!* Because regardless of your gifts, without *love*, you and I have nothing! He said, in the midst of all these divisions, “*love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends – even though all other things do. So put an end to childish ways. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

What if all the Christians in Congress and in the halls of government took those words to heart? What if all the faithful in churches across America lived with love, and spoke loving words? What if all of us Lutherans loved one another,

and our neighbors as ourselves, as God intended and as Jesus teaches us to love?
We certainly would not be so afraid of the threats which come from others!

Jesus began his sermon from Isaiah telling us that he has come to set us all free! Free *from* what? Free from all that enslaves us and keeps us in fear. Free *for* what? Free to love one another, as God loves us, and how Jesus calls us to love, to love your neighbor as yourself. So let us all seek faith, hope and love, these three – *but know this: that the greatest of these is love.* Amen.