



“An Offensive Preacher”

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Luke 4:21-30

Jesus had just finished preaching in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Big time preacher had come home. And his homecoming sermon was a doozy. Basically, he opened up the Isaiah scroll and preached, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And his sermon was off to a rousing start. His words generated nods and hardy “Amens” from the hometown crowd. Jesus’ kin and all the townspeople piled on the compliments. “Is this Joseph’s son? Wow! Look what he has done with his life! Local boy makes good!” You can’t ask for a better way to begin a ministry than this.

But, Jesus jumped over the accolades and the amens and continued on with his sermon by telling a couple of stories. He reminded the listeners of two old tales from their Hebrew faith. In the first story God passed up the opportunity to send Elijah to assist hungry Jews and instead sent the prophet to help a starving foreign, Gentile woman. In the second, God passed up the opportunity to heal Israelite lepers and instead sent Elisha to heal a foreign, Syrian leper. Uh oh. Now Jesus has gone to meddlin’. It’s like Jesus did an about-face and just turned the sermon on its head. It’s as if he said to them, “When I talk about God coming to free the oppressed and bless the poor, I’m talking about God blessing the people you can’t stand, the people you don’t want to be near, the people you think are your enemies.” Now that’s a different message, an offensive message. That’s a message that caused these synagogue worshippers, those who had just praised Jesus for his wonderful words, to become enraged. Jesus was barely four minutes into his sermon when the congregation got so angry that they wanted to kill him. They wanted to kill the preacher! I mean, I know I can say some things that challenge us at times, but I hope you never feel that angry with me. This terrible text shows us that sometimes preaching the radical message of God might push us to the edge of what we are comfortable with.

As we see from the Gospel Lesson for today and throughout our study of Luke, leading up to the season of Lent and Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross, not everyone received Jesus happily. In fact, although Jesus healed and helped and fed and taught, most people rejected him during his earthly ministry. And one of the biggest places he experienced rejection was in his preaching. The fierce resistance received by this offensive preacher led him to the cross. And so, it is pretty clear, wherever God’s all-encompassing, all-inclusive love is preached, there will probably be offense.

Jesus realized this. He knew that the synagogue audience didn’t understand the meaning of his prophetic pronouncement of Isaiah’s scroll. And that’s why Jesus continued, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’” That’s a telling phrase. “Doctor, cure yourself just like you have cured so many others. Because you and we are the most important. Cure yourself first!” This proverb Jesus spoke was not a criticism or condemnation, it was

something like “Look after yourself and your kin first before you attempt to help others.” Us first, everyone else second. And that’s not all, the people of Nazareth thought he would perform his wonderful deeds for them just like he did all around the region. “And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” Right here, with us, we are the chosen, the beloved of God. No one else matters but us.

And Jesus knew that was not the interpretation he wanted the listeners to have. Jesus knew that God was calling him to make a prophetic pronouncement that would not be well received, in fact it would be downright offensive. So, Jesus responded with one of the most iconic lines in the Gospel of Luke, “a prophet is not accepted in his hometown.” Jesus was not accepted in his hometown. The word accepted is *dektos*, which is an interesting play on words since we just heard that word five verses earlier in the beginning of Jesus’ sermon when he is reading the scroll of Isaiah. “The year of the Lord’s favor.” The accepted, *dektos*, year of the Lord. Jesus announced the acceptable year of the Lord but he himself was not acceptable in his hometown faith community. Do you see? That’s why the people were so angry. They were enraged because Jesus preached something offensive. He said that the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord’s favor comes about when all people, even those different than us, even our enemies, are acceptable to God. The messianic age is here but it is an offensive message, a message on the edge, an announcement that ALL people are acceptable to God.

In his lectionary preaching resource, Duke professor and author Will Willimon, quoted church growth guru Paul Borden who said that the challenge for us preachers is to “insert Jesus into conversation and then relinquish control.” Willimon goes on to say that “we preachers have got to have the courage to bring up Jesus in the sermon and then to let him walk where he wants to walk and to talk to whom he wants to talk.” Hmmm. But that is difficult for me. I want to keep the peace. I want to inspire. I want to bring comfort. I want to preach love. This is who I want to be. But Jesus, even in his very first sermon, had something different in mind. In his hometown congregation, the place where he grew up where perhaps he had been in the children’s choir, where maybe he was in Jewish version of Royal Ambassadors, or where he had possibly preached on youth Sabbath like Jaxson, Samuel, or Jonah – they knew Jesus and they knew his heart. But now he looked at the words of Isaiah, the holy scripture about divine good news and loving those on the margins, and he let that text speak to him. He preached. And according to Willimon, “He made some folks mad when he interpreted scripture in such a way that portrayed the work of God as a wide reach beyond the bounds of their definition of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’”

And the crowd, the congregation, didn’t like it. They were so angry that they figured their only solution was to kill him, to throw him off a cliff just so he would stop this offensive preaching. Ultimately, Jesus would be killed, crucified because of his message about a new kingdom, a new world where all people are loved and accepted and cared for and included. And, if we look closely, especially as we just recently celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we will see other preachers who were killed because of their message, like King and Archbishop Oscar Romero. But the message of Dr. King and Archbishop Romero and Jesus of Nazareth was one of the expansive love of God. And because that love went to people who those in power thought shouldn’t be loved, their words were no longer lovely to the ears of their hearers.

But the world needs to hear the message of Jesus even if it means we give that prophetic proclamation from the edge of a cliff. The message of Jesus is not always one that feels peaceful, but it is always one of love. One commentator says that there are two truths in this message of Jesus: “One is that God loves those whom we are prone to regard as our enemies, as unclean, as unsaved, and God will find ways to act in love toward them. The other truth is that it is dangerous to go around talking about the first truth.”

Following Jesus can take us to the edge of our comfort zone as it takes us to those on the edges of society. The edge is scary. The edge is awkward. The edge is lonely. But that is the Gospel, that was Jesus’s mission. Yes, Jesus calmed the angry waves. Yes, Jesus pacified the turbulent sea. Yes, Jesus silenced the violent demons. But that’s not all Jesus did. Jesus was also offensive. Jesus stirred things up, started trouble, and provoked angry responses from the crowds and the people in power. So, maybe as Jesus followers, we too need to be offensive at times. Maybe we too need to realize that when God sent God’s spirit to the church at Pentecost all hell broke loose. At Pentecost, all people, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality heard the word of God in their own language. Power was given to all people, Jews and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor, male and female. All people!

So, if we are to be followers of Jesus, how can the church today be prophetic, even when at the edges of life? I think we can look to the other lectionary texts for today from the Hebrew Scriptures. God asked the prophet Jeremiah to be bold, to speak God’s words of both love and warning, of both prosperity and hope, even for the enemy. Here’s what it says in Jeremiah, “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’ Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations AND over kingdoms, to pluck up AND to pull down, to destroy AND to overthrow, to build AND to plant.’”

You see, not everything God calls us to say to the nations feels good or easy. And so, like Jeremiah, the Church has a responsibility to speak the truth of God and to show the love of Christ for all people. The Church is to stand boldly in the face of adversity, preaching that poverty and racism and greed and hate do not have a place in the realm of God. No, all people, even those on the outside, especially those on the outside, deserve shelter and food and healthcare and education and hope. The Church, and we as offensive preachers of Jesus’s radical gospel must be fearless in an age when those who are supposed to be leading us are taking us to the edge of the cliff.

Some seminarians were engaged in a discussion of student sermons in a preaching class. One of the members of the class had preached last Sunday in his church and had been saddened that a number of his rural parishioners expressed anger because of his sermon. One man had even walked out before the singing of the final hymn. Attempting to be helpful, members of the class jumped into a discussion of what the preacher had done wrong. Had he overstated his arguments in the sermon? Had he spent enough time developing personal relationships with his people? Had

he spoken in too strong or harsh a tone of voice? The crusty old preaching professor listened to the discussion and then finally said, “Did it ever occur to any of you that perhaps what he did wasn’t wrong; it was right? I’m bothered by the assumption that many of you seem to have that there is some way to talk about Jesus without getting hurt for doing so. Let me assure you, none of you are smarter than Jesus. Jesus got into trouble for his preaching; so will you!”

Church, maybe our message of God’s love for the world needs to be so radical, so inclusive, so edgy that we get into trouble for our offensive preaching. For if that happens, we will simply be following in the example of the offensive preacher, Jesus. And so, I go back to the very beginning of our Gospel Lesson for this morning, to Jesus’ very first word after reading the radical good news of Isaiah, to the word “today.” Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today. This moment. Today, may we follow the offensive preacher.

Amen.