

Epiphany 4, Year C
Luke 4:21-30
January 31, 2010

This week's Gospel lesson is the conclusion to the story of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth begun last week. As we pick up the story Jesus has just read the passage from Isaiah proclaiming a Jubilee, the "year of the Lord's favor." During Jubilees – if indeed one was ever actually called – all debts were forgiven and all property that had been alienated in the previous fifty years was returned to its original owners. It was a time of forgiveness, reconciliation and cooperation across the social and economic lines of the Jewish people. For Jesus to declare that "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" meant that he was saying that moment had arrived, that time of a new start was upon us. It was therefore no wonder that the crowd thought well of him, for to the extent that they believed him, his statement was the vindication of their hopes and dreams for themselves and their country.

Had things stopped at that point this would have been a story of the moment Jesus captured the crowd and became a local populist hero. He would have remained in that role until he couldn't deliver on the promise, his favorable ratings began to drop and his party lost a senate election in Massachusetts. But that is not how this story ends because Luke wouldn't quit there with Jesus as the local populist hero. For Jesus, as Luke understood him, was not interested in

vindicating any human claims to a proprietary interest in God. He was not there to assure people that God was on their side, and that because of who we are, or what we do, or the thoughts we think, or the culture we support, that we hold some special place and favor in the heart of God. Jesus, as Luke understood him, was there to destroy those very notions about God, and to proclaim instead the Good News that God is for all people everywhere, and that the redemptive power of God's love is available to anyone. He did that by interpreting Jubilee with two biblical examples that totally destroyed the claim to exclusivity and thus turned an admiring crowd into a lynch mob.

The first example was the famine in the time of Elijah, when the prophet visited no one from Israel, but instead went to the aid of a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. We don't get that, but they did. She was a gentile, a descendant of the very Philistines who had warred with the people of Israel in generations past. God helped her, not the Jews. The second example was perhaps worse; it was the example of Naaman, whose leprosy the prophet Elisha healed. Naaman was a Syrian general who heard of Elisha and his powers only because during one of his raids he captured a Israelite girl and made her a slave; she was the one who told him of Elisha. When Jesus invoked those two examples of how the forgiveness and love and compassion of God works he was deliberately smashing the idol of an exclusive god who prefers one people to another, and insisting instead in the most offensive manner possible that a Philistine woman and an enemy soldier, responsible for much death and destruction in Israel, were

as beloved, as eligible for the healing and saving touch of God as any Jew. How is that for playing to the crowd?

Now it is fair to say that we don't get it, don't see the problem because we are not Jewish, and these examples are more than two millennia old. But it is not at all hard to help us get the point by updating the examples. In the Episcopal Church as a whole we have declared that God's love and inclusion and participation in the life of the kingdom as it is manifested here on earth extends to all people. Historically we first asserted that with black as well as white, then women as well as men, and now gay as well as straight. At each step of the way as that claim was made, that good news announced, people left the church because they could not believe it and would not accept it. Today we have bishops from various parts of the Anglican Communion doing the best they can to kick us out because of that stance. On the other hand I still remember preaching a sermon in Bend once upon a time in which I declared God's unconditional love for Lon Mabon, the author of a genuinely homophobic initiative petition that declared being gay "perverse." I preached that sermon in the context of my clear opposition to that initiative, and I was gratified when it failed by a too slim 52-48 percent margin. Nevertheless after church I was taken aside by a gay couple who assured me that my sermon fed the homophobic tendencies of society, gave aid and comfort to supporters of the measure and was very oppressive to them as a couple. And they were right. That sermon was

oppressive to them; they hated Lon Mabon, and justifiably so. He was in my view, as in theirs, a very bad man doing very destructive things.

And whenever we hear of the love of God for people we hate, the acceptance of God for people we reject, the mercy of God for people we know deserve no mercy, that feels oppressive. It feels wrong. It feels dangerous. It feels like our basic values and understandings are being undermined. The declaration that God loves Osama Bin Laden is as odious to many of us as the assertion that God loves George W. Bush is to a member of Al Qaeda. Yet, as oppressive as it sounds, that, in context, is exactly what we hear in today's story of Jesus' interpretation of what Jubilee means. God loves a Philistine woman, a gentile with no saving knowledge of God, no part of the Covenant. Again, even worse; God loves a Syrian General whose troops are killing your people. That is awful, and when we hear that we tend to feel awful, and then become angry.

But today, and in story after story, in parable after parable that is exactly what Jesus claims about God. He never claims that this means God doesn't care about what people do, or looks with the same favor on every human action. On the contrary, even as Jesus asserts the love of God for everyone he asserts with equal force the demand that we all become merciful as we have received mercy, that we forgive as we have been forgiven, that we love one another as we have been loved. There is no moral relativism in the claim of God's love for all – the standards enjoined upon us are higher, rather than lower than any of us are used

to meeting - but neither is there any room for the notion that a particular expression of human culture somehow captures the perfect essence of that love.

What we see today, and often from Jesus, is the complete destruction of the notion of a privileged group within this world. Jubilee is not just for us the chosen, "The Year of the Lord's Favor" does not belong only to the Jews, or Christians or Muslims. We are chosen not because we are more favored, more loved. We are chosen because we have been called to spread the word that Jubilee is for everyone; all are called into the light of God's love which is manifested not as adherence to a particular cultural norm, or set of religious beliefs, but as the triumph of justice, mercy and peace among and within all people everywhere.

Then as now, a world that insists upon a popular, and therefore necessarily partisan god, will not hear this as good news. Then, as now the world hears this mostly as bad news. The truth is that much of the time we hear it as bad news as well. Therefore the first task we have as proclaimers of this news is to strip our hearts of the notion that God exists for us and our group, and implant forever the truth that we exist for God. That is a wrenching task; it requires us to give up a lot. We have to give up the notion that our understanding is absolute, our insights complete. We have to realize that even as we gaze in horror at much of what happens in this world, nothing we witness can deflect God's determination to redeem us all, and therefore we may not dehumanize anyone, even and especially those who would dehumanize us.

There is no harder task, and there is no higher calling, than to purge our spirits of that spirit of strife that so pervades the world and would divide us all that all may be conquered. We can't do it on our own. That work begins inside, with an openness to God's mercy that frees us first to forgive ourselves, then all those around us, and finally to forgive a world that doesn't even understand what we are doing. Only then will we ourselves see what Good News we have heard today, in that Synagogue at Nazareth, and so become equipped to go out and spread that same word everywhere we go.