

Religious Conviction and Mob Mentality  
A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
January 31, 2010

Text: Luke 4:21-30

NRSV

<sup>21</sup> Then he began to say "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" <sup>23</sup> He 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.'" <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. <sup>25</sup> But 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; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> They 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. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst.

---

A few years back we were spending a pleasant inter-generational Sunday afternoon at the family cottage in Michigan. It was prior to our having grandchildren, but the little gathering in the front room of the cottage overlooking the lake included Kathy's parents, her sister and brother-in-law, their son Todd and his wife Julie, and Todd and Julie's little girls Olivia and Emily, who were about three and one at the time.

Peace, relative quiet, mid-Sunday afternoon sleepiness and comfort prevailed in the room until the one-year-old reached over and took a doll that the three-year-old had been playing with.

What ensued in a matter of seconds should serve as a reminder to those of us who wonder why Jews can't get along with Palestinians, or in other settings why clans have been at war with other clans for centuries, because Olivia yanked the doll out of her sister's hands, and Emily began sobbing.

The girls' father, our nephew Todd, calmly but sternly said, "Olivia, you have to learn to share with your little sister."

Instantly, crocodile-sized tears began rolling down Olivia's cheeks, and she wailed, "Daddy, I can't!"

Not, "Daddy, I don't want to," or "But Daddy, that's my doll," but "I can't."

This little moment in time in a family gathering says a lot about the human condition, doesn't it? As adults we may not be so blatantly honest as to say out loud that "we can't share," but our actions certainly show it, don't they?

Further, sometimes it is not just a toy, or a piece of property, or an inheritance, or the love of our parents or some such that we don't want to share, but the love of God. As though we had any right to dictate who God chooses to love, or accept into "God's" – not our -- Kingdom."

This human propensity to want to preserve the rules of God as we understand them, became very clear one afternoon in a seminary course on Christology – namely a fancy way of saying "different perspectives on the nature, role, and function of Jesus."

We were reading one of Jesus' parables, in which he sure seems to say that everyone is welcome in God's presence..., literally everyone!"

One of my female classmates blurted out what probably many of us were thinking when she said, "You mean I've been careful to be good all these years for nothing?"

By nothing, of course, she was thinking of the knee-jerk sense that we somehow should have to earn our salvation – that God shouldn't just bestow in on anyone and everyone who is less righteous or faithful than WE are.

Which brings us to today's text, in which the people of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth are thrilled to have their "very own" hometown prophet speak in their hometown synagogue.

Thrilled that is, until he reminds them that prophets are rarely welcomed in their own villages or even countries, and they proceed to prove that to be true.

Their reaction may have been "over the top," but their behavior was as naturally human as it would have been the reactions of the Democrats in the House Chamber last week during President Obama's State of the Union speech if he would have said he loved Republicans every bit as much as those in his own party, and if he'd said he was going to work as hard to get the Republican agenda through Congress as to get his party's agenda through.

You see, we want to know "which camp" folks are in, and we get incensed when we learn that someone in a position of power, or authority, is not in ours.

And that is what caused Jesus to go from being the hometown prophet who proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord, to becoming unacceptable himself.

What happened is that the hometown people expected their hometown boy to know the norms, the mores, the acceptable from the unacceptable, and Jesus didn't go along with their expectations.

And why would Jesus violate norms that he likely knew deep inside?

The answer is in what it means to be a true “prophet of the Lord,” as opposed to being a so-called prophet of the Lord while really just mouthing what will keep the people happy and the money coming in to the collection.

Indeed a “true” prophet will rarely be found to be pleasing to his hometown people because he or she is not governed by in-group loyalties. Jesus demonstrates through his words and actions that he is governed by the purposes of God and the precedents of his scriptural predecessors, and even if he was merely repeating what these folks from Nazareth should have known was in their own Hebrew Scriptures, it still stung.

Is this just a story about an ancient community in the Galilee, and an ancient prophet named Jesus?

Of course not, or it wouldn’t be relevant to our community, and to the prophetic voice of Jesus, the Christ, as he continues to speak through Scripture, the music, the prayers, the sharing of the sacraments, and the actions of people of faith.

So, what would cause us to shiver, shake, and rant and rage as those early Jews did on that Sabbath morning in ancient Palestine?

Try this on – hearing or saying -- “We have to take care of our own members.”

Pretty innocuous?

Possibly, if we interpret the Scripture to mean that God wants us to take care of “people just like us.”

Definitely not innocuous, however, if we maintain that a church is to be a “hospital for sinners,” meaning whomever comes to be cared for, rather than those who have already signed up for the salvation HMO plan, by being “our” members.

So, my fellow believers at CDA First PC, how do you perceive yourselves?

Are you those who come to worship as the infirm needing to be attended to, or as among the Wounded Healers who are commissioned to provide care to all the “sinners” in this congregation’s service area.?

This morning we have ordained and installed Deacons and Elders who will be joining or rejoining bodies within the congregation designated to carry out specific roles. That’s exciting. However, if the rest of you perceive that you are now “off the hook,” and don’t need to engage in bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, then we cease to be a true and almost always radically challenging church of Jesus Christ, and become a comfortable club for like-minded people.

May we not just ponder these things, but discern together how to live out the “good news.”