

Year C-4th Sunday after the Epiphany

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Love Found a Way

“He began to explain to them, ‘Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.’” The phrase “today” and “just as you heard it” mark the two ends of this astonishing sentence. What they heard him leave out was the phrase about God’s vengeance. As the implications of this dawn on them we see a dramatic change in attitude toward Jesus by the people of his hometown. How did the people move so quickly from “everyone was raving about Jesus” to “they rose up and ran him out of town...so they could throw him off the cliff?”

The Common English translation reads “Everyone was raving about Jesus” as he finishes reading from the book of Isaiah. The words “today, this scripture has been fulfilled” rang in their ears. Think about it through their eyes. “He has sent me to preach good news to the poor.” Well, we’re poor. This message is for us. Jesus has come to rescue us!

Nazareth is a poor little village up in the hills with dogs roaming the streets and sick people sitting on the ground in front of their rundown shacks. The soil is poor and the crops are meager and nobody wanders through there. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? The people are tired and worn out in their struggle to survive. They feel like losers and resent the way life has turned out for them.

He had said “to proclaim release to prisoners”—well aren’t they prisoners to exploitive foreign forces and distant landlords who demand a share of everything they work so hard to grow? Their taxes are so high they don’t have a chance to make it. It’s not fair!

And recovery of sight for the blind; yes, they have lots of blind people in Nazareth and they aren’t all old either. If there were ever a people beleaguered, it’s them. Yes Jesus, if you are the anointed one and can bring on the year of the Lord’s favor, we love you, please bring it on!

And to think you are one of us! Wow! Maybe our fortunes are looking up! So the anointed of God is one of our people. Could it be blessings instead of curses are coming our way? Well yes, but not in the way they expect.

They were all feeling hopeful “when Jesus said to them, ‘Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: ‘Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we’ve heard you did in Capernaum.’” The word “undoubtedly” tips us off. Jesus knows how they think and without a doubt they are expecting him, as one of their own, to share his fortune with them. That’s the way it works. If anyone in the village wins the lottery they are expected to return and share their winnings with the rest.

They’re thinking “you healed people in Capernaum, now heal us too. You owe it to us. We’re family. Besides, we need it worse than they do. They are a rich village down by the Sea of Galilee where the soil is deep; the fish plentiful and the tax base stronger.”

Even though the people of Capernaum are Jews like them, Nazarenes resent them for being better off. They are disturbed that Jesus healed those people before he healed his own. Doesn't Jesus know that in healing the citizens of Nazareth he's healing himself? The people of his hometown live in a world of "our" people who inhabit the center of God's benevolence and all other people who radiate out in concentric circles of ever lessening importance, starting here. To make this way of thinking work given their difficulties, they must see themselves as victims and they burn with anger at God and everyone else at a subterranean level. Their resentment is a symptom of the disease Jesus must bring to the surface so they can trust God. You can't trust God if you are angry at God.

Jesus loves them, understands them and knows that exposing the problem is the first step toward healing. Knowing this, Jesus says "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown." He is one of them but not in the way they want. He is a prophet. As a prophet he sees things they don't see and is charged with bringing those things to their attention. To welcome the prophet is to invite a wisdom that can only send the town to their knees in repentance and a prayer for mercy. This is a prayer to which God can respond.

To expose their sin of thinking God loves only them and plans vengeance for all foreigners, Jesus tells them two stories from within their own tradition. In the first story Jesus points out that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, the prophet. It hadn't rained for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land yet Elijah wasn't sent to any of them. Instead Elijah was sent to one widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. Zarephath was not a village of their tribe, and Sidon was not in the territory of their people. Elijah was sent to an outsider. The very thought makes them angry.

Could it be the problem was the way they divided the world between "our people and those people? It doesn't occur to them that God is the God of all people and loves "those people" too. Could it be that opening their hearts to that truth would heal them? Love would have a way of healing them!

At this point Jesus tells his second story. "There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed." Naaman the Syrian was the proud commander of a Syrian army and had an arrogant attitude toward the people of Israel and yet Elisha goes to him and heals him. Does God also love their enemies; even their proud, boastful and successful ones; the ones who have been victorious against them? According to the story he did. This was just too much; at this point the pot boiled over.

"When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger." We understand that! It's hard to want what's best for our enemy. We want vengeance and suffering for them not aid and forgiveness. It's easier and more comfortable to divide people into "us" and "them," Christian and Muslim, male and female, gay and straight, citizen and immigrant than want what's best for all. And right now our politicians are exploiting these divisions to their own advantage; fanning the flames of fear and misunderstanding.

With this call to include all, the boiling fury hidden in their hearts rises to the surface and they erupt in mob-rage. "They rose up and ran him out of town. They lead him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff." Are you astonished by this?

How do we account for the dramatic and lethal change in behavior? Could it be they liked the idea of "today this scripture has been fulfilled" but they didn't like leaving off the part that spoke of "the day of the vengeance of our God." They didn't want to accept that the year of the Lord's favor must include relinquishment of all vengeance and that vengeance can no longer be justified in God's name. Jesus came to bring forgiveness not vengeance. He came to open a way for all humans.

When Jesus exposed their "in" and "out" thinking they responded by throwing him out. This time he passed through the crowd and went on his way. There will be another time, another hill, and another crowd he will not pass through. They will nail him to a cross. Through it all forgiveness will be his response. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love found a way! Amen.