

Epiphany 4C - February 3, 2019

Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 4: 21-30; 1 Corinthians 13

***“Feel Like I’m Tied to the Whipping Post: The Soul in Conflict”***

Last week, we heard Jesus’ first spoken words in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus reads the words of Isaiah, sits down, and says, *“This Scripture is fulfilled in the ears of you.”* Jesus’ words are a celebration of God’s Kingdom, and the multiplicity and dignity of the whole spectrum of human experience.

Today, we hear what happens after Jesus speaks.

Nazareth is very impressed with the home-town boy and his desire to be a rabbi in his hometown. They say *“isn’t this Joseph’s son? Look how well he’s doing!”* *“I remember when he used to play down by the stream with my son. He is so grown up!”* *“He is the carpenter who is Joseph’s son, isn’t he? How wonderful that he wants to go into ministry.”*

And then, Jesus gets mad. He takes apart the people of his hometown. He looks up and down the aisles. His face changes. He speaks out against his hometown friends and teachers and relatives and business people, and excoriates their very identity as Israelites and inheritors of the promises of God.

I have preached only once at my childhood church. My pastor, Rev. Bob Duff, offered me a scholarship to seminary when I was going to United Theological Seminary. The only condition to my receiving the scholarship was to preach at First Congregational Church of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I was very young when I did it, in my mid-20s. I was very nervous and did not have a lot of confidence. I preached on St. Francis of Assisi. I said some radical things in the sermon, which was preached in the fellowship hall because of renovations in the incredibly beautiful sanctuary. Most of the people in the congregation were much older than I. I knew a lot of them. That is why I was nervous.

I did not do what Jesus does today. But I can imagine it. If I knew then what I know now, and if certain people showed up from my past to hear what I had to say, I can imagine being the kind of person Jesus is here. If, for instance, Charlie was there, who used to force me to give him money and pushed me around in the locker room and stole my Timex watch I got for Christmas; or if Bill was there, who used to chase me down the halls of Central Middle School; or Kip Heath, who sat behind me and kicked me with his steel-toed boots during choir; or the two thugs who were the principal and vice-principal of the school; or Steve, who would just hit me for no reason; or my Industrial Arts teacher, who walked out of the room once when Bill, Charlie, and Al started beating me up during class one day...if they were in the congregation, and if they came up to me

and said *what a great job I did, and isn't it great what I had become, and aren't you the doctor's son?* I can easily imagine going off on them all.

All of us, I am very sure, have conflicted relationships in our past. Some of those relationships did deep harm and left scars. Perhaps, even now, there are not scars, but instead open wounds that reach to the depths of your soul, of your being. Scars and wounds that define how you understand yourself, the world, and your relationships. Clearly, I still have feelings and attitudes about people from my childhood. Don't get me wrong - were I to meet them face-to-face I would likely forgive. I recognize that problems at home and in other areas of their lives played out against me for whatever reason. A couple of those people were just mean, though, and probably still are today.

The conflict we carry with us after the harm has been done, either to us or by us, shapes and colors our faith and our souls for years afterward. This is how it has always been. And this is why it is easy to imagine Jesus getting up in the face of his hometown. I have a short fuse sometimes, and it is very reassuring to me that the one we call the Son of God apparently does as well.

After Jesus receives praise, and then unloads on the congregation, the people's praise turns to rage. They push and pull him to the edge of a cliff, where they are going to throw him over as punishment for heresy. Jesus, after all, calls himself a prophet and points out prophets are never accepted in their hometown. And then, Jesus says, you kill them. This is heresy, according to the synagogue Jesus speaks in, and the punishment for heresy is stoning. That is why we are at the edge of the cliff at the end of this story. Jesus is foreshadowing his trajectory to the Cross in word and action.

Last week, we talked about hearing and seeing and how we perceive. We celebrated the many ways we each see and hear and feel and think. There are 7.5 billion people in this world, which means there are at least 7.5 billion different perspectives on the human experience, but probably several times more than that, given that each of us inhabit different parts of ourselves from one day to the next. Personally, that idea right there is one of my great hopes for our future as creatures on this suffering planet. My personal goal is to find ways to support each and all of those different perspectives and experiences. Glorifying the diversity of God's creation means celebrating the vast diversity of God's creatures and their experiences. Imagining into that vast diversity is one of the most beautiful things I can think of.

Our story today, though, shows us how rapidly things can go wrong when groups of people get together and think they all believe and agree on the same thing. Last week, I mentioned people often hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see. A person will place their authority and autonomy in another person and then align their thinking with that other person, claiming the authority's thoughts as their own. And then another person does it, and then another. And then you have a slathering, angry group who is willing to kill anyone who

contradicts the personal and glorified perspective they all believe in together. That perspective often goes by the word “*Truth*” or “*God’s Word*” or “*God’s Will*” or “*Righteousness*”.

One way to understand what is happening in this story is to see Jesus as acting out of his ‘human’ self here, and suffering the consequences of simple human behavior. This perspective has always struck me as weird. If Jesus is God come to earth, God become human, then there is no such thing as actions of Jesus that are only completely human and then only completely divine. All of Jesus’ actions are fully human and fully divine, and both the human and the divine are sanctified in that unity in Christ. My perspective here complicates everything, which Jesus kind of does all the time anyway.

If it is true, then, that Jesus is being wholly himself in this story, which is to say Jesus is acting as fully God and fully human, and we know also that God is love, as John’s first letter tells us, then we have a much more interesting story going on today.

Jesus is not angry with his home congregation because they are Jewish. That can’t be the reason or the problem, because Jesus also is as Jewish as Jewish can be. Jesus gets mad because the people do a very Human thing. Faced with the conflict Jesus sets up in his reading of Isaiah, the people think they understand what Jesus is saying. They think they understand the prophets, but worse, they think they understand Jesus. But Jesus understands the people of his hometown far better than they understand him and the Prophets. Jesus knows that what keeps the people from understanding is the past - **poor past understandings** of what the prophets were up to; **poor past understandings** of who the people of God are, **poor past understandings** of who God’s messengers might be - these also keep the people of the congregation from becoming who God truly wishes them to be.

Rather than deal personally with the deep soul conflict of realizing they have misunderstood a past upon which they have defined their lives and the reality that Jesus is presenting them with, the people in the congregation become a people aligned around the offense that they feel Jesus has committed against them. Each person together becomes a mob committed to the truth as they understand it.

It is hard to be around people like Jesus, people who call out another reality when they see it, people who are concerned about justice and the future, people who come at our perspective, our perceived truth, from our blind spots. Even if those people are welcoming and gracious, but also willing to speak up in this way, it is easier to not be around them.

Jesus talks about this later in the Gospel of Luke (14), where he tells a parable about a wealthy man who decides to have a banquet for his village. He sends out invitations to the town and describes the lavish foods he will have prepared and the music that will be there and the different gifts that will be given to all who attend. But the people who have been invited make up

excuses to not go to the banquet. “*I have to wash clothes that night.*” “*My in-laws are coming into town.*” “*I have a goat that needs to be milked.*” “*I think I have a thing that night.*” So the man says to his servants, “*Okay, then. Go into the streets and invite anyone, and it is best if I have never met them before.*” The banquet is crowded with people the man has never met, and then he says, “*Those I invited will never be able to experience this.*” In other words, they won’t receive the gifts the rich man is offering because *they* refused the invitation, *they* didn’t come to the party.

The only reason I can imagine not going to the wealthy man’s banquet is because being around the wealthy man makes me think about myself too much, because he has said things in the past that made me question who I am and what I think, because he may be from a different political or religious background than me and I have ridiculous attitudes towards people who think differently than I do. Not only do the invited who refuse the invitation not get to experience the meal and the gifts offered, they don’t get to have the experience of discovering something new about who they are, how they think, what their lives might look like after sitting at the table with others who have also been invited just because.

What if the invitation to the banquet was given in love and hope, rather than philanthropy and paternal benevolence? Part of the problem with a person like Jesus is that one of the qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is that *love rejoices in the truth*. And when love is not present in what we say, it is like a *noisy gong or clanging cymbal*. We see through a glass darkly in our daily lives and not one of us is capable of seeing the whole picture. I don’t know if Jesus in his earthly life could see the whole picture, either, but I am quite certain Jesus could see way further down the road than I can. He is like a difficult wealthy man who invites the whole village to a banquet. He sees through you and knows you, though, and that will make the meal an adventure, to say the least.

The thing is, we like how the Kingdom of God sounds when Jesus talks about it, but we don’t really like how it looks in action. The Kingdom of God means *we change* far more than we expect others to change, and this is why, I think, Jesus’ words and presence incites the crowd to kill him at his very first public appearance.

We, each one of us, must take the words of Jesus deeply into ourselves. Once those words find their way to our deepest being, we allow them to work on us, to seed themselves into the soil of the self. This is not gentle, and it means we will have to struggle with what the words mean for each of us. We will each of us be souls in conflict with ourselves. To realize with the congregants in Jesus’ synagogue that we may have to change on deep levels, that things we thought meant one thing actually mean another, that what we thought was the Kingdom of God isn’t, means it will feel like we are tied to the whipping post, to quote the Allman Brothers. “*Lord, Sometimes I feel like I’m dyin’*”, Gregg Allman belts out while he plays the piano.

So, what do we do now? We know ourselves relative to Jesus and the Cross and the Resurrection. We know this is a relationship built on love. This is the lens through which we see our lives and find meanings.

Sometimes, we look like the crowd in the synagogue and turn against the promise of Christ. We know this to be true if we take the Cross seriously.

But sometimes, you and I look like the promise of God, you and I look like Jesus. We don't know this to be true as easily as we know ourselves to be like the crowd. Why is that?

Perhaps the reason Jesus is angry today is because the crowd embraces platitudes, they embrace their memories, they embrace concretized and limited ideas of what Isaiah's words mean and what Jesus intends.

The crowd (and crowds always do this; a person does not) will always turn against those whom they raise up as heroes and celebrities and icons. Jesus, out of love, says to each person in the crowd, *"You are better than this. Quit talking about my parents and how well I did in school and how I reinforce your limited ideas of nation, and culture, and politics. Become the person God made you to be."*

And who is that person? Who are you? The one who hears Christ is the person is one who frees the enslaved out of love, who feeds the poor out of love, who grants freedom to prisoners out of love, who proclaims all debts forgiven out of love. If you thought the crowd was angry before, imagine how angry they will be when the whole world changes because many individuals decide to follow the proclamations of Jesus Christ out of love for God and for humanity in all its diversity?