

B Epiphany 4 1.30.22

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

Focus Statement: Jesus continues in his mission despite us

I've recently found passages of scripture resonating with me even more than usual, like they were written today and not two-thousand years ago. This morning's Gospel text is one of them. To recap the last two weeks, Jesus showed up in his hometown synagogue and announced to the people there that he was the fulfillment of the promise God had been making to them for centuries. And after some initial enthusiasm, they eventually became so "filled with rage" that they drove him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff.

That phrase "filled with rage" really caught my attention, this interaction isn't that loaded. Yes, Jesus announcing himself to be the Lord's anointed was a big claim, but we heard last week he'd been receiving praise everywhere he went. These people even started out pretty happy. The text said that "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that were came from his mouth." But then he started to talk about how Elijah and Elisha paid attention to people who were not Israelites, and suddenly they're trying to throw him off a cliff. Why were they so angry?

Why were they so angry; why is everyone so angry? "Filled with rage" seems like an apt description of a lot of people these days. Seems like every day there's a story on the news of people yelling at a school board meeting, or pitching a fit at a restaurant, or being duct taped to their seat on an airplane; everyone is just super angry. I even feel it in myself. Over the summer I found myself wearing my mask into Meijer just hoping someone would accost me about wearing it, so I would have an excuse to get irrationally angry at a

stranger. Fun fact, no one did, but this forced me to think long and hard about what was fueling this desire to have an excuse to fight with a stranger.

The people of Jesus' hometown were mad for a reason that also feels incredibly relevant, this sense that for someone else to gain, they must be losing. Jesus, their Jesus, the Jesus they'd seen grow up, came back bringing all these tales of the amazing miracles he'd done, and they are all like, hey, doctor, pay attention to us. You know those things you did in Capernaum, do them here. Don't we, we the people who raised you, we your own people, don't we deserve first dibs at all you have to give. We hear this fear in so many of the anti-whomever fears. Remember the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in twenty-eighteen, and the crowds of tiki-torch bearing white men in khaki pants shouting, "Jews will not replace us." Or the "All Lives Matter" backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement. Or the Muslim ban. Or the panic over caravans of immigrants approaching the southern border. The rise in xenophobia is a fear that someone who is not us, whoever us is, is going to get something. And if they get something, then we, again whoever we are, has to lose something.

And what's amazing, and also so relatable about what happened in Nazareth is Jesus didn't tell the people of Nazareth that this proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor was NOT for them, he just pointed out that it wasn't ONLY for them. This proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor was for them and for other people also. And what's more, God's blessings being for everyone wasn't new, Jesus demonstrated by sharing the two stories from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. God has always been a God of all people.

This is the scandal of the Gospel, this has always been the truth that makes grace so hard to understand, because it is so foreign to how the world as we experience it works. We live in a world of division. Not division in the divided social and political ideologies, though we live in that world too, but in a world of division in the mathematical sense. What do I mean? Let's say I want to pass out ten-dollar bills. I cannot give ten dollars to everyone in the world, I am restricted to the number of ten dollar bills I have. If I have twenty dollars, two people get ten dollars, if I have one-hundred dollars, ten people get ten dollars. If I have a thousand dollars, one hundred people get ten dollars, you know how math works. But the thing that makes grace grace, is that Jesus is not restricted in the amount of grace he can distribute. If grace was ten-dollar bills, Jesus could give everyone on the planet an unlimited number of bills, and still have ten-dollar bills to spare. Math breaks down in the presence of the love of God.

Which all sounds nice when we're talking about money. But it gets harder when we talk about love. Because what grace means is that God loves me, and God loves my enemy, just as much and in the same value and amount that God loves me. God loves Xavier West and Adam Yancer. God loves Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. God loves Joe Biden, Boris Johnson, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping. God loves Thich Nhat Hahn and Osama Bin Ladin. God loves every student at Oxford High School including Ethan Crumley. And if any part of that statement made you uncomfortable, guess what, you're in good company, it made me super uncomfortable to say it. But guess what: if we believe that grace is true, then God loves every person that God created, which is every person.

And as we sit in this discomfort, let's talk about love. What love means, what love is. Our second reading today was from First Corinthians, a text you're probably most familiar hearing at weddings. Maybe it was read at some of your weddings. In fact, I know it was read at some of your weddings, because I read it at some of your weddings. And we have enough of you in this congregation who've been married long enough to know that love is not a feeling, it is a decision and an action. When you heard this text at your wedding you might have thought of love as a feeling, but after enough time spent with another person you know that love is a choice you make, day after day, even on the days when it would be easier to just walk away.

Paul was writing to an audience of people who, like the townspeople in our Gospel text, like us, were struggling with God's economy of love. How can God love me if God also loves them? I am nothing like them, and also they are mean. And Paul says, all things you do, your worship, your wisdom, your knowledge, all of that pales in comparison to the power of love. Love, not you, but love, is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or rude. If you want to live in love, you have to choose to be all those things. And what's more, you're going to have to choose them over and over again. Because these things don't come naturally to us, don't come easily. It is in the short run much more pleasant to take the quick hit of adrenaline that anger gives us, rather than the long, slow work of love.

Love forces us to remain in relationship but love also doesn't shy away from speaking hard truths. During World War Two, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of grace and love led him to take part in an assassination attempt on Hitler, because he was convinced that the

go along to get along stance of the German Church was not living out the love of Christ to their Jewish sisters and brothers. I think I've probably shared with you the best example I've ever seen of love was the manager of the day shelter I worked at in Washington DC. Evelyn was this big, tough DC local who would not put up with anything, and at the same time would absolutely go to bat for anyone. She was quick to put women out of the shelter for violations of the rules, but when the time for being out was done, that same woman was welcomed back with the same warmth and trust as if the incident had never occurred. She explained to us young, naïve college interns that she had high expectations for the women, because someone had had high expectations of her, and that was what had allowed her to turn her own life around. That's love. It isn't, everything you do is ok because I love you. Sometimes it's what you're doing is not ok, and I'm not going to let you do that anymore. But I'm still going to work toward your best interest, even as I am stopping you from whatever wrong you are doing.

And in that, we get the final example and good news from Jesus, in the final verse of this passage. When they had Jesus on the brow of the hill, preparing to throw him off, "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." And the word here in Greek for "went on his way" is *poreumai*, which is the same word Luke will use later in relation to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem for his crucifixion. There is a sense of purpose, of direction, of conviction, in this word. Faced with the rage of his townspeople, rage he knew to be misdirected, instead of engaging in their anger, he simply walked away and went on with his mission of salvation. We know from Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees that he wasn't conflict avoidant by any means, so there's something key to be taken here in how he

walked away from this fight. This tells us two things, one a lesson for us and one a lesson about Jesus. The lesson for us is there are times when love looks like confrontation, and times when it looks like walking away. Walking away from a fight that is not ours, that we cannot win, that will only stir more anger, is a form of love. It's the cooling off period in angry words with your spouse, it's also not engaging your crazy cousin on Facebook. I think we can all agree that no one's mind has ever been changed by a sharply worded social media retort. You can have a conversation with said cousin, you can hear their fears and try to help them see yours, that's all good. But that snippy comeback, that will only make you feel good. Your cousin is likely to double down on the space laser theory.

The lesson about Jesus is this: nothing will stop Jesus in his mission of salvation for us and for all people. We already know the Pharisees couldn't stop him, Pilate couldn't stop him, demons couldn't stop him. Now we hear that even criticism from his own people does not stop him from his work of salvation. Jesus is in this for us and for everyone. No matter what. And that, dear people of God, is grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.