

C Lectionary 4 2.2.25

Luke 4:21-30

Focus Statement: Jesus transcends our boundaries

As I alluded to last week, the lectionary committee really left us at a “to be continued” moment with our Gospel text last week. Last week and this week really probably should have been one reading, but for some reason the lectionary committee in their wisdom decided to make it two. So, as a bit of a refresher. Last week, we heard how Jesus returned to Nazareth, where he was brought up, and how, was his custom, he went to worship on the Sabbath, where he was invited to preach. Going off the lectionary, Jesus read a few lines from the prophet Isaiah about how the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, because God had anointed him to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Jesus then declared to the congregation assembled in his hometown synagogue, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today, we find out what the people of Nazareth’s response was to this bold claim.

First, some things to know about first century Nazareth. You had to want to go there. It was very much off the beaten path, not on a major roadway, one didn’t simply end up in Nazareth. Because of this, it was tiny, maybe as few as three-hundred families. One article I read referred to it as a “one-camel town.” Everyone knew everyone else. It was also what we might think of today as a blue-collar community, housing the laborers and craftsmen working on the nearby pleasure palaces for Herod and other Roman and Judean dignitaries, as well as farmers growing food to feed the wealthy urban areas. There was a real Battle Creek gritty vine to the place. So when Jesus, this local boy gone big, the son of the

carpenter Joseph, showed up and started proclaiming that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him to bring good news to the poor and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor; the people of Nazareth thought, yes. About time. We've been slogging along, barely eking out a subsistence living to prop up the lavish lifestyles of others, it's about time for us to get our due. Time for us to live in some pleasure palaces, not just build them, repair them, grow food for them, pay for them with our tax dollars, etc.

Jesus announced the fulfillment of scripture, and the people of Nazareth were happy. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But then Jesus, as Jesus was wont to do, kept talking. "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.'" Luke, as he sometimes did, got a little ahead of himself here. The things Jesus did at Capernaum that the people were referring to actually happen at the end of chapter four. While preaching in the Capernaum synagogue, he will cast an unclean spirit out of a man and heal Simon's sick mother-in-law. What Jesus was alluding to with these proverbs was that he could tell what the people of Nazareth were thinking. OK, you've done all these great things for other people in other towns, now do them here. Stop wasting your precious, finite time, healing all these other people and heal us, free us, proclaim God's favor for us. Because we, not them, are your hometown. We, not them, are your people. We deserve your attention, grace, healing, care, not them, because you are one of us.

In response to the people's unspoken demand for his singular attention, Jesus directed them to two stories of famous prophets of old, Elijah and Elisha. In the Elijah story, Elijah, having just warned the king of Israel that his worship of foreign gods and mistreatment of his people were leading to a devastating drought, fled said king and found refuge in the home of a widow in neighboring, and competing, Sidon. There he performed a miracle, so that the widow and her family didn't run out of food for the entirety of the famine. In the Elisha story, having heard of the healing abilities of Israel's prophet, Naaman, a strong and mighty Syrian warrior, traveled to Israel with all sorts of wealth and riches to try and bribe Elisha to heal him. Instead of taking his riches, Elisha told Naaman to go wash seven times in the Jordan and he would be healed. Naaman, this story is really funny, so I'm going to tell you it, got all offended by this. "Are not the rivers of Syria as good as any Judean river!" To which his servant girl retorted, "if the prophet had asked you to do something hard, you'd have done it. Maybe try the easy thing he just said." So Naaman did, and he washed in the Jordan, and he was healed.

The point of both stories was to remind the people of Nazareth of something that has always been true, that the God of Israel has always been a God of and for all people, not just the people of Israel. From the day God spoke to Abraham and announced that he was blessed to be a blessing for all people, God has never put borders or boundaries around God's love. God's love was not not for Israel, it just wasn't exclusively for Israel. God cared about all God's people, Jews and gentiles. These two stories, like so many others in the Old Testament, point out a theme that is central to Luke's Gospel but not exclusive to Luke's gospel, the universality of God's love for God's people.

God's love is for everyone, for all people. For the people of Nazareth, the people of Capernaum, of Sidon, and, to get ahead of ourselves and into the book of Acts, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." God's love is for everyone, and the people of Nazareth didn't like this assertion because they wanted to be special, they wanted it to be only for them. And the more I sat with this passage this week, the more I thought, woof is this not pertinent. Because wanting to be special, wanting all the attention, fearing that there is not enough to go around, and if I share what I have with "outsiders" there won't be enough for me, is a universally human problem. There is a desire, when things feel chaotic and out of control, to draw inward, to set up borders and restrictions, to take care of oneself and ones own and to exclude all others. To say that Jesus is only for me and people like me, even though Jesus has never worked that way. There's a great quote from theologian R. Alan Culpepper on this passage. It's got some big churchy words in it, but bear with it, because the message cuts. Culpepper wrote, "The paradox of the gospel is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it." The paradox of the gospel is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it. It is almost offensive to us that God could be for everyone, for all people, that there is absolutely nothing we could do to lose God's love for us, and that that love is true for all of creation. We can shut ourselves off from God's grace not because God takes it away from us, but because we refuse to believe that it could be as expansive as it is. Said Culpepper, "Jesus could not do more for his hometown because they were not open to him." And then, here's the real question for reflection, "How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries of community and limits of love

that we ourselves have erected?” How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries of community and limits of love that we ourselves have erected? What might we be capable of, if we trusted that God’s love truly was for everyone and truly believed that every single person was and is made in the image of God?

I know I’m preaching to the choir a bit with you all. The question we find ourselves asking is not who should be included in God’s love, but how do we stand in solidarity with those who are being excluded? In a time in our nation and our world when so many are being excluded, cut out, separated, how do we, how can we, stand up and say no. Like I mentioned last week, most of us aren’t like Bishop Budde with the opportunity to preach directly to the president. But there are ways that we can in our own circles speak up for those who are being made outsiders. Earlier this week, I shared a message from our own bishop that shared a story about preacher Fred Craddock. Craddock always thought he’d preach a sermon that would, like Jesus, get him chased out of town. Instead, Craddock said, he found God was calling him not to the big sacrifice, but to give his life away twenty-five cents at a time. Countless little acts of love, care, concern, and sacrifice are what most of us are called to. The bishop’s message ended with a list of resources, including organizations within the ELCA supporting refugees and a new grant opportunity our synod started for congregations working with groups affected by recent executive orders.

There is work for us. It is small work, it may seem like insignificant work, but it is work. That’s the challenge of this text. Here’s the good news. When they became so enraged at Jesus that they tried to throw him off a cliff, he passed through the midst of them and went

on his way. The Greek for went on his way is the same word used when he set his face to Jerusalem and his crucifixion, there is a sense of purpose and inevitability to it. He passed through a he midst of them and went on his way because nothing could stop him from the work for which he was anointed, proclaiming the good news of God. Not a mob, not rage, not the selfish hopes of humanity, nothing.

Jesus will not, cannot, be stopped by our human failings. So when we do this work, we do it knowing that Jesus goes ahead, right through the middle of any who would try to stop him, and on to bring about the kingdom. Thanks be to God. Amen.