

January 31, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4: 21-30

Sermon: "Working in Our Own Backyard"

To be honest, I was praying for a lot of snow so I wouldn't have to preach this sermon because Jesus really doesn't do the preacher any favors in this text. Here he is, in his home church. They have heard about what he has done over in Capernaum, healing, and teaching and so they invite him back home to be their guest preacher for the day because they want to see and hear their "hometown boy doing good." They have a sense of pride in this young man because they remember when...they remember when Mrs. Smith was his Sunday School teacher. They remember when Mr. Jones took the youth group Jesus included on a trip to the Temple. They remember when funny story...when Jesus parted the baptismal waters on a dare. Sure they can laugh about it now but at that time, it was a little disconcerting and something made them all a little uneasy about this boy now turned young man named Jesus. They know that he was just a little different and that he would do amazing things...but still it made them all a little uneasy.

But now he is back and didn't he do a wonderful job. He has such a nice speaking voice. And what a text to read! From the Book of Isaiah...this little church in Nazareth always liked that passage Jesus read. It reminds them about God's promises. It reminds that one day God is going to smite their enemies. It reminds them that one day everything will be made right. It is the good news that they hold to as people of faith.

A couple of voices start to whisper...Can you believe it...that is Joseph's boy! Well, a few eyebrows are raised at that comment...because they all know that story. It was all a little sketchy, those details around Jesus' birth. Well, they'll just say Jesus is Joseph's boy, with a knowing gleam in their eyes.

Now a few more voices begin to whisper...You know, Jesus has done some amazing things in Capernaum. Just imagine what he will do for us...You know because you are supposed to take care of what's yours first. Imagine how much more he'll do here. Imagine what Jesus will do right here in his own backyard...

And the story continues and then all of a sudden it changes. It's like a flip has been switched and we don't recognize this Jesus. He begins criticizing his own family church. He tells them that "sure, you expect great things from me but guess what...no prophet is ever accepted in his hometown. And then he tells them about how God went beyond Israel's own backyard to heal and save a widow. He tells them about how God went beyond Israel's own backyard to heal and save ...the enemy.

Well, Luke tells us their reaction. They chase Jesus out of town and try to throw him off a cliff...And I have to tell you. I am not sure I blame them. I have tried to put myself in the story and to be honest, I would probably would be in the crowd, trying to push Jesus off the cliff...because sometimes, he just makes things uncomfortable. He doesn't make things easy. There have been moments that I have bopping along the path of life, cruising along the path of faith and then Jesus' words come to me...and they disrupt my rhythm. And I get uncomfortable. I get grumpy. I get down right upset.

And I try to throw Jesus off the cliff, try to ignore what he is saying...try to pick and choose what I want to follow.

And Jesus comes right in and says it doesn't work that way. He reminds me that his "purpose is to fulfill the Kingdom of God, not the expectations or aspirations of his [followers]. And the crazy thing about the Kingdom of God is that we don't control it, God does. The crazy thing about the Kingdom of God is that there are no own backyards, there are no boundaries. The crazy thing about the Kingdom of God is that it is God's Kingdom, inclusive, loving, welcoming, and yes, even a little uncomfortable because it holds up a mirror to our faces and makes us see what we don't want to see.

In our Scripture today, after he finishes preaching, Jesus sits down after sharing the Good News that the year of the Lord's favor is upon them, that the captives will be made free, that there is good news for the poor and he begins to see the gleam of power taking over. He can see his hometown church already designing the Kingdom of God headquarters right there in Nazareth. He could see this community of faith already interpreting the Good News in a very limited way, applying it only to them and to their own, forgetting their neighbor. He could see this beloved community who watched him grow up from a boy to a man begin to erect walls, boundaries, wanting to control who the Good news is really for and to. He sees the gleam of power and the twinkle of self-righteousness begin to take over and begin to push God out of the process, push God out of the Good News, push God out of the Kingdom of God.

And he didn't like what he saw.

He wants this group to understand that God's Kingdom doesn't work that way. That God's love doesn't work that way. That God's grace doesn't work that way. We as people of faith don't get to pick and choose who is out and who is in. We as people of faith don't get to pick and choose what Scripture we follow and what Scripture we don't follow. We as people of faith don't get to put God in a box or control the Kingdom of God because here is the really good news: "No matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to get God to respect our boundaries. God keeps plowing right through them, inviting us to follow or get out of the way."

Jesus is telling the community gathered there that morning to hear the good news that the Good News is about grace. It is about the inclusive love of God. It is about "living out the freedom that love brings so that people never lose their value, are never written off."

Jesus is telling the community of faith gathered at this home church that morning and telling this community of faith gathered here this morning that "we think we know who we are [as people of faith], we think we know where we are [as people of faith], we think we know what we need [as people of faith], we think we understand the true meaning and message of Jesus, but we don't."

Jesus is telling us that we find it easy to enjoy the "fine ideas of freedom, acceptance, and understanding but when they come true, it makes us uncomfortable."

We don't like it when the rules change in the game. We don't like it when we find out that the rules say that we have to expand our definitions. We don't like it when the Kingdom of God

comes in and disrupts our planned, our controlled, our defined boundaries concerning God's grace, God's peace, and God's forgiveness.

In our Scripture today, Jesus is inviting us to have an authentic religious experience and to understand that "at the heart of any authentic religious experience is the recognition that God's nature is too huge, God's movement is too deep, even to be comprehended by a single conception or point of view...God's truth is singular and eternal but the forms in which we give it expression are finite and fragile as clay pots and we must always be ready to break them open on behalf a larger vision of truth."

Hear the Good News: We don't control the Kingdom of God. We don't get a say in who is in and who is out. We don't get to erect walls or put up boundaries limiting the Kingdom of God. We don't get to only choose to work in our own backyard because the Good News reminds us that there are no own backyards in the Kingdom of God. There are no boundaries in the Kingdom of God. There are VIP sections in the Kingdom of God.

The Good News reminds us that it is not up to us! Thanks be to God! It reminds us that God is God. The Good News reminds us that "we have a deep need for God and recognizing that need will transform our relations with others." The Good News reminds us "that we are all in the same boat...lost without God."

The Good News reminds us that we don't have the last word...God does. Just look at our Scripture today and we see that that is true. The crowd tried to throw Jesus off the cliff but he passed through the midst of them and went on his way, unharmed. Living another day to share the Good News, Living another day to turn the foundations of this world upside down. Living another day to welcome all to the table of God, to feast on the goodness of God's banquet, to share in the inclusive nature of God's grace.

Just look at the cross and we see that this world does not have the last word, God does. The powers that be, the regular folk, even his home town church didn't like what they heard as Jesus spoke about the jubilee of the year of the Lord. They didn't like it when he said that the rich would be made poor, and the poor made rich. They didn't like it when he said that the mighty would be made weak and the weak made mighty. They didn't like it when he invited tax collectors, prostitutes, the "least of these" to associate with the rest of them. They didn't like it when he said that the Good News, the Peaceable Kingdom, the inclusive grace of God had been fulfilled in their hearing.

So they captured him, beat him, and crucified him on the cross. And three days later, he rose from the grave, passing through the midst of them, and went on his way, unharmed, bringing new life, wholeness, and healing for all of God's children.

So the question we must ask ourselves this morning as we read this text is not Why did Jesus purposely disrupt his hometown church, it is not Why did Jesus handle this situation the way he did? It is not why did Jesus give his community a faith such a hard time?

No the question that we must ask ourselves this morning as we read this text is What is the scandal? What was so outrageous about Jesus' message? What was so earth-shattering about what he said?

Because if we truly believe and celebrate God's inclusive grace and the coming of God's Kingdom, then we would lift our voices in song and praise.

The scandal comes because God just won't stay where we put God. God just won't confined to the box in which we put God. God just won't stay working in our own backyard.

God just want stay where we can control God.

And that is the Good news of the Kingdom of God!

May we always have the courage to be prophets of justice, prophets of peace, prophets of inclusive grace even in our own backyard. Amen.