

A Hard Truth

Luke 4:21-30

Here is a truth I think we all will agree on, and we all have experienced. People don't always do what you want them to do. It starts when we are young, as soon as we learn the magical word no, and it continues right to the grave. Parents want their kids to clean their room. The kids grab their bikes and cruise. Wives want their husbands to wash the dishes. Their husbands watch football. Your doctor tells you to lose weight. You stop by Dunkin Donuts on the way home. It is so common, in every part of life, that you can just say "where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name", there's bound to be a struggle.

Today in Scripture we see Jesus confronting that same struggle. He is just beginning his ministry. He has come home to let everyone know he has experienced a life-changing event, one that has set him on the path of living as God's Anointed One. Entering the synagogue on the sabbath he announces "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...."

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Luke 4:18, 19)

Then Jesus boldly proclaims ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, today is the day, and I am the Man!

This indeed seems like good news to the hometown folks. He is the son of Joseph. He grew up with their kids and played in their yards. They are impressed by his sermon and they've heard all about his great work in Capernaum. Now he has come home. And He is Ours.

Jesus, wisely or unwisely, sees and understands the attitude, but he is not going to have it. He states point blank what they are hoping for. He says to them, in effect, I know what you're thinking – "Charity begins at home." Physician, heal thyself.- Take care of your own. What you did in Capernaum you can do right here, for us. (And by the way, the nominating committee is eager to meet you.)

And there is the rub. Jesus cannot follow the path this good congregation wants to lay on him. After all, he had just announced that God has called him to bring in the kingdom, to extend God's favor to all people.

I wonder if they got it. I wonder if they heard a subtle 'sorry, but no' in his words. I wonder if they were disappointed in his attitude and annoyed at his hutzpah. This was not going the way they liked.

Then, just in case they didn't get it, Jesus presses it further. 'No prophet is acceptable in his own hometown.' (I get no respect!) Then he tells them two stories of God's servants who helped those who were not 'one of us'. The prophet Elijah, who moved out of Israel during a famine, and helped a widow in the region Sidon, a Phoenician stronghold that had a long history of conflict with Israel. And in the days of Elisha the prophet, with all the lepers in Israel, he only healed their oppressor, the Syrian general, Namaan.

OUCH, those words certainly hurt! Jesus laid it out to them in black and blue. He pulls them up short because they need to see not just who he claims to be but the 'much bigger picture' of who God is. They think 'the Lord is our God, and we are his people,' – exclusively. We and we alone should get his blessings. But not to Jesus. God is God for all people, whether you are a prophet, or a poor widow, a servant of Israel, or a foreigner oppressor. And God will be merciful and gracious to anyone, because that is who God is.

The people, as you can right well see, were upset with Jesus, really upset. They were so mad that they wanted to kill him, and they tried to throw him off a cliff! That's some anger! But Jesus just moves on. And his ministry, thank God, continued as it must. It led him to people like Peter and Lazarus, a paralytic, and a blind beggar. And it led him to Pilate's court and a borrowed tomb.

It is a powerful story. But it leaves us, this congregation, in a very awkward place. We are the people of God; really, we are! And we are trying our best. But the reality is - it's hard sometimes to hear God's truth, and even harder to follow it, because it can disrupt not just our plans, but everything we assume to be right. Who doesn't want God to 'do amazing things here,' and recreate what the church was decades ago. Even I would like that – and I wasn't here! And yet, it seems, like Jesus, God's Spirit is on the move, leading to places we don't like, and doing things we can't comprehend. We would rather God follow our plan, when God is calling us to a discipleship that moves us beyond our comfort zone.

My brothers and sisters, it takes courage and trust to let God be God, let God shape us as God will shape us, and use us and God will use us. It takes a boldness we may not always feel. It takes hope in a future we cannot readily see. It may lead us into unknown territory (I can guarantee you that.) It may lead us away from our desires and plans. (But we are disciples and followers of Christ - not the Lord of the Church.) It may lead us into a path that looks for all the world like a cross. (Which is the way Jesus went, is it not?)

But this - this is God's way. It is the way Jesus went, and it is a way that God has promised will lead to fulness of life for all people, not just us. It may just lead to the kingdom of God on earth, even right in our corner of Massachusetts.

Is this a truth we are willing to bear? Amen.