

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

Jan. 31, 2016

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Just a brief warning at the outset, this is a dangerous sermon.

So here's the situation, Pastor Peter is in Dar es Salaam today and will be in Tanzania for the next few weeks. And Pastor Deb is recovering from oral surgery. Have no fear good people of Christ the King, I'm hear to tell you, "I've totally got this." Now hearing this, I suppose there are a range of thoughts and reactions that could be running through your heads. You could be thinking, "Great, I really like Pete, I think he's an awesome pastor and I totally trust him to take us wherever we need to go." (By the way, if you're thinking this, you can consider yourself to be included on my list of favorite parishioners.) Now you could also be thinking, "How bad could this really be, it's not like he can do that much damage in such a short period of time, can he?" Or perhaps you're thinking, "Uh oh, I don't think this is going to end well for us."

At this point, I'm just glad that most of you have remained in your seats. It's a tremendous boost of confidence for this preacher to still have an audience and that you still might believe what I have to say will be of some redeeming value. I suppose it's also possible that you're still here because everyone likes a good train wreck and there's a chance you may satisfy some voyeuristic pleasure by watching me go down in flames. I'm going to go forward believing it's the former and that you're cheering me on with your subtle smiles and the almost imperceptible nodding of your heads.

Do you suppose this is what Jesus was experiencing as he preached his first sermon to the church in Nazareth? Nazareth was his hometown. The people in the synagogue knew him, they knew his parents, they probably helped to raise him. They taught him and cared for him in the way a tight-knit community cares for their own. It takes a village, doesn't it? Just before arriving back home in Galilee, our freshly baptized messiah, filled with Holy Spirit, has spent forty days in the wilderness where he faced down the devil himself. Now it's time to begin his ministry in earnest. So where does he start? He heads to his home turf of course. It makes sense to me. Why not get some preaching and teaching under your belt in a familiar place. And I can totally see the benefit of perfecting the stump speech in front of a friendly audience. It should be an easy morning at mom and dad's church, surrounded by all their friends and the neighbors too.

The church elders must have trusted him enough to put him in charge that day. They handed him a scroll and he found a passage that packed a punch. This was the story from Luke that we started last week. If you weren't here or don't remember, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

"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."

Then it was time to preach, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That's where the story ended last week, presumably at the conclusion of one of the shortest sermons ever. This week, that's right where the story picks up again. Last week, Pastor Peter spoke to us how Jesus delivers all the good news that's necessary in that one line. "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That's it, as if Jesus dropped the mic once it was said. And with this proclamation, we get our marching orders, the mission on which we're to join God. Encouraging the poor, releasing those in bondage, helping the blind to see, creating freedom and announcing that God's favor is here. These are good words aren't they? This is a mission worthy of our time and energy. This is our Epiphany proclamation: What? Jesus is here. So what? The Word has been fulfilled. Now what? Time to get busy encouraging, releasing, helping, freeing and announcing.

But that was last week and last week we didn't get the whole picture. This week, we read the rest of the story and it has a certain, more peculiar and life-threatening ending doesn't it?

At first the folks at the hometown church seemed quite pleased. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth," it was written. "Isn't that Mary & Joe's boy, he sure knows his Bible and speaks with such presence and authority." You would think this is what Jesus would have wanted to hear, praise and congratulations, some pats of the back and even some for his parents. But Jesus' reaction suggests otherwise. Instead of relishing the praise, Jesus gets... well... a little snarky and certainly more than a little combative.

Though they haven't even hinted that they were thinking it, Jesus calls out those gathered in the pews for being selfish. "You want me to perform miracles and offer healing right here and for your benefit alone," he

seemingly infers. What was it that he knew about them that would lead him down this path? Did he have first-hand knowledge of how skeptical they were of outsiders or newcomers? Had he heard all their protests about how “those people” were ruining everything for the rest of us? Had he grown up listening to their jealousies and suspicions? Did he have some special knowledge that even good, church-going regulars might not actually embrace ‘change,’ specifically the types of changes that he was proposing? Were they even aware that in order for the Kingdom of Heaven to come near, their self-centered worlds would have to go away to make room?

This is why a prophet is never welcome in the prophet's hometown. They speak truth that strikes a little too close to the bone. And then to really hammer-home the point, Jesus reminds them of how those celebrated profits of old, Elijah and Elisha cared for serious outsiders like widows and foreigners. “That's it preacher, we've had enough!” The text says they were “filled with rage” and this angry vigilante mob drags Nazareth's favorite son right to the edge of the cliff and prepares to launch him off, a literal ‘cliff hanger’ of an ending.

At first blush, Jesus' message pleased the crowd. Why was that? When Jesus began listing off all the good things about to happen (all that good news delivering, captive releasing, sight restoring, oppression freeing) perhaps the crowd considered themselves as the primary beneficiaries. I'm sure that more than a few of those gathered felt overly burdened, oppressed by the roman occupation, and poor in comparison to rich land owners and those in the ruling class. The fulfillment that Jesus proclaims probably sounded pretty good to them.

If we're honest, I think we like to hear Jesus share this good news from Isaiah because we hear a place for us within those who will benefit from God's favor. I'm discouraged by the widening gap between rich and poor and I think I'm on the wrong side of that divide. There's much in this world that I'm blind to. I see too much ugly and not enough beauty. There is much that I feel holds me captive and a little freedom would feel good right about now. So yeah, receiving some of these benefits seems exactly like what I would expect Jesus to do for me.

But Jesus didn't just leave it there. He goes on to suggest that the promise fulfillment he brings will be offered to those far outside our comfortable boundaries. How dare he? “We are God's chosen people. We remain obedient to God's law. We go to church faithfully. Those people are none of those things.”

Ok, here comes the dangerous part.

Last week I learned about a recently published study that shows the richest 1% of the world's population now holds wealth that is equal to the other 99%. Let that sink in for a moment. 1% is a tiny amount yet they possess as much as everyone else in the world, combined. I hear that statistic and I get mad. Really mad. Mad enough to want to throw some people off a cliff. How did the 1% manage to do that without some of us in the 99% holding them accountable?

When that Isaiah text Jesus read talked about "the year of the Lord's favor," it was talking about the year of jubilee. This was to happen every 50 years or so, when slaves and prisoners would be freed but more importantly debts were to be forgiven and property returned to their original owners. I imagine a sort of re-setting of the economic balance of the community. The overly rich were to please God by lifting up those much less fortunate. The gap between the rich and the poor was to close in. The 1% would no longer control more than the 99%. If I was sitting in that Nazarene church listening to Jesus, I would think that a year of jubilee sounded like a really good idea. Time to reset that 1% for the benefit of the rest of us.

But, let's look a little closer at that survey I read about last week. How much money would have to have to be considered part of the 1%? 10 million? 100 million? 1 billion? More? To be in the richest 1% of the world's population means that you cash and assets totaling at least \$760,000. I don't know about you, but that number surprised me. I'll confess that I'm not in the 1% but, really, I'm not that far away. To be in the richest 10% of the world's population, means you have cash and assets totaling only \$70,000. So I'm sitting firmly in the 10% right now and most likely, at the time my parents pass away, it's very likely that I'll be one of those people I'm so mad about, mad enough to throw off a cliff. At first, we were talking about *those* people. Now we're talking about *me*. I think maybe, we should back away from that cliff.

Ok, so maybe those Nazarene church-goers got pretty offended once they came to believe that the blessings that Jesus was proclaiming for those outsiders were going to be financed at their expense. Their boundaries were drawn pretty clearly and it was obvious to them that Jesus was telling them they were on the wrong side of the line.

That makes perfect sense. That is, if you're willing to ignore the rest of the story. As I read it for you earlier, the Gospel story concluded with the angry mob taking Jesus to the brow of the hill so that they might hurl him

off the cliff. Remember our literal cliff-hanger? Well there is one more verse in today's appointed reading that I haven't shared with you.

"But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

Of course he did, he had to. We know the story, Jesus isn't killed by being thrown off a cliff in Galilee, he dies on a cross on a hill in Jerusalem. Not only that, we're still at the beginning of the story. He has lots of teaching and healing to do, not to mention recruiting his disciples and feeding the 5000.

So how do we go from being strung up by an angry mob to "he went on his way" with so little explanation? When I imagine this scene I see Jesus employing some sort of Jedi-like mind trick. He just waves his hands ever so slightly as he walks through the crowd and leaves the mob wondering what happened. In reality, I'd like to offer a possible, and hopefully more plausible, interpretation.

I think the crowd had some time to think as they were marching Jesus out of town and up to that cliff. And during that time they considered more closely Jesus' proclamation and their sense of where the boundary lines were being drawn. Jesus' good news wasn't exclusionary at all. In fact, by claiming God's favor for the other, Jesus was making the most inclusive proclamation possible. If God's care for the outsider, the widow, the foreigner is central to his purpose, then his care for me as well must be certain. The boundary lines are even bigger than I could have imagined. In fact, there really aren't any boundary lines at all.

The real scandal of all this of course is how in order for us to claim our share of God's favor, we have to first accept that it exist for the other too. The 1% and the 99%, God's love for us is there in equal measure. When I accept that God loves you, and only then, can I accept that God loves me.

Jesus went on his way. There's no 'cliff-hanger' in the scriptures. The only 'cliff-hanger' is in our lives when we refuse to accept the entirety of God's story. When we refuse to see the other as equally loved, treasured, flawed, important, broken, worthy, saved.

Ok, here's another dangerous part.

There's a certain person who is running for a political office of a particularly high importance in this country. Their candidacy seems to be commanding a lot of attention. I will confess to you that I cannot

understand how we as a society will give public voice to the racism, misogyny, and xenophobia that seems to me is overly evident in this campaign. I'm sorry but how this person maintains any relevance mystifies me. Don't others see this too? How can you support them? I just wish you and your followers would lose your turns at the microphone and disappear. Your rhetoric is out of line and not at all representative of what I believe. And what I believe is right.

Then I'm reminded that whenever I start to draw these kind of boundaries between me and the other, I'm more likely to draw them in a way that I'm the one who ends up being excluded. We're good at drawing boundaries like who should be allowed into this country, or who should control our federal lands, or which religious practices are acceptable or how marriage should be defined or what's an appropriate bumper sticker to display on the back of your Toyota Prius.

Drawing the boundaries is the exclusionary act. Erasing them is the revolutionary act. If I am to believe in God's promises for me, I must believe in God's promises for you. One cannot be separated from the other.

Embedded in the truth of this claim then, is the possibility that the gap between us will close. Jesus has proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor. We're in this together: you, me, us, them, those people, all of us.

Yes, the rhetoric of this coming campaign season is already filled with false logic, misguided intention, and plainly, too much boundary-drawing. I am not suggesting that we have to accept the content of what is being said but I think Jesus is proposing an alternative way that might help us through. Accept that we are equal in importance to God. If we share in value, can we not share in dignity? If God's capacity to love is so great as to have room for you and all your flaws, then I can be reassured that there's room for me and all of mine too. Then, once we acknowledge the common space that we share, might it be possible for us to share in civility, constructive dialogue and possibly even, dare I say it, progress?

What? Jesus has come and will come again. So what? God's promises have been and will continue to be fulfilled. Now what? Well now that you're in this with me, I think it's about to get really dangerous. Amen.