

Sermon: On the Edge

New North Church, Hingham

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3 February 2019

Based on **Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30**

This week's reading from Luke overlaps with last week's reading by one pivotal verse, so let's back up a bit and talk about the story so far.

Last week, Jesus 'went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom.*' He does this regularly, not just every now and then. Matthew and Mark only tell us that Jesus 'began to teach the people in the synagogue,' but in Luke, he stands up and reads a specific passage from Isaiah from a scroll which was handed to him by an attendant. So, he had to unroll and find the passage in a scroll with no chapter and verse markings, but he had no trouble with that – he's done this before; he knows his Scripture.

And he read:

'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 he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. Then he said, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

All spoke well of him and were amazed. This guy just claimed that he was the Messiah, the anointed one, that he's on a mission, and he said it all with authority.

So far, so good until Jesus decides to antagonize everybody. He didn't have to say anything else, but he could have been annoyed by the comment about being Joseph's son, as if someone of apparently humble origin couldn't become an authority on Scripture. Or, maybe they didn't really believe him. His next three statements seem to anticipate what those in the synagogue might be thinking of him.

Then Jesus speaks the truth – uh-oh – and he reveals it through Scripture, pulling out two examples that recall the earlier prophets, Elijah and Elisha. These are really obscure references and we probably don't need to know everything that's going on with them, except to say that the unnamed widow at Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian were both gentiles, yet obedient and faithful to God, and that the prophets went to them to heal them. To those in the synagogue with Jesus, the widow and the Syrian were outsiders, and that the good news he proclaimed was for Jews and gentiles alike. This is not what they wanted to hear. Maybe he had also made Nazareth feel excluded from God's grace.

And that's when the trouble started.

Why would Jesus do this? Why would the promise of an inclusive mission and ministry enrage the congregation to the point where they wanted to do him harm? The late Peter Gomes may have given us a clue when he wrote, 'The people take offense not so much with what Jesus claims about himself, as with the claims that he makes about a God who is more than their own tribal deity.'¹

In the ancient Near East, every village and household had their own gods. All the surrounding cultures had their own particular gods, except the Romans, who borrowed from the Greeks. Generally speaking, tribal deities were everywhere. In the very first commandment, God said, 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:3).

These days, people say we worship the false gods of money, celebrity, and sports teams. Mostly it's the money but whatever it is, it becomes a comfortable distraction from doing what God expects of us, it merely keeps us busy while we live in a bubble.

We are only human, which is not an excuse, but we tend to like things the way they are, and we tolerate change best when we're not aware that change is happening. But when our expectations get flipped on their heads, our reactions are often more immediate than they might have been had we first had some time to notice and then gather in the new situation. That might be the more peaceable approach, but then we wouldn't have noticed that anything had changed. We wouldn't have learned anything.

Jesus wanted us to notice. It's not every day that someone visits your church and announces that they are the Messiah. Jesus needs to know that you know exactly what kind of Messiah he is before you get all excited and put up billboards about it: *this* Messiah is for *all* the people, Us *and* Them.

And before we start thinking the Messiah's work will be easy or pretty, consider Jeremiah. Like most prophets, he tries to worm out of his call. Moses tried that same approach, saying, 'I don't speak very well.' Jonah ran away. Isaiah said, 'Woe is me!' before he finally stepped up and volunteered. Ezekiel saw a vision of 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord' (Ezekiel 1:28b) before God said, 'I am sending you to them' (2:4) and he didn't argue.

Jeremiah tried something new: he said he was too young. God said, forget about it; I'll be with you the whole way. When it's God doing the asking, we rightly believe we are not up to the job, but God knows better because it's God who prepares us in advance to do the work when we're called.

The work that God will have Jeremiah do is the same work that Jesus will do, for all the nations and for all the kingdoms, and that is to *pull down* the walls that separate us from one another; *pluck up* our egos and self-satisfaction; *overthrow* sin; and *destroy* death. Then, *build up* a new life, which is God's favorite thing to do. *Plant* a new garden, a new vineyard. This is the purpose for which God created us all.

The irony in Nazareth is that Jesus was preaching to them. When he proclaimed a gospel of grace for the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, he was talking about them. Nazareth in Galilee suffered under the Romans as much as all the other towns in the region. The grace Jesus proclaimed was wider and more inclusive than the Nazoreans were themselves, despite the fact that God's grace was for them too. They resented a grace that was extended to outsiders, what we would call 'the other,' and that kept them from receiving grace themselves.

Just as those in Nazareth had gotten comfortable with a social and religious status quo of stereotypes and with thinking that God served *them*, so too do we need to be aware that God's world view is far more expansive and broader than our own. Yet if we adopt God's point of view and keep it ever in the forefront of our thoughts, then we can see that the good news applies to us too, and that God's grace flows to everyone.

Amen.

¹ Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good about the Good News?* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 39.