

February 3, 2019

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Luke 4:21-30; I Corinthians 13:1-13;

### **Amazed at the Gracious Words**

Reactions to a sermon vary, the gospel tells us. Today's gospel story from Luke 4 is Jesus' first sermon, and it's preached in his hometown, Nazareth, and at first the response is fantastic, highly positive, everyone listening "spoke well of him," and was "amazed at the gracious words that came out of his mouth." That reaction changes. A few breaths later the amazed crowd drives Jesus to a cliff. Sermon reactions vary.

At the prior congregation I served, a church in town called Homewood, there was an older member, a man who was quietly and deeply dedicated to the church, rarely missed a Sunday, helped out in many ways, one of the kindest people you could meet. He was not particularly expressive, including verbally, so when he gave me a quiet nod after worship and said, "Nice job," it meant a lot. I had heard how he became a widower, how his wife had suffered a long and difficult illness, and then died. And I had heard how some time after that, he met a widow, and she liked to golf, and she asked him did he too? And she had this joyful way about her, she was always smiling and she made him smile, too, and she was an amazing cook—I can verify this because I tasted the pies that she brought to church events. They were married by the time I met them. I would see them, sitting together in church, with their snowy hair and a sparkle in their eyes. It was good to see that while leading worship, that made worship for me. And so I was very concerned one Sunday as I was preaching, and I looked at him, and instead of open attentiveness he looked concerned. Not just concerned, upset, angry even. I thought it was a pretty good sermon, but he was giving me these awful looks. I finished preaching, we finished up worship, I stood in the back of church and he came up to me and said, "I'm sorry, but I couldn't hear a word you were saying today. My hearing aid has been acting up, and I think it's interacting with the church sound system, too. It was making these awful screeches right in my ear all during your sermon. I wish I could have heard it."

Such was not the case in Nazareth. The people could hear Jesus, loud and clear—too clear. They could hear Jesus telling them these stories from their past. They weren't stories they particularly wanted repeated; they didn't exactly like the points these stories made. The stories reminded the listeners that their history included hunger, and sickness, hard times. It can be hard to hear those stories, who wants to relive that. These stories also reminded the people that they weren't the only ones who suffered. People who were not Israelites had it hard, too: a widow from Zarephath almost starved to death, Naaman of Syria suffered from leprosy, a debilitating disease that made one a complete outsider, but God's prophets helped save them, these foreigners. The stories reminded the listeners that the God of Israel had an eye for outsiders, their God did not focus exclusively on people who'd been part of the covenant for generations. Jesus' made a point of this, and his listeners did not like the reminder. They became filled with rage, started rushing towards Jesus, their eyes scanning the outskirts of town for the nearest cliff, so they could push Jesus over it, just make him and his infuriating stories disappear.

It's a disturbing story, but it still happens. Still today, congregations can act like those worshippers in Nazareth. Churches today do this when it becomes a point to emphasize, even a point of privilege, how long someone has been involved there. Or when people wonder why some group gets special attention, when they're not even part of the church. This inward focus is a constant challenge to any faith community, though it's not very faithful, nor good for the community, nor true to the gospel. As today's gospel tells us, this kind of thing pushes Jesus right over the edge. Almost. Jesus, it turns out, will just walk away from it. Which itself says something. Jesus has nothing to do with it, and it's not going to deter or destroy him. Instead, often it's the congregation that hurtles itself over the cliff.

Jesus told stories when he preached, and they could be hard to hear, disturbing. Jesus told stories of the past, including stories of suffering, including stories that point out privilege and its false assumptions. This month, February, Black History month, can be a time to hear and tell stories, to be reminded of our nation's past, to not forget the suffering it included for vast groups of people labeled "other," how this nation was founded on the premise that not all are created equal, how the scourge of racism is ongoing, how inequality is woven deep into economic and educational and housing and political systems, how implicit bias implicates us all. It's our history, and it's our present reality. It is not easy to hear this. How about a miracle instead, Jesus? Why don't you do that, instead of telling us these stories?

Jesus told stories of the way things were, and are, and Jesus told made-up stories, too. We may be reminded that many of Jesus' parables make similar points about God's attention to others: the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, for example, the one where people are hired at nine and noon and three and five, and at the end of the day everyone gets the same pay. It doesn't matter how long you were there, how long you worked, at the end of the day everyone gets the same amount on their check. That story is absolutely enraging! And the Parable of the Prodigal Son, that says something like that, too. That story should also make us mad, if we are listening carefully, if we've been quietly dependable, good church going folks like the older brother, who then have to watch a spendthrift schemer get party thrown on their behalf?! If we are honest, these stories are galling. Listening to them our faces should be screwed up in displeasure, even and especially if our hearing aids are working properly. If and when they are, the screech that we hear is not the sound system, it's the gospel.

The gospel undoes our understanding of how things should work, including God. According to the gospel, you don't get paid more the more you work, the more time you've been there. According to the gospel you don't get paid more for being the better worker, the better brother. That's not how the gospel works, because that's not how grace works. Grace has nothing to do with works. It's not wages. Sin has wages. Grace is a gift. The amount of grace offered does not depend on seniority or merit. The amount of grace offered depends only on the love of God, which is beyond human reckoning, and is freely offered to all. This was what Jesus said in his first sermon, God's love is for all, and "all were amazed at the gracious words that were coming out of his mouth." That reaction was right, it is amazing, grace, in many and varied ways grace is amazing, and confounding, and disturbing. If we do not acknowledge this we are only half listening, or are deaf to suffering, which is still undeniably there, in our past, in our present, in our person, and often at our own hands.

Grace does not explain suffering, nor erase it. Grace does not make our painful past disappear, it is still there and here. But grace does mean we can tell another story. By the grace of God, we can tell the story of the paycheck you received when you were waiting all day for someone to hire you, and at the eleventh hour they did, and then they paid you over and above what you expected, not because you earned it, but because they could. By the grace of God we can tell a story of a father's arms, opened wide in embrace for the wayward, and offering a welcome, too, for the one who'd been there the whole time, a reminder that all this was theirs also, always. By the grace of God we can tell a story of a pie baked with love, a love that was found late in life, after sorrow, a reminder that after suffering, still there is love. By grace there is still love, and it is the only thing that will last, as 1 Corinthians 13 tells us. Love is the only thing that will get us through the present, and bring us to the future, the future that is the full knowledge of God's loving story for us, and for all the world.