

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 31, 2010
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 1:1-10
Psalm 71
I Corinthians 14:12-20
Luke 4:21-30

One of the basic principles of good Bible study is that we respect the literary integrity of a biblical text. That is, we honor and pay attention to a text's beginning and ending.

Unfortunately, the lectionary compilers did not do that this week, and have placed us in the middle of a conversation in Luke's gospel that begins back in 4:16. This story, then, covers 4:16-30, and should be read as a single unit.

Last week's Gospel lesson started the story, where Jesus goes to the synagogue service in his hometown of Nazareth. Visiting rabbis and teachers were often asked to stand and read the scriptures in these services, and so it's no surprise that Jesus is asked to do so.

He stands and reads from the prophet Isaiah, where Isaiah speaks about five activities that the Spirit has anointed the Lord's servant to accomplish.

The first activity involves preaching good news to the poor. Now in Luke's day, this meant the coming of a world of abundance and an end to poverty. The Book of Acts foreshadows this when it describes the church caring for the poor

through the church's holding of material goods in common (Acts 2:42-47; 4:35-5:10; 6:1-6).

The second thing the servant does is to proclaim release of captives. This refers primarily to those who had been jailed for their witness to Christ. In the Book of Acts, faithful disciples are jailed and three times God releases them (Acts 5:12-26; 12:6-11; 16:25-40).

The third act of ministry the servant achieves is to proclaim sight to the blind. Jewish literature also uses blindness as a metaphor for spiritual dullness or imperception. In the Book of Acts, Saul becomes the example of this as he is blinded on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians (Acts 9:11-13).

Fourth, the servant in Isaiah proclaimed freedom for the oppressed. In Luke's world, the oppressed are those who are possessed by demons. Luke describes not only cases of individual possession, but also suggests that demons operate through aspects of the Roman empire (cf. 4:33f; 6:18f; 8:2; 8:26f; 9:37f; 11:14f).

And finally, the servant proclaims the "acceptable year of the Lord." This is a reference to the year of Jubilee (cf. Lev. 25), the occasion every 50 years when land in Israel reverted back to its original owner.

Jesus finishes reading, then sits down. This action signified that the reading of the scriptures was over, and the sermon or commentary was about to begin.

With all eyes on him, Jesus' sermon is brief and to the point. He says: "today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And the people respond with awe and amazement. And if Jesus would have ended the sermon here, things would have been fine and everyone would have gone home to a nice dinner. (This is why it is a good idea to keep sermons short -- the longer you preach, the more you invite trouble!)

Jesus can't leave well enough alone, however, and continues his sermon in 4:23. His comment about "physician, heal thyself," reveals the crowd's desire to see him demonstrate or prove one of the things he has just talked about from Isaiah.

But Jesus' answer reveals to this crowd the broader purpose and implications of his coming, and what he says is what causes the problem, both then and now.

On the surface, it would appear that the hometown people's familiarity with Jesus makes it hard for them to hear him and to understand him. They are amazed and are left asking, "how can this be? Isn't this Joseph's son?"

On further analysis, the problem here seems to be deeper than just a sense of knowing the hometown boy too well. For in a very short time they move from praise and amazement to anger so white hot that they want to take Jesus and push him off a cliff. How can this be? What is going on here? Are the people of

Nazareth so familiar with Jesus that they simply don't "get it?" Or is there more to it than that? What is really happening here?

The clue comes in two stories Jesus quotes for them, stories readily found in their Scriptures. Jesus tells them of Elijah, who was sent to the widow of Zarepheth during the time of great drought in the land. And he also tells them of the prophet Elisha, who was sent to heal Naaman (a Syrian) of his leprosy. And as he tells these stories, the "Aha" moment happens that makes this text a little more accessible to us.

All week long I've been looking at this story and thinking, *the people of Jesus' hometown are so close to him, so familiar with him, that they simply don't "get it" when he visits them.* That's the problem. These people are so close to Jesus that they just don't "get it."

But the real problem -- the cause of the people's anger at Nazareth -- is not that they are so close to Jesus that they don't "get it." The real problem here is that they *do get it*. It's not that they don't understand what he tells them, it's that they understand *all too well* what he tells them. And what he tells them is that God is a God who likes to invite outsiders to the party.

These folks listen to Jesus read the promises of Isaiah, and they think, Jesus is talking about *us!* The Messiah has finally come, and he's come *for us!* Finally,

the sun of God's grace and favor is going to shine *on us!* The "someday" we've prayed for all these years has become "today," and it's all *for us!*

And with the brief mention of two incidents from their past, Jesus incites a murderous rage in them by telling them what they already know: the grace and blessing of God Jesus brings are for *all* people. In that moment the people of Nazareth discover that one of the most painful lessons in life is *learning what you already know.*

But this lesson learned by the hometown folks at Nazareth is Good News for us. For truth be told, we are all "outsiders" and foreigners who have been invited to the party. But sometimes, especially after a long period of time, we are tempted to believe that the Good News of the Gospel which came to us as outsiders was only addressed *to us*, and now that we've accepted our invitation to the party, the guest list is complete.

But do me a favor this morning. Think for a moment, and remember a time in your life when you found yourself on the outside looking in. A time when you felt alone and excluded. A time when you felt isolated, and that no one really understood how you felt or what you were going through.

In that time, it is likely that someone reached out to you. Someone extended a hand and welcomed you. Someone saw the anguish behind your eyes and said, "please, won't you join us?"

Jesus announced to the people in the synagogue at Nazareth that the “someday” they had been praying for had arrived. But that message of great news wasn’t just for them. God’s heart of love and compassion beats strongly for all people everywhere. It always has.

God’s heart of mercy and grace beats strongly for those who are outsiders, those not part of the inner circle, those who are not well-connected, those without pull or influence. In a word, God’s heart of love and mercy beats strongly for *us*.

And when Jesus went to the Father, he sent the Holy Spirit to the Church and called us to take up the mantle, to announce to broken, hurting people -- people like us, and people who are different from us -- the Good News that “someday” has become “today.”

And the anointing of the Spirit is upon *us* this morning to speak that message to a hurting world. Through every ministry of this church, through every act of compassion and kindness that emanates from here, we are, in our own small way, saying to people: “your *someday* has become *today*.”

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, these signs of bread and wine remind us of that very fact. In Jesus Christ, the time of God’s favor has arrived. And now all of our “somedays,” will never be the same.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.