

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

We have before us this morning, a continuation of our Gospel from last week. Our Gospel lesson last week closed with the very words that open our lesson today...

Then Jesus began to say to all in the synagogue in Nazareth, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21)

After these words were spoken by Jesus, we hear today that all spoke well of him. Nazareth was buzz...the townsfolk were amazed at the gracious words that he spoke...it seemed to be as my dad used to say, local boy makes good.

The opening of the Gospel lesson reminded me of the scene in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, when George Bailey's brother Harry received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions in World War II. In the movie, Harry Bailey was a Navy pilot who saved the lives of 15 soldiers by shooting down a kamikaze that was about to attack their transport. And as a result of his heroism, all the town was planning a big celebration when he arrived back home and of course.....all spoke well of him.

We hear that in the synagogue, the folks were speaking well of Jesus and asking, isn't this Joseph's son? We hear also that the folks were amazed at all the things Joseph's son was saying...that is, until Jesus said something they didn't like. And their disdain seems to begin with this line, "Is not this Joseph's son?" Now, we have no audible tone on this comment that would enable us to hear either sarcasm or praise. We simply have no way of knowing how to read it with inflection or emotion.

I can speculate about the meaning but we have no real sense of the tone. This phrase or comment can be read with varying degrees of praise and approval, or skepticism, sarcasm, or even envy. "Is not this Joseph's son?" This can take a tone such as: does he really expect that we are going to believe that he is a prophet...who does he think he is and how dare him blaspheme like that! We can also read "Is not this Joseph's son...who would have thought that Joseph's boy would someday be a prophet...wow, that's really great! This is one of our own who has done well, we now have a front row seat to God's grace because he's one of us!"<sup>1</sup>

When looking at this question about Joseph's son in the context of the rest of the passage, we learn that the tone *is* the latter. The townspeople had heard reports of Jesus' teaching elsewhere and have reasonably expected that Jesus really is a prophet endowed by the Spirit of God. Through human nature along with the rest of the passage we can see that the townsfolk assume that Jesus will find favor with his hometown folks and shower *them* with his mighty works.

In this tone the folks can say that they too are chosen by God, after all, God's chosen is one of them. We can safely assume this about the townsfolk because when they learn that this was *NOT* the case, that Jesus does *not* favor the hometown crowd they turn on Jesus and drive him out of town and attempt to throw him off a cliff.

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<sup>1</sup> Comments regarding answers to the question in Luke 4:22b, "Is not this Joseph's son?" are built on commentary in: Keck, Leander, senior editor. *NIB, The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Volume IX, Luke, John.* Nashville, Tenn: Abington Press, 1995. Luke 4:16-30, Preaching in Nazareth, pages 106-107.

After he reads the passage from Isaiah, Jesus says to all in the synagogue in Nazareth, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." After this, Jesus begins to preach and we then see a very sharp shift in tone in this Gospel lesson. Jesus tells of a merciful God that is not exclusive to them...its as if Jesus is saying to the hometown crowd, you may think you know me, and you may think that makes you better, but God's mercy is not exclusive to you. Within the reaction of the folks, we see the consequences of preaching the truth of the Gospel...the townsfolk want to run him out of town in order to throw him off a cliff. Here is where the Gospel hits home for us.

We love to proclaim our faith in God and how God has done mighty things for us...that is until we are confronted with the reality of God or the truth of the Gospel, in that God does not work according to our likes and dislikes...God's mercy reaches way beyond our expectations and our prejudices. Today we hear Jesus say:

"Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" (Luke 4:23)

The people at Nazareth believed that the Messiah would put an end to the Gentiles and set Israel up as the grand people God had promised they would be. But today in our Gospel Jesus cites two examples of prophetic moments when God acted to redeem and to save two "outsiders." Jesus starts with Elijah who gives food to a Gentile widow and her son, even though the prophet feeds no Israelites. In verse 27 today we hear in the preaching of Jesus, he tells of the time when Elisha healed Naaman, a Syrian army officer, of leprosy...leprosy a chronic infectious disease that instantly made one who suffered with it, an outsider...but even worse...a Syrian army officer. This is when the folks' initial admiration turns to murderous rage and they drive Jesus out of town and attempt to throw him off the cliff.

Jesus uses the prophets to show the people the truth of God's mercy, and as a result, they learn the truth of God's grace. And that truth is that God's mercy and grace are NOT exclusive to them...it is not exclusive by association...it is for all...and they don't like it...they are so incensed that they want to throw Jesus off a cliff. Elijah and Elisha as we all know are Old Testament prophets who act most like Jesus. They are called to extend the word of God BEYOND the boundaries of Israel. And here we have Jesus, extending God's mercy beyond the boundaries of the expectations of the townsfolk. When Jesus says, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' he is exposing their true hearts which means "Look after yourself and your kin first before you attempt to help others." They may not say it, but the hometown folks want Jesus to do here, in his hometown, the things that they have heard he did at Capernaum...they want the same thing done for them as he did for those in Capernaum. If scripture is to be fulfilled then the townsfolk expect Jesus to do wonderful things for them...and how dare you do that for others who are not one of us.

Like Elijah and Elisha who went outside of the boundaries of Israel and took care of folks who were not the favored or socially favored, Jesus is telling the hometown folks this is how his ministry is to be. In other words, the townsfolk heard Jesus' declaration of fulfillment as a promise of spiritual favor towards them, rather than the people who are not his hometown folks. And when Jesus tells them that this is not the case, they are insulted and enraged.

I believe we too, in so many similar ways sit here in the church and view our faith as a seat of privilege and feel God that God does good things for us and holds the others in contempt...just like we do. No doubt, God's mercy is a great gift of wealth for us who are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. But in our seat today, we forget what grace and mercy are all about simply because we have become complacent to that mercy. In our complacency we lose sight at times and forget that God sent Jesus to preach the Gospel to the poor. And in the case of the lesson before us, the poor are the Gentiles...the outsiders.

However, in *our* context today, the poor are those who are impoverished in sin and faithlessness, those we judge unworthy of the mercy we sit in. Moreover, for us today, the poor are literally the poor or those who live beyond the boundaries of our social circles. The ministry of Jesus reaches to those who possess nothing at all: neither God, nor the law, nor the prophets, nor justice or the recognition and understanding of God's mercies. Our complacency seems to distort or deny the image of God and our ability to see God in others and for others. We seem to hold on to that old Messianic view of those back then, and that is that when the Messiah comes, he will vanquish the Gentiles...or we can say today, God will vanquish those who we view as corrupt...you know who they are, those who do not worship like us, live like us, vote like us, or have wealth like us...God will destroy them and praise us and bless us alone. In our cultural understanding we seem to view God's mercy as money we have earned and profited from when we hear that God's mercy is given to us. In turn, we then become frugal with that mercy. We then only give mercy when those receiving it meet our criteria or standards...or when we can get something for it or profit by it. But Jesus teaches us today that its only when we truly learn that we only profit from God's mercy when we give it away as freely as it has been given to each of us.

Jesus preaches at Nazareth and proclaims, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." The congregation upon hearing this admire Jesus' gracious words but he continues to preach and all of the sudden they want him destroyed...how dare him say these things. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that preaching "allows the risen Christ to walk among his people." A preacher is called to preach the Gospel and that is what preachers do in a sermon when they have done their work and have done things well. In essence, proclaiming the Gospel or proclaiming the Good News lets Jesus loose or as Bonhoeffer says, it as if Jesus walks right down the center isle of the congregation. And, as today's Gospel reminds us, when Jesus walks or talks among the people, well, that's often when the trouble begins, even more so when he preaches. That's when we are called away from our place of privilege and complacency and become offended by what God's grace and mercy truly mean, not just for us, but for all. Jesus preaches at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, and his words are succinct but very gracious and merciful, nonetheless his sermon angers and offends so much that the congregation wanted to kill the preacher...I pray that is not the case today.

Whether we like it or not, when we associate our will as God's will, may we then understand that God's will is merciful and gracious, not to just us, Jesus' hometown folks, but to all who are not like us. Today, through God's mercy and grace we are gathered. And in this gathering is the body of Jesus Christ, God's Holy Apostolic Church. We are gathered with the sole purpose of being with God, listening to God, learning from God, being judged by God through the very Word and Sacrament that is set before us, and by that we are gracefully empowered by God to be that grace and mercy in the world...out there, not just in here.

We learn today that in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, is not heard by everyone gladly, some heard with resentment and anger. But I pray in this moment that the we truly see the grace of the Good News of Jesus Christ along with the presence of that mercy and grace that is with us in His body and blood...to see the pure grace and mercy that allows us to gather in God's presence this day, to see the mercy that allows us to see God as God really is rather than how we would have God be and act. I pray that the Holy Spirit has opened our hearts and our minds to learn whatever God has willed to teach us. And I pray that God's mercy made known in Jesus Christ would be the verdict that opens God's glorious kingdom to us all.<sup>2</sup>

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>2</sup> Portions of the closing is a prayer by William Willimon. Portions of this sermon are adapted from Willimon's publication: *Pulpit Resource*, January 31, 2010 - Pardon Me While I Offend You with My Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany RC/Pres: 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Luke 4:21-30.