

Luke 4:16-30 ¹⁶ When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ “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 set free those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” ²³ Jesus said to them, “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.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Luke 4:16-30

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“The Courage to Speak Unpopular Truth”

Rev. Amy Terhune

When I put together a plan for worship during this epiphany season, using the prescribed lessons of the lectionary as my guide, I had no idea how things this week were going to go down, or that an Episcopal Bishop was going to become a living embodiment of my sermon title, stirring up a firestorm simply by pleading with the newly inaugurated President to be merciful, but here we are. Half the population is now lauding her as a hero, and the other is lambasting her as political lackey. Having listened to her sermon, I don’t think she said anything that is not biblically and theologically grounded, but I will admit to being uncomfortable using the pulpit of Jesus Christ to call out an individual, even if that person is a powerful public persona like the president.

What is alarming to me is a rise in the last 48 hours of so many people talking about the sin of empathy. Empathy is the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes – to feel their pain, to understand their perspective, to relate to their emotions. In scripture, we are told to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), to love our enemies (Luke 6:27), to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15), to look to the needs of others (Philippians 2:4), and to remember those who are in prison as though we were in prison with them, and those who are being tortured as though we were being tortured (Hebrews 13:3). All of these are calls to empathy. To be sure, empathy can sometimes cause us to lose sight of healthy boundaries. If we take on another’s problems to the point where we enable or harm, rather than help, this can be dangerous. But to close ourselves off to empathy is dangerous as well, because empathy often leads to compassion, which is action-based. In other words, compassion takes action to alleviate the suffering of others. And scripture clearly calls us to compassion. Time and again, the prophets and psalmists describe God as compassionate. Jesus also is described as having compassion for the crowd (like sheep without a shepherd) as well as for the sick or the wayward. The apostle Paul calls followers of Jesus to clothe ourselves with compassion and to have compassion on the

poor, the sick, and the lost. There are two Greek words used most often for compassion. One is *splagchnizomai* (*splangk-N-EE-zom-ah-ee*), and the other is *oiktirmos* (*oyk-teer-MOS*), both of which are translated sometimes as compassionate and sometimes as merciful, indicating an obvious connection between the two. [see <https://biblehub.com/greek/4697.htm> and <https://biblehub.com/greek/3628.htm>.] Friends, whatever else happens, don't let go of your ability to identify with another, to imagine their suffering, to let it move you to act with mercy. If you're afraid of losing yourself, find an accountability partner. But remember that empathetic, compassionate work is the work of Jesus Christ.

In our lesson this morning, Jesus is just beginning his ministry. Jesus has been baptized by John and then driven out into the desert to face the devil's temptations for forty days (more on that when we get to Lent). After going through all of that, he comes home, goes to the synagogue just like always, and is invited to preach. Remember, the Jews beyond Jerusalem at that time would not have had a paid rabbi to preach all the sermons. So, the learned men of the city would share it around each week. Jesus has been gone; he's been through some challenges. I don't know how much the hometown crowd knew about what Jesus had been up to in the weeks prior to this event, but you can be sure they noticed that he wasn't around. So they say: let's hear from Jesus this week—he's been gone awhile. He accepts, reads from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 61: "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 set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of jubilee." His hometown would have known that this was the work of the messiah – to provide for the poor, free people from all kinds of bondage (be it political, economic, physical or spiritual), and reorganize social order consistent with Leviticus 25, which declared that following a series of seven sevens, the 50th year would be a jubilee year of debt forgiveness, freeing slaves, and reallocating land and resources fairly. R. Alan Culpepper explains it like this: "Jesus' first words are electric. He announces that the centuries of waiting on God's blessings have ended. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The words from Isaiah spoke of an anointing by the Spirit, the work of a prophet, and dramatic signs of God's redemption. The townspeople have heard reports of Jesus' teachings elsewhere and might reasonably have expected that if he was a prophet endowed by the Spirit of God, he would favor his hometown with his mightiest works. Thus, they would share in the fame of the prophet from Nazareth...". [from R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, L.E. Keck et al, editors, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg. 106.] They like what he says, the images he highlights from scripture, and so they speak well of him, amazed that the little pipsqueak who stayed behind in Jerusalem when he was 12, and who always had his hand in the air at sabbath school had somehow become a prophet of Yahweh.

But in the end, it became clear that the blessings Jesus promises are not based on geography. The poor, the oppressed, the captives everywhere will find release. Culpepper goes on to write, "the people of Jesus' hometown read the scriptures as promises of God's exclusive covenant with them, a covenant that involved promises of deliverance from their oppressors. Jesus came announcing deliverance, yet it was not a national deliverance but God's promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender or race. When the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' announcement became clear... their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over their joy that God had sent a prophet among them. In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others sharing in the bounty of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it." [from R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, L.E. Keck et al, editors, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg. 108.]

Jesus courageously tells them what they don't want to hear – unpopular truth. "You've got it wrong, friends. This is bigger than you. This is bigger than Israel. This is not nation-building, it's Kingdom-building and they're not the same. This isn't about throwing off Rome, this is about throwing off sin. The only throne I'm interested in is the one within your heart. Your priorities are out of whack!"

Which is true, but is incendiary none the less. Oh boy, are they mad! Insulted! Enraged! They want to hurl him off a cliff, but he passes through the midst of them—not sure exactly how that’s done—and goes on his way. And to the best of my knowledge, he doesn’t go back to Nazareth.

Now all of this begs a question: namely, so what? Why does Luke tell us this story, and what are we supposed to do with it? Well, “...as Dr. Paul S. Rees says, "The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement!" [from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, (IL: Victor Books, 1987), p. 9.] And that's exactly how Jesus treated it. And Jesus' announcement tells us some important information about God, and perhaps gives us some insight into ourselves.

First and foremost, Jesus’ message is one of hope. “Wherever Jesus went, he brought hope. It was his calling-card. He brought hope to the leper, exiled from his home and his community. He brought hope to the paralyzed man who was unable to care for his family. To people who felt worthless, or lost, or broken, or rejected, or beyond saving, Jesus brought the message that God loved them—that they had a purpose in life. To those broken by sin and bad choices, Jesus brought grace, compassionate understanding, and new life. In his birth, Jesus brought hope, not only to his parents, but to shepherds on a hillside and magi from a faraway country. And in Jesus' last moments, when he was dying in agony on the cross, he offered the hope of eternal salvation to the thief dying beside him. The giving of hope framed Jesus’ earthly life.

“In the ancient classic, titled *Inferno*, by Dante, the author imagines that the entrance to Hell is marked by a sign, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Dante can't be far off the mark. Where God is, there is hope. That was the message Jesus came to share with us. [2 ¶s from “Surprise!” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Second, Jesus makes it clear that God works outside the boundaries that human beings draw. God works outside the kosher rules and statutes that guided every facet of existence for the Pharisees and the Sadducees. God works outside the borders that separated Israel from its neighbors. God works outside the walls of the church. God works beyond the limits of time. This is good news...or it should be. But plenty of people are threatened by a God who isn’t manageable.

And yet, I can’t help but point out that life isn’t manageable sometimes. If you’ve ever stood beside the bed of one who is dying, or experienced a relationship falling apart, or watched a loved one spinning out of control due to mental illness or addiction, or been that one yourself, you know. There are some things I just can’t manage. When I look around at the pain and fear of the world, I need to know that God can manage what I can’t. Which means God must be bigger than me. I can’t manage my world if my God is manageable. It’s the great paradox of faith, I suppose.

Back in the early 1980s, Pop Singer ‘Sting’ left the band “the Police” and began a solo career. On his first album, he released a song entitled “Russians”. It drew sharp criticism, and protests at some of his concerts. Why? Listen to some of the words:

*In Europe and in America, there's a growing feeling of hysteria
Conditioned to respond to all the threats and the rhetorical speeches of the Soviets
Mr. Kruschev says 'we will bury you!' I don't subscribe to this point of view
It'd be such an ignorant thing to do if the Russians love their children too
We share the same biology, regardless of Ideology
And what might save us, me and you, is if the Russians love their children too.*

Criticism? For that? Why? Why—because it humanized the Russians. It was so much easier to get things done if we thought of the Russians as a nation of oppressive, communist, God-hating, Stalin-idolizing, Marxists. To suggest that they might love their children—that makes it harder to hate them! And some people found the very thought of Russians capable of loving as threatening.

There is fascinating story that comes out of the D-Day invasion of World War II. Shortly after midnight on June 6th, 1944, elements of our army’s 101st Airborne Division parachuted into the darkness of France. Their mission was to link up with one another, then secure the key bridges and

crossroads for the soldiers who would land on the beaches later that morning. As often happens in war, things didn't go as planned. Heavy cloud cover and poor visibility forced planes to scatter before they reached their drop zones. As a result, soldiers were dropped miles from one another all over the French countryside.

In the early morning darkness and confusion, General Maxwell Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne, found himself all alone in the pitch black. When he spotted another soldier groping his way through the darkness, he demanded the individual identify himself. It was one of his troops, just as lost and frightened as he.

The two were so overjoyed to find each other they put aside military protocol and hugged one another. "It was at that very moment I knew we were going to win the war," said General Taylor. When a general and a private understand that they are one, they can face anything. [from "Saving A Sinking Ship," by Bob Moeller, *Leadership*, Spring 1996, p. 51; as used in "The Dachshund Dilemma" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

That's what Jesus asks us to do—to understand that we're one. We're one humanity—one with the Chinese, whose leaders would just as soon infect our entire internet with viruses and spyware. We share our humanity with the Iranians, whose leaders would just as soon develop the most potent nuclear arsenal in the world. We even share our humanity with radical jihadists, who would just as soon wipe us off the face of the planet. Republicans and democrats, liberals and conservatives, citizens and immigrants, gay and straight and transgender, pro-this and anti-that, neighbors and rivals, co-workers and competitors, siblings and spouses and parents and children—there is so much dissension. The fact that some may have forgotten our common humanity is not an excuse for us to do the same.

I'm going to close today with a reading from Tim Hansel's book "Holy Sweat":

At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. He was out there, sort of like a president. I recognized His picture when I saw it, but I really didn't know Him.

But later when I met Christ, it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike and Christ was in the back helping me pedal. When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable...it was the shortest distance between two points.

I don't know just when it was that He suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since. When Christ took the lead, He knew delightful long cuts up mountains and through rocky places, and at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, He said, "Pedal!"

I worried and was anxious and asked, "Where are you taking me?" He laughed and didn't answer and I started to learn to trust. I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I'd say, "I'm scared", He'd lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance and joy. They gave me their gifts to take on my journey, our journey, my Lord's and mine.

And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away; they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did, to the people we met and I found that in giving, I received and still our burden was light.

I did not trust Him at first, in control of my life. I thought He'd wreck it, but He knows bike secrets – how to make it bend to take sharp corners, jump to clear high rocks and fly to shorten scary passages.

And I'm learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places. I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breezes on my face with my constant companion, Christ. And when I'm sure I just can't do any more, He just smiles and says, "PEDAL!" [8 ¶s from <https://christeien.com/2023/05/15/the-road-of-life/>]

Amen.