

Epiphany 4C  
Peace, Seattle  
February 3, 2019  
Luke 4:21-30, 1 Cor 13

## **PART 2: THE CONFRONTATION AND THE OUTCOME**

In the first half of our gospel story, which we heard last week, we learned that Jesus had just started taking his mission public when he came to Nazareth to deliver a sermon to his home congregation.

When his time comes to preach, he's given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and reads these words from the 61st chapter:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's Jubilee.

**By the time he takes his seat, Luke says, THE EYES OF ALL IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE FIXED ON HIM. And into that expectant silence Jesus declares:**

**TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.**

Last week I invited you to imagine with me how the circumstances and geography in which Jesus lived his life up to this point may have shaped what he understood his mission—his calling—to be.

- His training as a craftsman under his father Joseph in Nazareth.
- Their proximity to the city of Sepphoris, which was being rebuilt by Herod Antipas and designated as that region's new capital.

**THIS WEEK, we get** (as Paul Harvey used to say) **the rest of the story...**

When the congregation in Nazareth hears Jesus say: TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED, their first reviews trend positive:

HEY, they say, THAT'S JOE'S BOY....AND AIN'T HE DOING US PROUD!

**But then Jesus—perhaps not convinced the congregation has caught the song beneath his words—starts spelling things out in no uncertain terms.**

DOUBTLESS, he tells them, YOU WILL SAY, 'DO HERE ALSO IN YOUR HOMETOWN THE THINGS WE HEARD YOU DID AT CAPERNAUM.'

In other words, 'YOU DID MIRACLES FOR THEM—BUT DON'T WE DESERVE AS MUCH AND BETTER? AFTER ALL WE ARE YOUR PEOPLE, AND LOVE BEGINS AT HOME, DON'T YOU KNOW.'

With the mercury rising, Jesus cites story after story of how God's servants brought power and healing to bear beyond the boundaries of hometown, beyond the boundaries of home religion, beyond boundaries of home country.

**In short he tells his fellow Nazarenes: THE MISSION I'M ON WON'T BE WALLED IN OR CUT DOWN TO FIT THE SIZE OF YOUR LIMITED IMAGINATION! And that message? That doesn't go over well.**

**The initial nods of approval turn into shouts of HOW DARE HE! And in short order the home crowd is ready to drive Jesus out and hurl him over a cliff.**

**“Oh, the house of denial has thick walls and very small windows,” writes Mary Oliver, “and whoever lives there, little by little, will turn to stone...” Or, in this case, take up stones.**

**In her book, The Company of Strangers, Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story:**

“Several years ago,” she writes, “I attended a weekend retreat with about 70 other people, where the opening exercise was to tell a story about someone who had been Christ for us in our lives. After we thought about it a little while, some people got up to tell their stories to the whole group.

- There was one about a friend who stayed put through a long illness while everyone else deserted,
- and another one about a neighbor who took the place of a father who self-destructed.

“One after the other, they were stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue. The conference room turned into a church, where we settled into the warmth of each other’s company. Jesus our friend was there with us and all was right with the world...

**“Until [that is] this one woman stood up and said,  
‘The first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was,  
“Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?””**

“She burst our bubble,” writes Taylor, “but she was onto something vitally important that most of us would be glad to forget: namely, that the Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us. The Christ is also the one who challenges and upsets us, telling us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up.”<sup>1</sup>

**This is the Christ we come face to face with in today’s gospel.**

I don’t know about you, but when that kind of truth comes my way I’m awful quick to throw up walls. But as Mary Oliver reminds us, WALLS not only separate people from each other, they damage the souls of those who erect them.

“Christ is the one who tells us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up,” says Taylor, [and] “if you don’t believe that, maybe it’s because you have not recognized Christ in some of the offensive people God has sent your way. Not all of them, mind you, but some of them—people sent to yank our chains and upset our equilibrium so we do not confuse our own ideas of God with God.”<sup>2</sup>

During this Season of Light Christ calls us to follow him beyond our walled enclaves, beyond our personal or communal entrenchments, and that’s no easy walk.

St. Paul speaks this kind of tough love for the first 11 chapters of his first letter to Corinth, pointing out in every conceivable way how far off the gospel road that community has gone.

He then gives them a new image in which to see themselves—the image of one Body with many members, all related, each with an important function, each valuable and deserving of honor.

**And finally Paul lands here in the 13th chapter, which is where he’s been heading all along.**

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Company of Strangers*. (Cambridge: Cowley, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

YOU CAN HAVE THE MOST BRILLIANT IDEAS, THE MOST SCINTILLATING INSIGHTS, AND EVERY KIND OF SPIRITUAL GIFT THERE IS, Paul says, BUT IT WON'T AMOUNT TO A HILL OF BEANS IF YOU DON'T HAVE LOVE.

Every other gift will have its day and then be done, and even life itself will one day end. But LOVE—the love with which God loves us in Jesus—THAT love abides, outlasting everything else.

This LOVE, as elusive as it can be in our marriages and families and friendships, is worth striving for, worth setting our minds toward, even if we never quite attain it.

For the good news is God has already embodied that love in Jesus. Love that's tough and tender; love that challenges and soothes. Love that calls us beyond lesser loyalties. Love that never ends.

Love that expansive is hard to accept, so we try to build hedges around it, put boundaries around it. After all, in the end people really should get what they deserve, shouldn't they? And how can that happen if God in Christ loves us indiscriminately?!

**The love we see embodied in Jesus offends us. So we keep trying to put limits on it. The love Jesus lived took him to the cross. And we're still trying to get our heads and our hearts around what that could mean for us.**

In our baptism, through the Word, and at the Table, Christ calls us today a more mature faith; to a way of being in conversation and community with those we'd just as soon throttle than listen to.

He challenges us to put an end to childish ways. And we're still trying to figure out what that looks like.

We see now in a mirror dimly, says Paul, but one day we will see face to face; one day we will know completely, even as we have been completely known.

Now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.