

“Jesus the Preacher”

“In the beginning was the word. In the present, the word still is.” These were the closing sentences to last week’s sermon ... a message that strongly affirmed the Scriptures as the vessel containing the source of power to create, to transform, and to reveal the very presence of God. Also, the message affirmed that the word of God is what has brought us all together. The word of God is why we are here today. And the word of God is what holds us together. As people of faith, we are people of the word. We are called by God to listen ... then to do what we have been told.

Listening then doing is not easy. Since the time of creation ... from the time of Abraham to Jesus ... then by his disciples and through the historical mothers and fathers of faith ... right up to the present ... the word of God is the one true source of revelation by which God makes Himself known. God commands us to read ... to listen ... to interpret. Once we have done what we’ve been told, then the word of God is in us and we are never the same. The word will not leave us alone. Just as the word gathers and confirms us as God’s people, it also judges and criticizes us ... calls us to *be* more ... to *be* different than we would be without the word. One of the reasons we gather for worship each week is to be confronted ... antagonized by that word ... that life-giving, world-provoking power of the word.

In fact, from the Gospel lessons from Luke, last week’s and this week’s, we read where Jesus returns for a preaching engagement in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. He preaches from a text in Isaiah, saying in essence that this prophetic Scripture was not a dead letter ... but that even today it was lively and active, powerfully at work, and fulfilled in their hearing. What was the response to Jesus’ sermon? At first, the congregation is quite positive. People chirp about what a good preacher Jesus is ... that his sermon is “very meaningful” ... that they are pleasantly surprised to hear such eloquent and wise words pouring from Jesus’ mouth --- after all, he is “Joseph’s son; they know his family.” But eventually the service turns ugly and the congregation becomes angry and threatens to throw Jesus off a cliff! The word touched some nerves!

In this synagogue scene in Nazareth, Luke is giving us a template, a foreshadowing ... a master plot of the whole gospel. Jesus’ message is the familiar one that Israel had come to know and love ... that God brings good news, release, freedom, and healing to the people ... no problem with that message! However, what turns out to be offensive is the discovery that this “good news” embraces not only the Israelites but all people ... people Israel had left out ... like the poor, women, sinners, and pagans (Gentiles).

What turns the Nazareth congregation ugly is Jesus’ reminder that God’s work on behalf of outsiders is also biblical. When questioned, Jesus turns to the scriptures and gives two examples of God’s saving work outside Israel’s borders: Elijah’s ministry in Zarephath (I Kings 17:1-16) and Elisha’s healing of a Syrian (II Kings 5:1-14). The reasons why I said this lesson foreshadows what is to come, is because time and time again in his ministry, Jesus will act out this commitment to outsiders (i.e. tax gatherers, lepers, prostitutes).

And there is more! The outrage in Nazareth is not just because God loves outsiders. There is an additional problem. And that problem is the resentment toward the wideness of God’s love ... a love that can create barriers between God and God’s own people. For the people of Nazareth, the thought that a prophet’s work is just as important for people considered outside the covenant as for those in the covenant is blasphemy. They resist the very idea that the prophet would speak of others being loved by God, as much as God loved them. In turn, such jealousy about God’s mighty works to outsiders poisons the possibility of God working for insiders. Self-righteousness erects a barrier between God and God’s people. Thus they didn’t recognize Jesus or accept his message which is obvious when Jesus’ neighbors take him to the edge of town to hurl him off a cliff.

The United States Secret Service, responsible for guarding the integrity of our nation’s currency, has time-tested ways of training its agents to recognize counterfeit bills. There are many tricks of the counterfeit-hunter’s trade, but what they all come down to is this: the Secret Service trains its agents not by teaching them how to look for the real things. Agents who have become thoroughly familiar with every characteristic of a genuine bill have little problem spotting a counterfeit. The people of Nazareth were so busy looking for counterfeits they were unable to recognize the real thing ... Jesus ... even when he was standing in their very presence. What barriers do we erect between ourselves and God that prevent us from seeing, hearing, experiencing the wideness of God’s love and mercy?

What is radical, what is offensive about Jesus and his message is that God's love extends to those perceived by the Israelites as being outside God's covenant with them. However, whatever they may think, Jesus the preacher patterns his ministry after Elijah's ministry to a widow who was not of Israel and after Elisha's ministry of healing a soldier who was a foreigner. Jesus reached out to touch and heal those whom Israel excluded. This is why his ministry aroused hostility and opposition! This is why Jesus was crucified. The wideness of God's love does not exclude any of God's children, because we are all God's children.

Newspapers several years ago carried the story of a reporter covering the war in Sarajevo. It happened that a little girl walking on the street right in front of him was severely wounded by sniper fire. Before the reporter could react, a man scooped up the little girl and was pleading with the reporter to drive them to the hospital. "You have a car," the man begged. "Please won't you take us to the hospital?" What could the reporter do? Without hesitating, he loaded them into the back seat of his car and sped off. After a minute or two, the man said urgently, "Please hurry; she is still living!" The reporter drove faster. A few minutes later, the man in the back seat said, "Hurry, please, my little girl is still breathing!" The reporter sped on. Yet a few minutes later, the man said, "Hurry, please, my little girl is still warm." Soon they pulled up to the hospital, but alas, the little girl was pronounced dead. The man and the reporter went into the restroom together to wash the child's blood from their hands. "Now comes the hardest part," said the man. "What is that?" asked the reporter. "Now I have to go and find that little girl's father and tell him she is gone." The reporter was stunned. "But I thought you were the father! I thought she was *your* child!" The man replied, "Aren't they all our children?" I believe that statement expresses well the wideness of God's love

We need to honor the wideness of God's love. Chardin writes, *It is impossible to love Christ without loving others, and it is impossible to love others without moving nearer to Christ.* Jesus Christ honored all people as human beings, as children created by God and loved by God. Everyone is unique. Groups of people are different. In Jesus Christ, we see and hear that "love respects difference." In Jesus Christ, we see and hear that human need and response to that need rises above differences. In Jesus Christ, we see and hear what it means and requires to *be* the Body of Christ, the church.

If differences drive us or motivate us in ministry, then division surely follows. Whether over issues or opinions or interpretation of scripture or political positions, when focused on the differences, the real need goes unnoticed. Jesus, somehow, was able to move beyond cultural differences, differences in religious practices, and boundaries dividing the races. Jesus saw behind the person's mask; he penetrated the hardness of hearts; and he spoke the word of God with authority and power ... the word that healed the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the poor, ... the word that freed the soul from the prison of guilt and paralysis of despair ... the word that truly changed people's lives and brought them peace ... the word we seek ... the word we need. Thank God that the wideness of God's love is wide enough to include you and to include me.

Love respects difference. On an early morning in early December several years ago, someone threw a rock through the window of a home in Newtown, Pa. It was the third day of Hanukkah, and the home belonged to the Markovitz family. The vandal reached into the broken window, grabbed the electric menorah inside, and smashed it to the ground. The people in the neighborhood were pained that a hate crime could happen in their community ... fearful that it foreshadowed greater violence. One neighbor, a Christian woman by the name of Margie Alexander decided to do something about it. She went from home to home visiting her Christian friends and explaining what they could do to show support for the Markovitz family. Within a few days, on the next-to-last day of Hanukkah, twenty-five Christian homes displayed brightly burning menorahs in their windows. The vandals never returned, and as the lights burned on, barriers between people were broken down and love overcame hate ... at least for a while.

Political positions ... prejudices ... hate ... self-righteousness ... fear ... cultural differences ... blame ... judgments: these are all like jersey walls that separate us from people God loves. Herbert's poem "Evensong" underscores the strength and accessibility of this love: *My God, thou art all love. Not one poor minute scales thy breast, but brings a favor from above; And in this love, more than in bed, I rest.* Just think what the people of Nazareth missed because they wanted Jesus to be theirs and no one else's. As Christians, we have the mission of tearing down walls and allowing Jesus to work among us. Because Jesus reconciles us to God by dying for our sins, we are called to be reconciled to each other ... due to the plain truth that we are all encompassed by such great love. Amen.