

SERMON: “When Jesus Went from Preaching to Meddling”

January 31, 2010

PRAYER: O God of boundless merciful, you sent your Son Jesus to proclaim your kingdom and to embody your reign of love, not just in some far-off future, but today, here and now. Grant now that by the same Spirit that inspired the writers of scripture, we, too, may be inspired to receive your word in faith, that by the power of your Spirit, we, too, may share in Christ’s work of bringing good news to the poor, comfort to the brokenhearted, and liberty to the oppressed. In his name we pray and live. Amen.

OT LESSON: Isaiah 49:5-6

NT LESSON: Luke 4:14-30

When was the last time a sermon gave you “heart burn”? I don’t mean just made you squirm in the pew, but gave you a serious case of theological heart-burn, like John Marshall’s infamous “*Baptized By Fire Chili*”? You don’t need to answer out-loud. Just think about it for a moment. Have you ever heard a sermon that left you so angry you wanted to tear a hymnbook in two?

As far as I know, I’ve never preached a sermon that got that kind of response. I occasionally get an email taking me to task for something I said or did, but not very often, and never in a threatening or angry tone. A number of years ago, we did get a call at the church from someone who asked if there was a McSween here as pastor. When the secretary said there was, the man threatened to burn the church down.

I know a number of ministers who have had members walk out in the middle of sermon, or slam a hymnbook shut as they stormed out of the choir loft. In fact I know one timid young minister who had that happen during his first sermon at a church in California...and at the end of the sermon the congregation gave him a standing ovation. Talk about a mixed reception. And I know a good many ministers who, as a result of sermons they preached during the explosive days of the Civil Rights Movement, were driven out of their churches or threatened. For some reason a lot of them ended up, at least for a while, in Kentucky. Most of my best friends there were refugees from Mississippi.

One of the preachers whose first sermon nearly got him killed was a guy named Jesus. Last week Buz told you the first part of the story of Jesus’ first sermon back home in Nazareth. Today, I’ll tell “the rest of the story.”

To set the scene—Jesus had been preaching and teaching in the region around Galilee. Word had gotten back to his home town of Nazareth about the crowds that were flocking to hear his words and to be healed by his touch. Now Jesus was coming home for a visit, and he had been invited to preach in the synagogue. His family and friends would be able to see for themselves if what they were hearing about their home-town boy was really true.

All eyes were focused on Jesus as he stood to read scripture. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. For his text that morning he turned to words from the 61st chapter of Isaiah--words we used as our call to worship this morning.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty the oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Jesus says, in effect, that is who I am and that is why I have come to you. I am the one anointed by the Spirit of God to set people free and make them whole. **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today!** So far so good.

Luke says, “**All spoke well of him and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.**” Can’t you imagine people throughout the synagogue turning to one another with warm smiles, nodding their heads in agreement? There may even have been an “amen” or two from the back corner. “He reads scripture so well. He speaks with such authority as he read the prophet’s words. I’m so proud of our boy! Look at Mary, she’s beaming, and Joseph, too.”

Then suddenly something happens. Almost in mid-sentence, as if were, the story takes an ominous turn. The smiles give way to sullen stares. Admiration turns to anger. The crowd of admiring friends and neighbors suddenly turns into a lynch-mob. Jesus has barely gotten two illustrations into his sermon before the people are ready to throw him off a cliff. His first sermon back home in Nazareth has caused such “heart burn,” that his friends and neighbors are out to kill him.

What’s that all about? Even the worst sermon I’ve ever preached didn’t trigger that kind of explosion. Or maybe, I’ve never preached a sermon **good** enough to get that kind of reaction, which is more likely the case.

Marva Dawn, in her challenging book on worship, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, has a chapter entitled “Worship Ought to Kill Us.” In it she begins by saying, “I wish this chapter’s title could be more startling.” Marva Dawn goes on to say,

In a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God’s Word, rightly read and heard will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness....Once worship kills us, we are born anew to worship God rightly.¹

I would never put it that bluntly. I’m a Presbyterian, not a Lutheran, you know. But there is a disturbing amount of truth in what she says, which may begin to help us understand what happened that Sabbath day in Nazareth.

Luke says that the people “**wondered at his gracious words**” and said to themselves, “**Is not this Joseph’s son?**” Isn’t that’s Joe’s boy, whom we’ve known since he was kid? Then suddenly Jesus turns and says to them, “**Doubtless you will quote to me the proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself'; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.**”

Here it seems that something has been left out of the story. There is a disconnect. Does Jesus know what is in their hearts? Can he see in their faces how short-lived will be their admiration when he “goes from preaching to meddling,” as we might say.

I suppose our nearest equivalent to the proverb “Physician, heal yourself,” would be something like, “**Charity begins at home.**” It seems that what the congregation in Nazareth was saying to Jesus was, “Look, if you really are the one anointed by God, the Christ, do some great, unforgettable miracle among us. After all, we are your own people, your own flesh and blood. What you did over there in Capernaum, do here and now for us. After all, you are one of us. You owe it to us, you know.”

But Jesus refuses! He refuses to be owned or controlled or pressed into the service of anyone, **except the Lord God alone**. Jesus will fulfill his ministry in complete obedience to God, and yet for that very reason, he will exercise his ministry in complete freedom from the pressures of others, even those nearest and dearest to him.

Time and time again in his gospel, Luke will sound the theme of the **sovereign freedom of Jesus Christ**. Jesus exercises his ministry in the perfect freedom which comes from complete obedience to God

alone. Jesus is one with us, but he is not just one of us. He is not ours to use as we see fit, to do our bidding. We do not have Jesus simply because we wear the name “Christian.” He has us. In his servant ministry, Jesus is free to be for all people, not just those on his “home team.” He is also free to be with and for those who quite literally “don't have a prayer,” those whom we wrongly assume are outside the embrace of his love.

It seems that one of the things that happened at Nazareth was that Jesus reminded his family and friends in no uncertain terms of the stunning “**wideness of God's mercy.**” God's love is not limited to the little circle we draw around ourselves and those whom we love. God's grace reaches out to a hated Syrian general and a poor pagan woman in Zarephath. It is wider than the measure of our minds, wider than the sea.

That's not what the congregation at Nazareth had come to hear from their home-town boy. It seemed to them that he went from preaching to meddling when he suggested that God has always been at work in ways that defy our expectations. The people of God are not just chosen to be the God's favored pets, but to be “**a light to the nations,**” all the nations, so that **God's “salvation may reach the ends of the earth.”**

That has been true from the call of Abraham on. The Lord declares to Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...and by you **all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**” (Gen 12:2-3) All of them!

The same is true for us as the Church of Jesus Christ. God has called and claimed us as his own. But, that does not mean that we have a monopoly on God. God is not in the business merely of upholding our values, or defending our institutions, or supporting our causes. God has called us to be a witness to all the world to the “wideness of God's mercy.”

During the American Civil War an ardent supporter of the abolition of slavery once said to Abraham Lincoln, “Mr. President, isn't it wonderful that the Lord is on our side!” To which Mr. Lincoln replied, “No, the issue is not whether the Lord is on our side, but whether we are on the Lord's side.” That's what matters.

Even though we bear the name "Christian," even though we belong to the Church of Jesus Christ, we do not "have Jesus," as if he were under *our* control. His love is not limited by any of the boundaries of race and class and nation and ideology we draw. He is free to be for us, and, if need be, free to stand against us. There are times when in his love his must “put to death our selfishness,” as Marva Dawn says, ‘so that we may be born anew to worship” and serve God rightly.

That he does in his first sermon in Nazareth. When the congregation of friends turns angry, Jesus doesn't back off. He doesn't retreat into vague generalities the way I too often do. If anything, he throws fuel on the fire. “**Truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.**” Prophets are unacceptable to those who know them best because they remind us of things we already know but fail to practice. Prophets set before us the will of a just and holy God, and challenge us to live up to what we profess. No wonder we name streets in honor of the prophets only after their disturbing voices have been silenced.

To friends and neighbors gathered to hear the first sermon of their home-town boy, Jesus sets before them two stories from their own beloved scriptures of how the great prophets **Elijah** and **Elisha** were both sent to ones outside Israel.

In truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when there was a severe famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them, except to a widow at Zarephath, in the (Gentile) land of Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman, the Syrian.

That's when the whole place exploded in rage! They had come to hear a nice, uplifting little sermon from their home-town boy. They had not come to have their faith challenged by a vision of God's compassion wider than their hearts could hold. Luke says,

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put Jesus out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him headlong.

People, then and now, who are committed to the proposition that God is on their side find it more than a little difficult to make room in their hearts for a God whose love embraces all people. More than a few in the synagogue that day must have wondered, "What good is it being a Jew, if the Lord loves gentiles and pagans, too, and even a Syrian terrorist like Naaman!" And sometimes we, too, wonder the same thing: what good is it being a Christian, if "God so loved **the world**," for Christ's sake?" The whole bloody world.

What it comes down to is this. In Jesus Christ God has made known his love in a way that can never be surpassed. But God's love in Jesus is not limited to those who think they have some special claim on him. As the psalmist insists, "**The Lord is good to all, and God's compassion is over all that he has made.**" Over all, for Christ's sake!

The love of God is not limited by any of the labels we put on people, or the walls of division we build. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus goes to the heart of the matter,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:44-45)

God's love in Jesus Christ is "wider than the sea." God's compassion is over all God has made. The gospel calls us to see the world through new eyes. And the Holy Spirit empowers us to view all of life through the eyes of Christ, whose love is "broader than the measure of our minds." And so we cannot rest content with any of our narrow little prejudices, or any of our attempts to harness Jesus to our own agendas. He has promised to keep pushing and prodding and challenging and disturbing us to care as widely as he cares, so that, even through us, "the wideness of God's mercy" may be made known, here and now, **today**, on earth as in heaven. If that gives you "heart burn," sorry—that's just the way it is under the sovereign Lordship of Jesus Christ, to whom be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and for ever more. Amen.

i. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995), pp. 205-206.

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