

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For today's message, we need a review of Last Sunday's gospel...where Jesus goes into the temple of his hometown and reads a passage from Isaiah.

As a reminder, here it is again: "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 let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It is a familiar passage to those who hear it, and some of them are absolutely certain that they know what it means: that in God's good time, the Messiah will come to deliver them from the oppression of Rome and set them free as the privileged people of God. And here is a familiar face telling them this...a wandering rabbi come back home to the young adults who he grew up with, and to the older adults who are their parents and watched them all grow up together.

When he is done, he takes his seat and everybody looks at him, hoping that he will comfort them with an interpretation. Then he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

His hearers are shocked, surprised, even delighted. A ripple of murmurs moves through the congregation like a ripple through a pond: Jesus, the hometown boy, is saying that the day of deliverance has arrived! Before sunset, the Roman soldiers will be gone and they, the people of Nazareth, will walk the streets as a free people with God as their only king. Hallelujah!

Well, that was all in last week's reading, and this Sunday's continues on directly from there. Jesus raises his voice again. He expects they will ask him to do in Nazareth great deeds such as he did in Capernaum. After all, Nazareth is a proper Jewish community...while Capernaum, on the other hand, has more than its share of Gentiles. If he has been a busy do-gooder in Capernaum, then certainly he owes as much and more to the people of his old home town, who knew him back when he was Joseph and Mary's little boy.

The mystery to us today is two fold: First, within the lines appointed for today, Jesus moves quickly from being the local boy welcomed home to barely able to escape his hometown with his very life...all by virtue of what he tells them...which remains, on the surface, unclear to us today. And the second mystery, as usual, is what this passage really means for us today. In other words, why and what should we care that Jesus was run out of his hometown 2,000 plus years ago?

Instead of working a miracle in their presence, Jesus tells them that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." That he has read their hearts...that they are governed not by the grand designs of God, but by their own sense of entitlement. Their vision extends no further than taking care of their own. And, by now, the crowd mood is changing, and Jesus keeps talking...reminding them of two stories that they know well, stories from their history.

One of them is about Elijah the prophet during a time of drought and famine. It is not safe for Elijah to seek help from his own people because all of them are worshipping a false god by order of their king who has put a price on the head of Elijah. So the Lord sends Elijah to Zarephath....a Gentile widow, a poor outsider. She may be a Gentile, she may be poor, but unlike Elijah's own people, she recognizes and respects him as a true prophet of God.

The second story is worse. Naaman the Syrian is not only a Gentile, but he is an enemy army commander whose forces have just defeated Israel. And yet, when he comes, however reluctantly, to the prophet Elisha, seeking recovery from his skin disease, he ends up cured by the power of God. Like the widow from Zarephath, he knows a true prophet when he encounters one, and he confesses his faith in the God of Israel.

As identified last week, the mission and ministry of Jesus is to shake things up...and he is doing so in a serious way with his hometown congregation...warning them. Warning them not to assume that the way they see it is the way God sees it. Gentiles in Capernaum welcome Jesus as a prophet, but it may be that his hometown neighbors cannot do that because their pre-dispositions make it impossible for them. And the hometown folks explode in rage, ready to kill him, but he gets away and heads back to Capernaum where he gets a better reception because the hearts of those listeners are not closed, where his voice is heard with authority, and his teaching reaches into and touches them.

This story repeats itself time and again in the history of the people of God. The community of the chosen enjoy special privileges, but do not get what God is about at some essential moment. The Zarephath widow and Naaman the enemy general keep appearing over the centuries....people that are outside the inner community, yet they recognize the touch of God's fingerprints on their lives.

Where today do we see the church behaving like the old neighbors of Jesus? Where today do we see people outside an in-group, people like Naaman and the Zarephath widow, knowing the physical presence of God when they see one, welcoming some small scrap of good news and new life, setting to shame those who think that they have it all figured out?

Jesus came to bring a message of good news to the Jews, but also for Gentiles...for all people..not just inside the expected and customary boundaries. And, as then, so it is for us. There is no question that it is easier for us, as the people of this parish, if we just keep our faith to ourselves....or, if we absolutely had to, shared it with others who look and sound and live just as we do. The carbon copies of the people who are sitting around you this morning.

One could do that in this community, in say...1965. Families went to church then. I would guess that this parish was absolutely packed for Christmas and Easter services then. We had the Ten Commandments carved in stone and placed in the yards outside of our municipal buildings then. Stores were closed on Sunday mornings, and Good Friday was either an official or unofficial holiday so that effectively government offices were closed, as were the bars and taverns and liquor stores.

The past is another world, and this is a new world we are living in. And, even though we are theoretically getting used to it, it is still easy to see the threat of the new. Think of the people of Nazareth. It was upsetting and scary to think that God was going to do something as radical as include Gentiles as His covenant people.

St. Paul wrote “There is neither Jew nor Greek...in Jesus Christ.” But it took the Church decades to understand what Jesus was saying...that the un-circumcised...meaning Gentiles...could be part of God's people. Strange people..those Gentiles...people who did not need to keep the kosher food laws or ceremonies of Israel.

The next part of his sentence....”there is neither slave nor free”... took another eighteen hundred years before Christians began to act in earnest to live into this vision of inclusiveness. And, as for the rest....“There is neither male or female, but all are one in Jesus Christ”....some churches still have not followed. There should not be division by race or background or gender. The Church of God is not a private club with membership limited to Jews only, to whites only, to men only, to straights only, to the highly able only.

In the Christian life, there is a prevailing dichotomy that appears nowhere else on the planet. For on the one hand, it is not about us at all. This ministry we share in the world as a Christian Church is not about us, it is about others. St. Augustine said that “the Church is the only club in the world that exists for people who are not yet members of it.” Yet, like the congregation in Nazareth, we are naturally inclined to wonder, “What about us, if it is not about us but is about others?”

And yet, on the other hand, it IS all about us. It is entirely about us. When you come forward this morning to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, you will be reminded again that it is all about us...all about you. The bread will be placed in your hand with the words that have been spoken to Christians throughout the ages: The Body of Christ, broken for you. You. Not for the masses, not for the multitudes, not for others...but for you.

Jesus shakes things up...saying it is about others, and it is about us as well. It is about a God whose mercy is so great that everyone needs to know...and it is about time that we, as the greater church, got around to it.

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