



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 4:16-30

January 26, 2025

Family Conversations

Today's gospel lesson is a fascinating drama that moves from highs to lows in a few short verses. Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and spoke in the synagogue, much to the delight of the local congregation. He boldly announced it was a time for good news to the poor, release to the captives, and a year of the Lord's favor. All who heard him were amazed at the power and authority clearly present in Joseph's son. He was a hometown celebrity. In addition, Jesus' reputation had preceded him. They knew he'd done wonders in other cities. Wouldn't he save his best work for them?

Jesus knew what they were thinking. He even said to them, "Doubtless you will say 'Do here the things that we heard you did at Capernaum.'" But then he pivoted and said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Jesus wasn't interested in providing favors to the in-crowd, even his own in-crowd. His ministry would focus on expanding the circles of God's grace, of healing those on the margins and welcoming home the prodigals. So next he told his audience two stories from their own religious history. He told about the widow of Zarephath, a Gentile, whom Elijah cared for, and about Naaman the Syrian, another Gentile, whom Elisha healed.

None of that was what the synagogue crowd wanted to hear. So they tried to kill Jesus. They'd rather destroy the hometown boy than listen to God speak through him about a grace and love that extended beyond their private community. Their reaction shouldn't surprise us because it is a common human one - this sense of "us vs. them." It has existed for thousands of years. Think back to the ancient days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In that world of polytheism in which hundreds of gods were worshiped, a new religious understanding took root. It was revealed that there was only one true God, the maker of heaven and earth - a God who rescued the Hebrew people from slavery, who established a covenant with them and led them to freedom. But from the very beginning there remained a troubling tension: If monotheism is true, if there is only one God, then what about the people who don't worship this God? Are they recipients of God's favor or outcasts to be shunned at all costs? Is God's love just for "us" or also for "them"?

This tension is still with us today. Honestly, it is what we've seen blatantly lived out in Washington this past week. Some politicians would have you believe the world is fundamentally a zero-sum place. They preach that our success is dependent on someone else's failure; that America only becomes great if others are diminished, demeaned, and penalized. For them, compassion and compromise are signs of weakness; in this world they believe there is only the dominant and the dominated, winners and losers.¹

Long ago on that day in the synagogue, Jesus challenged this misguided insistence on religious “winners vs. losers.” Jesus announced in Nazareth that, yes, God loves God’s covenant people, but God’s love extends beyond Israel to all the lands. God’s light has shone on people in the shadows – the widow of Zarephath, the leper of Syria. Jesus set before them a foundational question of all life: Can we worship a God who loves more broadly than we can imagine? Jesus’ hometown family revealed their response to that question by trying to push him off a cliff.

In truth, the choice to accept Jesus’ message instead of rejecting it isn’t as difficult a move as you might think. To illustrate this, I’d like to tell a story about my father. My dad was a small business owner who always dreamed of owning a farm. So when I was in the 2nd grade, my parents bought a 180-acre farm about 45 minutes south of Kansas City. If you remember the TV show “Green Acres,” you can picture what our farm was like. One night the phone rang and it was a neighbor calling to tell us that someone had been driving too fast on the gravel road west of our property. They had crashed their car into our barbed wire fence and we’d better fix it before any cattle got loose. I was in 7th or 8th grade. My dad told me to get into the truck so we could go check on our fence.

We drove around the farm to the western edge and when we topped a hill, we saw a late-model car with a crunched-up hood slowly trying to make its way up the road. My dad pulled our truck in front of the damaged car, which contained a nervous teenage boy and his date, the daughter of a neighbor. Ahead of us we could see where his car had gone into the ditch and broken several strands of barbed wire in our fence. It was a mess and I wasn’t sure how my dad would react. He slowly walked up to the car, looked in the window and said, “Are you the ones who drove your car into my fence there?” There was a mumbled “Yessir” and a long awkward silence. Then my dad quietly said, “Well, I suppose you need to get out and help me fix this fence.” For the next hour or so, by the light of the truck’s headlights, we stretched the barbed wire and reattached it to the posts as best we could. My dad told the girl he’d be calling her folks to let them know what happened and then he sent the couple on their way.

I’ve thought about that night many times over the years. My dad could have yelled and screamed at those kids; he could have lectured and threatened them or played the victim. But he chose to see that moment as an opportunity to teach them about responsibility and to model that life isn’t a zero-sum game. We’re in this together. We only get through life by taking responsibility for our actions, by fixing what we mess up, and by believing that it’s not just what happens inside our own fences and borders that matters.

Let’s go back to Jesus’ family conversation with the hometown folks in Nazareth. He began with good news of healing, freedom, and God’s favor. He then stretched their worldview by noting that this favor wasn’t just restricted to them, but to all people: Jew and Gentile, people of the covenant and people outside the covenant. The crowd took offense at this. They threw a tantrum and tried to throw him off a cliff. How did Jesus

get away? Scripture doesn't shed any light on this. It simply says, "He passed through the midst of them and went on his way" (Lk 4:30). Jesus didn't duck under a cloak and slip away while they were distracted. Jesus didn't run away, being chased by an angry mob in hot pursuit. Jesus didn't use some supernatural ability to overwhelm his adversaries. Basically, he turned and looked them in the eyes. In that tense moment, they looked at each other and something changed. I'd like to believe that by God's grace, they remembered the common humanity that united them, the shared history of their community that had shaped them, and the mutual faith in one God that called them not to be petty, not to be vindictive, and most importantly not to believe that God's love shared with others meant there would be less love to be showered upon them.

The apostle Paul would constantly reinforce this same message. He traveled around preaching a sermon similar to what Jesus spoke in that Nazareth synagogue – this message of a God whose saving grace is wide enough for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, gay and straight, and all in-between. He wrote to the Corinthians about how there are a variety of gifts in the world, but it is the same Spirit that enlivens us all. There are many languages, cultures, and members in the global village, but ultimately the body is one. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book Braiding Sweetgrass, put it well: The gifts of the earth are all in one bowl, and are to be shared from a single spoon.² In this life we have one bowl and one spoon. The titans of capitalism now seated at tables of power in Washington may argue that such an approach is wildly impractical. But I'm pretty sure that the tweets of billionaires rarely align with the core message of the gospel of Christ.

That's when I remember when my dad quietly leaned in a car window and suggested perhaps the problem before us needed to be solved by working together. I recall the apostle Paul stressing that a body is only healthy when the eye, hand, and foot accept their mutual dependence. And I recall when Jesus' neighbors turned a family conversation into a shouting match, pushing him to the edge of a cliff as they wrongly insisted God's love was a possession to be hoarded and withheld from outsiders. In that moment, Jesus modeled a faithful response. He turned and looked at them. He didn't shout. He didn't curse. He simply walked through the midst of them and showed them a different way. It happened that day outside Nazareth. It happened again on a garden path on Easter Sunday after a stone had been rolled away from a tomb. And it happens today whenever we believe in a love that overcomes our fears of "us vs. them." All that's left for us to do is to follow, together, where he leads. AMEN

¹ Cf. Jamelle Bouie, "Trump's New Favorite President," *New York Times*, January 19, 2025

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, p. 376.