

That First Sermon

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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Sunday, January 31, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 4: 21-30

That first sermon. Probably most pastors can remember his or hers. That first sermon is usually interesting for two reasons. Most preachers preaching for the first time want to show off a little of what they know about God, the church, Jesus, the Bible, epistemology, ecclesiology, eschatology, Christology, and the universe and they try to do that in one twelve to fifteen minute capsule.

I remember my first. It was on "faith" – how's that for plunging into deep theological waters. It was a sermon preached in the style of the late fifties, you know, three points and that inevitable poem. Since I preached my first sermon at 17 years of age, and although it has been a while, I can still remember the poem, or at least a part of it:

Faith is not merely praying upon your knees at night.
Faith is not merely straying from darkness into light.
Faith is not merely waiting for glory that may be.
Faith is the brave endeavor, the splendid enterprise,
The strength to serve whatever conditions may arise.

Doesn't that just stimulate your mind and set your discipleship nerves a twittering?

But what's even more interesting about that first sermon for most pastors is that they tend to be preached in one's own home congregation, among family and long-time acquaintances, with the typical reaction going one of two ways. There are those who will immediately identify you as the offspring of someone in the church. "Oh, yes, that's Betty's boy." (That would be me.) Or, "Yes, isn't that Judy's boy?" (That would be Vicar Tom.) Or, "Is not this Joseph's son?" said in our Gospel of Jesus.

I still get that reaction from some when I return to St. Paul's Lutheran in Lititz; after all, my mother was a life-long member there, taught third grade Sunday school for 35 years, was on the Social Ministry Committee for over 20 and help relocate countless refugees for most of that time.

The other reaction to the local kid preaching goes in the opposite direction, unfortunately. This comes from those who have known the person since they were young, reckless and/or awkward, and know all about his or her behaviors as a child, like my old high school vice-principle who, when he learned that I was going into the ministry, commented that God's grace was very real to him now. "If *he* can preach, God must be pretty powerful." So goes that reaction.

Well, Jesus first recorded sermon was on the Sabbath day in the synagogue in his own hometown and it was, according to all reports, a fairly dismal failure. We read it as our Gospel lesson for today. The meeting room was crowded with his friends and acquaintances all of whom had heard great things about this son of a carpenter turned preacher.

In the passage of scripture right before our reading for today and what was actually our Gospel text last week, Jesus had stood before them and read the stirring words of Isaiah 61:

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.

As a synagogue lector, he was apparently a big hit, for it says, "All spoke well of him." And if he had sat down then, he would have had the admiration and praise of everyone in the place. But according to Jewish custom, the person who does the reading, if they are male and of sufficient learning, can comment on the reading. His comments became what is generally considered to be his first sermon.

Now, to better understand just what kind of an effect his message had on his hometown crowd, let me rephrase his words, using a paraphrase written by Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Version of the Bible, written at the time of the civil rights movement in this country, with a little editorializing my me.

"Surely," Jesus said, "some of you will cite to me the old proverb, 'Doctor, take your own medicine. Let us see you do right here in your home town all the things we heard you did in Camp Hill.' Well, to tell the truth, no prophet is welcome in his own hometown. And I'm telling you straight, there were a lot of white widows in Central PA during the time of Elijah, when the skies were locked up for three years and six months, and there was a great drought everywhere, but Elijah didn't stay with any of them. Instead he stayed with a black woman over in Maryland. And there were a lot of sick white people during the time of the great preacher Elisha, but he didn't heal any of them – only Naaman, the Syrian."

As a synagogue lector, he was a hit; but as a synagogue preacher? Well, let's just say they held a congregational meeting right on the spot and voted to throw him off a cliff. How's that for immediate feedback? Where's the Mutual Ministry Committee when you really need it?

So, the question is, what made these people so angry? Well, it's rather simple, and rather dangerous. Pastor Russell Anderson says Jesus was practicing the art of

“creative insecurity,” which is to say that he triggered off the insecurities of the people in a challenge they clearly heard, for he was confronting their image of God.

They thought they had a lock on God’s love and favor; after all, they were the chosen people, were they not? They understood God and what God expected of them. They knew the law, and as far as they were concerned, they were doing all right in the eyes of God.

Then along comes this upstart of a preacher, “Joe’s boy,” challenging the very core of their beliefs. He tells them that their concept of God is too small, too parochial, and he does that with two illustrations from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, both miracles performed not on the good old home team, but on foreigners, on strangers in their land.

And then on top of that, he claims to be the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. And we know the story of how Jesus throughout his ministry offered God’s love to the Gentile as well as the Jew; to the outcasts as well as the establishment; to the unclean, the despised and the rejected, as well as to the respectable and the respected. The good folks of Nazareth knew who was acceptable, who belonged and who didn’t. What Jesus said was dangerous. It allowed the unclean to mix with the clean, the foreigner a place among the favored of the temple, the outcast a seat at the banquet table. He was challenging the most basic assumption they held about God – that the promises of God belong to them and to them alone as the elect people.

That’s why the hometown folks got angry with Jesus. He was challenging them to consider that God was larger than their dimensions of him; so large, in fact, that he could come among them even at that very moment.

Dr. Nelson Trout, seminary professor at Trinity Seminary, former bishop and longtime friend, had a way of reading this text that always got the attention of those who heard him. He would play with his glasses and pretend that he couldn’t quite read the text clearly. Preaching one time in College Station, Texas, in the heartland of America, he read the passage like this: “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but none of them was cleansed except Naaman, the Communist, uh – wait – darn these bifocals! Not Communist, Syrian. I’m sorry.” This was in one of the most conservative towns in America in 1962, when Communism was the number one enemy of J. Edgar Hoover and our worst fear.

Then one time in San Antonio, when he read the lesson, he said, “None of them was cleansed except Naaman, the Mexican, uh – wait – darn these bifocals. Not Mexican, Syrian. I’m sorry.” This was in an all-white church that had managed to exclude those who were not. On both occasions, it was reported that Bishop Trout received the obligatory chuckles, but that if there had been a Congregational Meeting and vote, he would have been the next one led to the cliff.

I wonder what Nelson’s bifocals would see if he were reading this today among us? Which leads me to point one of this sermon for us to ponder today – Jesus’ sermon

claims an inclusivity to the Gospel that we cannot ignore or dispute. God's love is for the world and all men, women and children, regardless of status, race, or lifestyle. God's love and grace know no bounds, and he calls us to be one family in that faith. That's why these doors must always stay open – for the Prodigals returning home from their reckless sojourn in a foreign land, for the outcasts of society who have no place to belong and no people who care for them, for the misfits who rebel, for the consumers who want to know what's in it for them, for the prejudiced, *and* for those who experience their glare – the Gospel challenges our concept of whose in and whose out by proclaiming that all are within God's love and care and, as the church who embodies Christ, we need to be too.

But I think there is a second learning here for us as well. We cannot let our experiences of God, our concept of God, ever be limited in its vision. We cannot let our understanding ever be the completed picture, because God is still at work with and for us. We are not finished products as God's people. And God's church is an ever-evolving missionary society that constantly needs to be open to the proddings and leadings of God's Holy Spirit. We don't claim God, God claims us and we must allow him to continually claim, remake, fashion, and mold us as his people in mission. One of the ways to consider this learning is to believe that your best years are ahead – you, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church; yes, you, your best years are ahead because of the power of the Holy Spirit among you!

You see, this Gospel reading challenges us. Despite our best intentions, we have to confess that the modern church continues still to try to decide who is in and who is out. Those on the inside take pride in their status, and make claims of God's love upon them for their devotion. And when we do that, we forget the words of Jesus today in that first sermon of his, and we forget the life he came to live and model for us, a life of service to all those who need to hear Good News. And this Gospel also challenges us to expand our understanding not only of God, but of how God lives among us, calling us to new mission and ministry in His name and for His sake.

Now, "there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman, the . . ."

I can't quite make out what Nelson's bifocals say. What do you read? How do you understand Jesus' words for us today?

AMEN.

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