

## Cliff Notes

[Text - Luke 4:14-44]

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January 24, 2016

This morning we hear Luke's account of Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth, which takes place soon after his baptism. Initially there's a highly favorable response to Jesus' return, as he announces a new era of Divine Compassion and Grace. Reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Holy One is upon me, and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor! God 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 Season of Divine favor!"

These *are* the signs of God's saving action through which the Messiah [or in Greek, the Christ - the Anointed One] is to be revealed. And how fortunate for the people of Nazareth, that Jesus - their hometown boy - *is* that Anointed One! Luke records that, "All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." To paraphrase Humphry Bogart at the end of *Casablanca*, "This looks like the beginning of a beautiful relationship!" But suddenly, everything drastically changes. Jesus goes from being *commended* by all to being *condemned* by all, run out of town and nearly thrown off a cliff! The critical question for you and me today is "What happened?" And the reason this question is so crucial, is that the answer can help you and me better understand what *we* may encounter, when we faithfully follow the Way of Jesus Christ.

In his first public proclamation in his hometown Synagogue, Jesus reads a passage from the Prophet Isaiah - a passage which offers a concise summary of the Messiah's mission and purpose. As the Messiah, Jesus will pour-out his all to bring Divine compassion and grace to those who need it most: the poor, the captive, the infirmed, and the oppressed. The citizens of Nazareth, like many people in Israel, initially buy into that Messianic Mission-statement. It really does sound like Good news! The problem arises, however, when Jesus goes on to explain that this mission of Good News isn't only for a particular, inner circle of special people. In fact, he makes it clear that those who think they have a "home field advantage" when it comes to receiving Divine blessings, are sadly mistaken.

He reminds them that there were many widows in Israel who suffered from famine in Elijah's day; yet Elijah brought relief to a widow in the *outside* region of Sidon. And though there were many lepers in Israel in need of compassion and healing, Elisha was sent to heal Naaman the Syrian. So, what angers the people of Nazareth is Jesus reminding them that - throughout the history of Israel - God's goodness and mercy comes not only to the "insiders," but also to the perceived "outsiders!" Jesus tells them, and us, that Divine Compassion and Grace is available to all people - yet it must be intentionally extended particularly to the poor and oppressed, the outcast and the outsider. In First Century Judea, as in Twenty-first Century America, there's a tendency to resist and resent that kind of inclusive thinking and extensive welcome.

Jesus is often challenged and attacked because he passionately proclaims that showing compassion for all, is closer to the Divine Desire, than excluding people through picky religious rules and regulations. He is vilified, because he maintains that every person is precious in the eyes of the Holy One - not just those from a particular region or religion. Many religious and political leaders of Jesus' day fear and despise his graciously inclusive message; so they attack that message and try to destroy the messenger. Yet even when that Divine Truth is denounced and the Divine Truth-bearer is crucified, the Divine Reality of Love and Grace cannot be stopped.

The astonishing proclamation of our Faith is that Jesus Christ lived for the sake of all people, died for the sake of all people, and continues to live for the sake of all people! His death isn't because God desires some kind of barbaric, blood sacrifice of atonement. It's because the Holy Source of Life and Love deeply desires that compassion and harmony, wholeness and peace reign throughout the cosmos. And the cost to those who try to help create this Divine Realm of peace and unity can be tremendously high. Yet as Christ's Resurrection reveals, the Divine Source of Life and Love will always have the final word!

So...here are a few things this might mean for us today. If you and I truly want to serve and grow as children of the Holy One, then we must allow the Holy Spirit to increase our faith, expand our vision, and embolden our hearts. If this congregation wants to continue to evolve as the living, loving Body of Christ, then we must be willing to broaden and deepen our ministries of outreach and compassion. If people in this country want to claim that this is a "*Christian* Nation" [which, Constitutionally, it is not], then they must at least try to emulate Jesus Christ: by bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, healing to the afflicted, and welcome the so-called "outsiders"!

In the Divine Realm, there *are* no "outsiders"! This is why the Heart of the Holy One probably beats more passionately for the poor and suffering Syrian refugee, than for those comfortable and complaining American politicians who want to keep them out of our country. And the argument that we must first "protect and take care of our own" just doesn't cut it; especially when it comes from those who are also arguing that we must cut funding to programs that help protect and take care of our own poorest and struggling citizens!

I think Nancy Rockwell makes a truly powerful and valid point in this morning's Continuing Testament. She writes, "Jesus' words challenge us to hear that he has not come to save us individually, apart from one another; or privately, through our personal belief. He comes for us all, and is revealed in us and through us all, as we reach out to embrace one another's needs."

When Jesus enters the synagogue of his hometown, he comes “to proclaim the Season of Divine favor” - not just for the people of Nazareth or Israel, but for all people. That’s because Divine “favor” shows no “favorites!” It is lavishly bestowed upon us *all*, so that we in turn, can graciously and gladly share it with others. This is the Way of Jesus Christ; this is the Way you and I are called, encouraged, and inspired to live!