

One More Time

[Text - Luke 4:14-44]

Pastor Dave Shackle
June 23, 2019

Last Sunday, as I was greeting people after worship, one of our members [who shall remain unnamed] said to me “Well, Dave, two more Sundays.” I said, “Yep, that’s true!” He then said, “Well I hope you’ve got two more sermons in you!” To which I replied, “You and me both brother!” But here’s the thing: this week, as I thought about that exchange, I realized that I actually didn’t have two *more* sermons in me. As a matter of fact, looking back over the past 15 years here, I recognize that - in a way - I have essentially preached just one basic sermon over and over and over again. Now to be fair, I *have* mixed things-up a bit, so please don’t fire me, or throw me off a cliff. The truth is, that whether I start with David and the Giant Goliath, or Jonah and the Giant Fish, or even James and the Giant Peach, I inevitably end up at the same place. That’s because, from my theological understanding, there’s only one message to proclaim. And that’s the message of the Holy One’s abundant, extravagant, unfailing love for you and me and for all people.

In this morning’s New Testament reading, we hear Luke’s account of what is essentially Jesus’ first [and only] sermon. He delivers it in his hometown of Nazareth, soon after his baptism. Initially there’s a highly favorable response, 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!to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the Season of Divine Favor!”

These *are* the signs of the Holy One’s Active Presence, which are to be revealed through the Messiah - the Anointed One. And how fortunate for the people of Nazareth, that Jesus - their hometown hero - *is* that Anointed One! Luke writes that, “All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But then 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 *question* is “What happened?” And the answer to that question, can help you and me understand what *we* may likely encounter, when we faithfully follow the Way of Jesus Christ.

The passage from the Prophet Isaiah which Jesus reads, gives a concise summary of the Messiah’s message and mission. The Messiah will offer Divine compassion and grace to those who need it most: the poor, the captive, the infirmed, and the oppressed. And the people of Nazareth, like many people in Israel, initially buy into this Messianic Mission-statement. It really does sound like Good news! The problem, however, is when Jesus goes on to explain that this message and mission of Good News isn’t reserved for a particular group of privileged 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 “way off-base”!

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 - Divine compassion and love isn't just for the "insiders," but also for the so-called "outsiders"! Jesus tells them, and us, that Divine love and grace are intended for all people - and that it must be extended particularly to the poor and infirmed, the oppressed and the outcast; and specifically to the foreign "outsider". Of course, in First Century Judea - as in Twenty-first Century America - there's a strong resentment and resistance to that kind of inclusive thinking and extravagant welcome.

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

The one, essential 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 in us for the sake of all people! But we must be clear: Jesus' death isn't the result of God needing or desiring some kind of barbaric, blood sacrifice of atonement. It's because the Divine Source of Life and Love deeply desires that compassion and unity, peace and justice reign throughout the world. And those who try to advance this Divine Realm of unity and peace will often pay an extremely high price. Yet as the Message of Christ's Resurrection maintains, the Divine Source of Life and Love will always have the final word!

So today, in my next-to-final sermon, I once again unapologetically summarize the substance of Christ's Core Message: That as children of the Holy One, you and I are called to open our hearts and boldly reach-out to *all* people. That as the Body of Christ, this congregation is called to increase and broaden its wonderful ministries of compassion and caring.

And finally, that anyone who claims to be a Christian, must actually emulate Jesus Christ: by bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, healing to the afflicted, and welcome to the so-called "outsider". I believe that this is Jesus' essential message. And I am happy to know that this Divine message and mission continues to live and grow and thrive within this remarkable Family of Faith!