

Good News?

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 24, 2016

First Congregational Church, Oshkosh, WI

Luke's story of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth omits something important that Matthew and Mark allude to in their accounts of the same story; it puts something into the story that the other two omit. Is this why, in Luke's account of the event, people eventually chase Jesus out of the Synagogue? Did they invite him to leave because his message was not good news to them? Let's see.

In this story, Jesus comes to Nazareth, it is said *where he had been brought up*, and he goes to the Synagogue as was his custom on the Sabbath. So far, so good. He stands to read the Scripture (traditional practice) and sits down to expound on what he reads (also traditional practice). The scroll that was handed him by the *chazzan* (attendant at the synagogue) was of the prophet Isaiah. The text are references *the year of the Lord's favor*, a concept of debt forgiveness that was to come every fifty years that would relieve the burdens carried by generations of the nation's poor and give to them a chance to start over! The JUBILEE year, as it was called at times in Israel's history, was one of those interesting theory about economics that never seemed to have been practiced in the nation's history. Not only would the poor be relieved by such economic mercy, the earth might be also for it would rest from

overwork and regenerate for the future. Think of this as an extension of the concept of *Sabbath rest*. Like I said, however, biblical scholars have not found any evidence of this ever happening.

So, when Jesus reads the text and announces *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* most everyone in the synagogue said, “he speaks so well... isn’t he wonderful...and to think, he is from Nazareth, grew up here, he is one of us.” They were, at first, proud of their native son. A rabbi! How nice!

No one, at first, had any inkling that what he had just read might apply to them. No one really believed that the Jubilee Year was a reality. It was just one of those good feeling texts from an ancient prophet who lived in a by-gone era when life was simpler and making a living wasn’t as hard as it is today. He really didn’t believe this. They just knew it.

Before they realized it, Jesus interpreted the text by reflecting on their past. In his telling their history it is revealed that fundamentally it was rarely the righteous of Israel who recognized God’s actions in the past. Surprisingly it was the unrighteous, the outcasts, the foreigners, etc., etc.! He was alluding to some other of their ancient scriptures of course. Scattered among what we call Old Testament stories were numerous examples that foreigners sometimes knew God’s help when

Israel did not. His point came home to them. No matter what they thought of themselves, they had a great deal to learn about how to be God's servants in the world.

“That’s enough, throw these bums out of here,” screamed Nick the bartender in Pottersville in “It’s A Wonderful Life.” And like what is portrayed in that wonderful film when George Baily and his guardian angel Clarence are tossed out into the snow, Jesus is driven not only out of the synagogue but also out of town by a worshipping congregation that suddenly becomes an enraged mob. They had expected fresh insight from their young teacher, not brash confrontation. After all, they had extended him the hospitality reserved for one of their own and he had used the opportunity to insult their intelligence and their faith.

The passage that Jesus read described the Year of Jubilee, when it was promised that crushing debts would be forgiven, captives would be set free, injustices turned back and equity reset. Furthermore, it was believed in some communities of faith that this text was about the Teacher of Righteousness – the Messiah - who was to come. When Jesus proclaimed that it was being fulfilled in their hearing, he was identifying himself as the one they had been expecting for centuries!

It is tempting for us to think that the most shocking aspect here is the content of the Isaiah passage. In this day and age of prosperity gospel teaching in American culture giving impetus to the growing imbalance of wealth in our society, I believe is very difficult to teach that God's favor rests on the lowliest of society: the poor, the trapped, the infirmed, the oppressed. From what I understand of our culture right now, I believe this perspective would be termed nonsensical.

Everywhere I turn, whether it be in the religious sphere or the political, it appears that people of faith believe that God's favor rests on those who work hard and prosper. Why would Jesus announce just the opposite, especially when the opposite could potentially upset the privilege that the powerful already enjoy? So, it would be easy to assume that the reading from their scriptures was what upset the people.

The early church struggled to create a community whose culture ran counter to that of the empire where an imbalance of strong and weak kept the "pax romana" as it was termed. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth reveals the philosophy that undergirded those earliest communities. In the passage that was read earlier you heard Paul say that with this new teaching comes new understanding of the essential importance of each member, regardless of class, respectability, power, or reputation. The fact that Paul thought this important to teach indicates

how much many American Christians would fit in nicely in Corinth for we too are likely to identify with the strong rather than the weak.

In this Presidential Election year in our country it ought to be obvious to us what our cultural values are as candidates vie for attention and support. There is much talk about strength, military and otherwise; economies, secure and bonded; personalities, loud, strong, and assured vs soft-spoken, thoughtful, and reticent to announce easy answers. We all know which way our culture leans.

The only difference between the people who heard God's word spoken in Jesus' day in Nazareth and the people who populate much of American Christianity's pews is that the people of Nazareth were themselves the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. They were under the rule of a foreign power; they were starved, controlled, and enslaved – much like those who live in so-called third world and developing nations of our contemporary world. They were waiting for the Messiah with great anticipation and hope because they believed he would change their condition and free them from oppression. Like those who lived in Central and South America during the heyday of the priests who taught Liberation Theology in the 20th century, the people in Nazareth were eagerly awaiting their liberation. The Messiah was good news. They had been praying for the arrival of this One for centuries.

Ernesto Cardenal was a Catholic priest and theologian in Nicaragua in the 1980s. He led a bible study with some peasants and when they read Luke 4 a woman responded:

What we read is a promise of liberation, a teaching that a lot of Christians haven't learned yet, because we can be a church singing day and night tra-la-la-la, and it doesn't matter to us that there are so many prisoners and that we are surrounded by injustice, with so many afflicted hearts...so much unfairness in the country, so many women whose eyes are filled with tears...

Cardenal himself said,

If I feed the poor from my church they call me a saint. If I ask why they are poor, they call me a Communist!

So, why did the people of Nazareth eventually become oppressors of the One Who came to lift their burdens that day so long ago?

Luke's gospel is the only one that tells us what was read specifically. And, it is the only account that contains words said by both Jesus and the people in the synagogue. If we had only Mark and Matthew's versions of the story, we would quickly agree that the people tossed Jesus out because they simply weren't willing to accept his teachings. He had grown up there. They all knew his brothers and sisters and mother. No matter how well he spoke, read, or interpreted sacred

scripture, they wanted no part of him and his ministry. They all assumed they knew him too well. The implication? He was a fake. Mark and Matthew's accounts do not tell us that the people forcibly rejected Jesus, that he had to flee Nazareth, never to come back. They simply hint that Jesus could do nothing there because of their familiarity with him and his family.

All of this, as Mark and Matthew tell it, makes perfect sense. God's truth may come to us in ways we do not chose to recognize. In lesser circumstances, probably all of us have made the same blunder the people of Nazareth made. We may not heed someone who might bring us closer to God because we lack the humility to listen. Familiarity with the messenger makes us deaf to the message.

Luke's account of the event brings us two aspects left out in the other two gospels: the specific text which, as I said, contained a direct reference to the Messiah; and, Jesus' interpretation of texts familiar to all in the synagogue that pointed to how those other than the religious community of Israel were more receptive to God's work in the world. The implication being that once more, if indeed the time of Jubilee was at hand (fulfilled in their hearing) and they are not receptive to it, others might reap the benefits!

I am not going to treat this text today as a metaphor or allegory so as to draw some lofty moral or cute little package of social service objectives for the church to pursue. I am simply asking that you give it consideration. Ask yourself: what really would be good news to today's poor in our land? Jesus' read a passage of Isaiah in which he claimed he had come to do things for the poor that would be utterly earth shaking – as though the long favored year of Jubilee had come. Would that be it? A bail out for the poor – all debts released – all homes lost in the last great recession returned to those who lost them – all jobs lost in overseas drift of American corporations and their bank accounts brought back home – all unattended and deliberately ignored aspects of our nation's infrastructure addressed with works programs and reinvestment of wealth to the extent never before seen in the history of the world?

That is what Jesus was implying that day in Nazareth. There were folk in the synagogue who stood to regain their lives. There were people present who truly understood what such a declaration would mean in the alteration of their privileges. And, there were folk wedded to the Empire who simply would not stand for such revolutionary talk in a religious house. I think this is really what happened in Nazareth of Galilee one day. Luke got it right. His sources were solid. We know the rest of the story. This was but the first of many places and persons who would reject the Son of Man. Truly, nobody knew the trouble he saw. Amen.