

**The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
(Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Luke 4:21-30; I Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30 is the conclusion of the story begun in Luke 4:14-20 that made up the Gospel Lesson for the Third Sunday in Epiphany. In that lesson, we noted that Jesus both inaugurated his ministry and stated what he perceived as his primary mission. In fact, it is the one place in the Gospels where he does state unequivocally his mission. What Jesus saw as the thrust of his work was to proclaim good news to the poor, set captives free, recover the sight of the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor” (that is, Jubilee) (4:18-19).

In Jewish society, the Jubilee was the most radical vehicle for bringing about a redistribution of the wealth of the nation, so that no one would sink into the depths of poverty nor would anyone accumulate so much wealth he could become unaccountable for his actions. It existed to maintain a “golden mean” of status, privilege, power and wealth in the nation, so that the community would be preserved as an equitable community.

It was not simply a redistribution of wealth about which Jesus was concerned. He was committed to seeing Israel recapture for its life together the “shalom community” of the Old Testament (what Jesus called “the kingdom of God”). He wanted a nation and all its people who would be faithful to the Deuteronomic ideal of justice for all, an equitable distribution of wealth and elimination of poverty, and a society living in a relationship of love and trust with God and with each other. And the key to making that great reversal happen was full obedience to and the practice of the Jubilee. It was this mission that Jesus assumes that is presented in Luke 4:14-20.

How did Luke indicate that Jesus went about seeking to proclaim this message and acting to get Israel to re-embrace the dream of the shalom community? He did it in three ways. First, he taught this vision to the ordinary people (the “poor”), healed them, did signs and wonders among them, and loved them. Second, he called Israel’s political, economic and religious systems (the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy, Pharisees, Sadducees, land-owners, Herodians) to accountability, demanding that they be true to God’s call to build a society of justice, equity and relationality. Third, he built his own alternative community (the disciples and those who followed him) of those who lived out – both while he was alive and after his death and resurrection -- the kingdom of God that God intended for all humanity. Finally, when Israel’s aristocracy proved so resistant to his call to accountability that they killed him, Jesus acted out the atoning nature of Jubilee and, through his resurrection, created a “new Israel” to live out what Israel’s leaders had failed to be and do.

It is in the light of Jesus’ announcement in Luke 4:14-21 that he had been sent by God to bring about the transformation of the nation and people of Israel into society as God intended it to be, that we examine Luke 4:21-30. How did the people who heard Jesus that day in the Nazareth synagogue respond to Jesus’ announcement of his mission? Their response would be prophetic of Israel’s response and the world’s response ever since.

First, there were those who heard Jesus gladly! Luke tells us that upon Jesus' completion of his one-sentence sermon (vs. 21), "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (vs. 22). For some people, Jesus' proclamation of a jubilee nation was good news! They responded with enthusiasm to the announcement that God was once again working through a prophet to return the nation to a common justice, equitable wealth-sharing and the embrace of each other and of God.

But, second, there were those who heard Jesus badly! Others criticized, "Is not this Joseph's son?" These words, of course, are a nice way to really say, "Who does this Jesus think he is? How dare he declare to us that he is God's Anointed One who will bring in God's shalom kingdom? We know who he is. He grew up here. We knew him as a boy playing in the streets. We know his father and mother and brothers and sisters. Who does he think he is, announcing himself as God's big shot?" The jealousy, anger and rejection is palpable in their response.

Who were those who heard Jesus that Sunday in the synagogue gladly? And who were those who heard Jesus with indignation and rage? To answer that question, we must go further in this text.

Luke tells us, "And Jesus said (to the people), "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (4:24-27). Luke then reports that the people were enraged at what Jesus had just said, and seek to stone him to death as a heretic. "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way" (4:30).

What's going on here? There are two ways of interpreting Jesus' enigmatic statement that so enraged the people. The first interpretation is that Jesus is stressing in this statement that God is for the Gentile as well as the Jew, and that such a bold statement flew in the face of Jewish xenophobia, so that the people became enraged and sought to kill him.

The strength of that argument is found in the fact that the "widow at Zarephath in Sidon" was a woman living in a Gentile enclave and therefore was presumably Gentile herself, and that "Naaman the Syrian" was clearly a Gentile. Jesus seems to be saying that Elijah, Israel's greatest prophet, came not to save the Israelites but rather a Gentile woman from famine. And Elisha, Elijah's heir, had come to cleanse a Gentile of leprosy rather than the lepers in Israel. Thus, by extension, Jesus was saying that he had come to extend Jubilee and the gospel to the Gentile world, even if that excluded Israel. Those who support this argument say that it was Jesus' preference for the Gentiles over the Jews that proved so offensive to Jesus' hearers that they sought to kill him.

That is possibly a legitimate interpretation of this passage. But there are problems with it, as well. Chief among those problems is that there is nothing in the passage up to that point to suggest that Jesus was really making a polemic for the Gentiles. The argument seems to come out of nowhere, for up to this point, Jesus wasn't talking about reaching Gentiles with the shalom

community, but of calling Jews (and especially the Jewish “powers that be”) back to the work of building the shalom community that God had given to all of Israel by giving them the Law. Gentiles didn’t even know about the shalom community or kingdom of God! Therefore, could there be a more plausible interpretation of Jesus’ “fighting words”? I believe there is.

If Luke’s gospel is about anything, it’s about Jesus being for the poor. Luke is the gospel for the poor. There is more reference to the poor in Luke than any other gospel. A concern for the poor and how the rich and powerful respond to the poor makes up the message of almost every parable in the Gospel of Luke (and Luke has more parables than any other Gospel account – see the commentary on last Sunday’s gospel lectionary). And Jesus directly states in this passage that he has been anointed and called by God “to bring good news to the poor” (not to the rich and powerful).

But who are the poor? What is poverty? When Americans talk about the poor, we almost exclusively understand poverty as being economic. A poor person is one who lacks economic resources (for whatever reasons). Our limited understanding of poverty is caught up in the fact that we have only one word in our vocabulary to describe the impoverished – the “poor”. But in the Hebrew language, there are nine words that are translated by the one English word, “poor” (*ebyon, dal, chelekah, machsor, misken, aneh, ani, rush, chelkaim*)! Each Hebrew word nuances poverty differently, so that through these words one looks at poverty not simply as being economic, but also as being powerless, oppressed, exploited, vulnerable, weak, humble, afflicted, ill, even spiritually ill.

What Jesus was doing in this passage by speaking of Naaman and the widow of Zarephath was really quite insulting to those who challenged him in Nazareth. Jesus has just announced to his Jewish listeners that he has come to “bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the politically oppressed and Jubilee to the nation” (incidentally, notice the diverse ways Jesus defines poverty in his mission statement). Then, he says in response to the people’s criticism of him, “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s homeland”. By saying this, what Jesus was declaring was, “You people don’t want to hear that God is about to act to return our nation to the shalom of political liberation, economic reversal and sharing of wealth, and spiritual revival. Well, if you have closed your ears and eyes to what God is about to do through me, then you will experience as a nation what Israel experienced under Elijah and Elisha!”

And what had Israel experienced under Elijah and Elisha? When the nation was in famine, God sent Elijah “to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon”, impoverished economically, politically and socially (because she was a widow) and because she was a Gentile. *She* would be receptive, and therefore would be fed. God sent Elisha to “Naaman the Syrian” who, although he was the commanding general of the army of Syria (and thus very powerful and wealthy) was also impoverished because he was a leper (thus being both ritualistically unclean to Jews and physically ostracized by Syrians) and because he was a Gentile (spiritually poor). But, he too was receptive to what God could do for him through Elisha, and therefore was healed.

The offense was not simply that the widow and Naaman were Gentiles and yet seemed preferred by God. It was that Naaman and the widow had “ears to hear what the Spirit is saying” and

“eyes to see”, and the Jews did not! In this passage, I believe that it wasn’t simply the Gentleness of Jesus’ examples that caused such offense to his Jewish critics. It was Jesus’ declaration that those in his hometown were not open to what God was about to do through Jesus, because it didn’t fit into their understanding of the world as they intended it to be. Should they not have been thrilled that the poor would receive good news, that captives would be freed, that the blind would see, that the oppressed would be set free, that poverty would be eliminated? But they weren’t, because they had eyes that saw not, ears that heard not!

So who were those who criticized and belittled Jesus on the occasion of his first sermon? And who were those who “drove him out of their town” and sought to hurl him off the cliff to kill him and thus “shut his mouth”? Why, they were like all the fine, upstanding, church-going people everywhere! They were the pillars of Nazareth, the leaders of the synagogue, the wealthy supporters of the synagogue, the upstanding citizens of Nazareth. And the last thing they wanted was someone – even a homeboy -- who would come along turning everything upside down and proclaiming a reversal of their society. And so, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, they sought to eliminate him!

“But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way” (4:30)!

Jeremiah 1:4-10. As Jesus announced his call to bring God’s Kingdom to the world (but especially to Israel), so in the Old Testament Lesson for the 4th Sunday in Epiphany, Jeremiah is also called. And that call has marked similarity to the calls of both Jesus and of Moses.

The account begins with God’s direct call to Jeremiah. “Now the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations’” (1:4-5). Like Jesus and Moses, Jeremiah has been chosen by God to his mission even before he was born, while he was still in his mother’s womb. Just as Jesus was “to save his people from their sins”, and just as Moses had been chosen and protected by God at his birth (Exodus 2), so Jeremiah was called before birth to be “a prophet to the nations”.

Jeremiah’s work was not only to impact Israel, but the other nations of the world as well. And he was elected and chosen by God before birth for this task. Thus, he was not a self-appointed messenger, for Jeremiah had no choice in the matter. He was set apart even before birth for this God-chosen mission. That reality is the ground for Jeremiah’s prophetic standing.

Like Moses (Exod. 3:11; 4:1, 10), Jeremiah resists his call. “Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy’ (Jer. 1:6)”. Jeremiah reminds God that he is only a mere lad; how dare he represent God before his elders? Further, he does not know how to speak eloquently or clearly; how can he speak God’s words? Jeremiah sounds very similar to Moses, who also demurred his call – and with the very same excuse of being slow-of-speech.

But God refuses to take “no” for an answer. He reminded Moses, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak” (Exod. 4:11-12). So God also

reminded Jeremiah, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jer. 1:7-8). God promises to be with both men, and to put God’s words into their mouths. God will not let either the one who is to be Israel’s Law-giver nor he who is to be Israel’s prophet to negotiate their way out of God’s sure and certain call upon their lives. They are God’s chosen, and so they will do the work to which they have been called.

Then, God presents to Jeremiah quite clearly the nature and extent of his call. He touches Jeremiah’s mouth (just as he had Isaiah’s in Isa. 6:6-7), and then says to him, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:9-10).

God’s call to us may not always come as good news! It may be overwhelming and even risky news. It may be frightening and intimidating news. And it may be welcomed news to God’s people, even though it may have great demands that it will lay upon them. Good news may be contained within it, but it may not be solely good news.

God tells Jeremiah that he has been chosen by God before his birth to proclaim God’s word to both Israel and the larger world. And as he carries out his ministry, he will be both destroyer and builder, for he will “pluck up”, “pull down”, “destroy” and “overthrow” the systems of the nation, as well as “build and plant”. Likewise, Moses may “set my people free”, but to do so, he will have to confront Pharaoh and humble both him and the Egyptian empire. Further, Jesus may “bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, set the oppressed free” and proclaim “It’s Jubilee-time”! But he is also “destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed – and a sword will pierce his mother’s soul too” (Luke 2:34-35). So, God’s call may not always be good news, but it will be transforming and restorative news!

This, then, is Jeremiah’s call – for he has been called by God to do that particular work God has for him to do, like Moses before him and Jesus after him. And you – what about you?

Psalm 71 is the psalm for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany. It is a prayer for lifelong protection and help. Some of its stanzas are particularly noteworthy.

“In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress” (71:1-3).

This is a moving cry for the support, sustenance and strength of God in the Psalmist’s life. It becomes particularly poignant, however, when he compares his youth and old age.

“Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. . . Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (vss. 6a, 9).

God was faithful and clearly present in the Psalmist's birth and earliest years. Yet he feels God's absence now in his final years, and therefore calls upon God to be present to him now.

But God becomes present to him, even as he prays. Therefore, the psalm ends with a shout of joy and of praise to God.

“My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued. All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help, for those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced” (71:23-24).

I Corinthians 13:1-13 is Paul's famous love poem. It is a beautiful statement of the nature of selfless love, and especially Christian love. But it has a very strategic place in this letter to the Corinthian Church.

As developed in the commentary on last Sunday's epistle lesson, the Corinthian Church was divided into four unequal parties – the Pauline, Apollos, Petrine and Christ parties. Each of the parties had its own agenda for the Corinthian Church, and was pushing that agenda with no compromise and with no inclusion of the other parties. The result was a “superiority complex” on the part of some and a sense of being marginalized and powerless on the part of others.

A crucial part of that struggle had been around the “spiritual gifts” of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge (knowledge not being accumulated information or wisdom, but special insight and discernment given by the Holy Spirit). In the previous chapter, Paul had argued that these spiritual gifts are given by God to the church to build up and edify the church, and to better equip it for outreach to the world. Those gifts are distributed as God chooses throughout the church (not exclusively to a given “party”), and exist for the strengthening and edifying of everyone. Therefore, Paul advises the Corinthians, embrace the gift that God has placed within you, use it for the good of the entire church, and do not covet the gifts of others.

But Paul takes his readers one step further. He urges them to embrace the gifts within them. And he then states, “And I will show you a still more excellent way” (12:31b).

That “more excellent way” is the gift of love – the one gift that every member of the church needs to embrace. Thus, Paul begins his great chapter on love as the supreme gift of each Christian – a love for one another that excludes no one and embraces everyone.

I Corinthians 13:1-3 begins the poem by stressing that love is the supreme gift God awakens in every Christian. If one has prophetic powers, understands all knowledge, speaks in heavenly language but does not treat brother and sister Christians as loved siblings, then he is nothing more than “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”. He is worthless!

Paul then moves on in verses 4-7 to describe what he means by the word “love”. It is important to recognize that those who spoke Greek at the time of Paul distinguished between three types of love – erotic love, companionable love or friendship, and self-giving love; so it was crucial that Paul define here what he meant by love. The kind of love that the Corinthian Christians are to

practice toward one another, Paul declares, is self-giving or Godly love. It is a love that is patient with one another, kind, not envious, not boastful, not arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful, doesn't rejoice in the exposure of wrong in other people but believes the best about them, hopes for the best in people, and endures persecution, condemnation or ridicule.

Paul then compares and contrasts love with other virtues (vss. 8-10). All the "gifts of the Spirit", Paul contends, are temporary gifts. They are given to strengthen the church and its world mission during this period of transition between the first and the second comings of Christ. Whether one speaks of prophecy, knowledge or tongues, they will all "come to an end".

But love – God's love reflected through us – is another matter entirely. Love will never end. Love will be as much in God's kingdom when it comes in its totality as it is needed today. It is the one virtue given by God that is everlasting. Therefore, it makes sense to concentrate on nurturing this gift within ourselves and each other.

Paul then concludes his poem, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love" (13:11-13).

Paul uses two metaphors here to communicate his concern: the metaphor of child and adult, and of seeing either a reflection or the reality. Living centered in and boasting of our gifts is like living as a child; it is childish and is not the stuff of mature Christians. Living centered in love for God's people and the world is the stance of the mature Christian. Likewise, living centered in ourselves and our own gifts, and living in a party spirit is like viewing life through a mirror (a mirror in Roman times was made of burnished bronze and thus gave both a dim and distorted reflection of the person); living in love is like seeing a person face-to-face. Thus, to settle for satisfaction with one's gifts is to settle for second-place. To strive after that "more excellent way" of Christian love is to strive after the very essence of Christianity.

Thus, Paul ends, "faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love". Authentic Christian faith comes down to three ingredients: a right relationship with God ("*faith*"), *hope* that God is indeed the ground of our and humanity's very being, and *love*. All three are crucial, but it is love that is eternal, for love is the indispensable characteristic of authentic Christian life. Therefore, Paul is saying to the Corinthian Christians, do not long after the gifts of the Spirit; long after the exhibition of love in your life. For you can exhibit only what you are allowing God to grow in you – God's love for the world and for all who name the name of Jesus Christ.

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