

Epiphany 4C
Feb. 3, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

Did you ever walk into the middle of a conversation
and try to make sense of what you were hearing
without really knowing the context?
That's what our lectionary does to us this morning.
Our gospel lesson picks up in the middle of a story,
a story that's hard enough to understand even if you start at the beginning.

So let's backtrack a little bit.
If you were here last week,
you heard some of the story that comes before this part –
this very troubling part.
Last week, we heard how Jesus,
fresh out of his 40 days in the wilderness
and filled with the power of the Spirit,
returned to Galilee, his old stomping ground,
and began teaching in synagogues,
and how impressed everyone was with him.

When he came to Nazareth, his hometown,
he went to the synagogue, and stood up to read,
and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled it, and found the place where this was written:

“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.”

Then he handed the scroll back to the attendant and sat down
and everybody looked at him.
And he said, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What Jesus did last Sunday was basically to proclaim

that the Year of Jubilee had come.
Jubilee is that long-awaited time
when slaves were set free
and debts were forgiven
and everybody who had made a mess of their lives
got a do-over.

According to the Book of Leviticus,
the Year of Jubilee was supposed to roll around for the Israelites
every 49 or 50 years.

In a time when most people never lived to see their 50th birthday,
it really was a once-in-a-lifetime event,
though many scholars believe
it never really even happened at all.
So for Jesus to proclaim the arrival of the Jubilee,
well, that was something.

And that's where our story picks up this morning.
And initially, people liked what they heard.
All spoke well of Jesus,
and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.
They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"
Only that's when things start to head south.

Now, in Matthew and Mark's versions of this story,
that question, "Is not this Joseph's son?" is sort of an accusation.
In Matthew and Mark, folks can't believe that Joseph's son,
whom they presumably knew as a child,
could ever have amounted to anything.
They're not expecting much from this local kid.

But in Luke, that's not how this story unfolds.
In Luke's version, they're pleasantly surprised.
There's nothing to indicate they're hostile to Jesus – not at first.
In fact, they seem quite proud of him.

But this is Jesus we're talking about,
and he seems to know what's in their hearts
even if it's not on their lips.
It seems that along with their pride comes a certain expectation.
A certain sense of ownership.

This is THEIR young man.
They felt like they had just had a family member win the lottery,
and now they expected to be showered with God's favor.
Nazareth was gonna be Ground Zero for Jubilee benefits.

But then Jesus says some stuff that rubs them the wrong way.
Jesus starts talking about the blessings
going not to those in his midst, to his hometown buddies,
but to strangers, to the gentiles.

It's as if he's saying,
"When I talk about God coming to free the oppressed and bless the poor,
I'm talking about God blessing the people you can't stand,
the people you don't want to be near,
the people you think are your enemies."
And so he reminds them of a couple of stories
where God blessed not Israel, but Israel's enemies.
And it makes them mad.
So boiling mad that they're ready to get rid of this so-called prophet.

They didn't like being told that their enemies were God's friends.
They were blinded by indignation
and didn't want to believe that God's grace
isn't subject to our lists of who's in and who's out.
They were so focused
on what they believed God's blessing should look like –
just for them –
that they missed the opportunity for grace that Jesus was offering.

The gospel says they were filled with rage,
and they drove him out of town,
up to a high cliff,
where they meant to throw him off.
This part isn't in the other gospels.
But Luke is a great storyteller,
the George Lucas of his time.
The scene is meant to remind us of the LAST time
Jesus was taken to a high place
and challenged to throw himself off.

“He will command his angels to protect you,
 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone,”
 Satan had taunted Jesus then.
 Looks like Satan knew what he was talking about.
 Luke doesn’t tell us how Jesus did it –
 whether angels protected him
 or he used some sort of Jedi mind trick –
 but Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

And he went to Capernaum,
 where he proceeded to do the kinds of miracles
 the people of Nazareth thought rightfully belonged to them.
 They wanted it so badly.
 How they yearned for it.
 And when it was denied to them,
 things got ugly.
 The people were filled with rage
 because Jesus proclaimed a grace
 that was wider and more generous
 than they were.

Now here’s the *really* uncomfortable thing about this Gospel passage:
 The people of Nazareth are not unlike us.
 Not at all.
 You see, the heart of this lesson is the theme of privilege.
 Privilege is a powerful reality in our society,
 just as it was in Jesus’s.
 The idea of privilege –
 that some people benefit from unearned
 and largely unacknowledged advantages –
 has been around a long time.

Those of us with white skin reap innumerable advantages
 just because of our skin color.
 Those of us who speak English fluently
 have huge advantages over those who do not.
 Those of us in the dominant culture
 just expect everybody else to adapt to our way of doing things,
 and we don’t give this privileging of our own tastes and preferences
 a second thought.

It is simply our due.

The people of Nazareth who gathered in the synagogue
on that long-ago Sabbath
may not have been wealthy or powerful,
but many thought of themselves as God's people,
God's favorites.

That led them to resent a grace
that was extended to others,
and ironically,
kept them from joyously receiving grace themselves.

We would all be wise to occasionally stop and question ourselves.
When has our own sense of entitlement
caused us to shoot ourselves in the foot?

When has our need to show our disapproval
of individuals or groups or nations
we feel superior to
led us to harden our hearts,
and adopt questionable positions
that ultimately wind up
not only failing to benefit us,
but to cost us in the long run?

When has our own need to disparage our enemies,
to prove the righteousness of our own positions,
forced us into morally compromising situations,
which inevitably lead us to that cliff,
right along with the people of Nazareth that day?

That's when we need Jesus to remind us
that God simply won't be manipulated
into hating all the same people as we do.
We need Jesus to remind us
that when we live as one of God's beloved children,
there *are* no more enemies.
There's no more us versus them.
There's only us. There is no *them*.

That's a hard thing to hear, and harder to live.
 But the hard thing about the God we know in Jesus
 is that whenever you and I draw a line
 between who's in and who's out,
 we will find Jesus on the other side.

Part of becoming a mature Christian -
 is learning how to put *our* expectations aside
 in order to listen to what God's are.
 This is hard work.
 But it's what we, as a church, are all called to do.
 All of us. It IS our calling.
 In our epistle reading today, the Apostle Paul
 encourages us to love in the radical way that Jesus teaches.

This passage from Corinthians is often read at weddings,
 but it's really not about the love between spouses.
 It's instructions that Paul left for the members of the church in Corinth,
 a church that was struggling with internal divisions.
 Without love, Paul says to the church,
 it doesn't matter what budgets, buildings, or mission strategies we have.
 Outreach, Christian formation, fellowship opportunities
 are wonderful things
 but we must never forget that the church is first called
 to be a community that practices love.

A loving church shows patience.
 A loving church shows kindness.
 We don't insist on our own way.
 We don't act irritably,
 we don't hold onto resentment.
 We bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

Because it seems that no matter how hard we try,
 we cannot seem to get God to respect our boundaries.
 Like an All-Pro linebacker in the Super Bowl,
 determined to sack the quarterback,
 God keeps plowing right through them,
 proclaiming a grace that excludes no one.
 Not even us miserable sinners

who somehow find ourselves up there on that cliff
in the midst of an angry mob
that maybe, in retrospect, we don't really want to be part of, after all.

Because the Year of Jubilee has come.
Our sins have been forgiven
and we have been set free.
Set free to love.
Set free to make our way back off that awful cliff.
Set free to start tearing down the walls that divide us.
Free at last. Free at last.
Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.
Amen.