

Luke 4:21-32  
St. John's Norwood  
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What a moment for Nazareth! They have heard the news about Jesus' anointing by the Spirit and how his teaching amazes all who hear him. And now he has come home. Joseph's son is teaching in the synagogue in the town where he grew up. The villagers are proud of the home town son. And they are sure that, true to Mediterranean tradition, the good son that he is, Jesus will show favor to his family and his village. After all, they've known Jesus his whole life. They are the "in group".

The men gathered around Jesus watch as he rolls up the scroll of Isaiah and hands it to an attendant. They hear him say, "*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" And their expectations soar. There standing right in front of them is the Messiah and he will deliver his people from the Romans and all that has oppressed them.

But then to their great consternation and surprise, Jesus turns their expectations upside down. He tells them two stories; one about a widow and Elijah and one about Naaman, the Syrian, and Elisha. They are stories about prophets doing the unexpected. And in both cases, the unexpected has God showing favor to two Gentiles over the people of Israel.

Now we have the advantage of having read Simeon's prophecy and of hearing Isaiah's words about Jesus bringing salvation to all the nations, Jew and Gentile alike. But this is the first the Jews have heard of it and they go ballistic. Why is Jesus telling them a story that contradicts all that they have known about the way their world works?

In fact they are so angry, they run Jesus out of town to the edge of the hill on which their town is built so that they might hurl him over the cliff.

This lesson resonated deeply, given what is happening both in the world and in our Episcopal church today. It is this idea that we, like the crowd gathered in Nazareth, have such a tendency to see everything in terms of what **we** think is right and wrong. We, whether Christian or Muslim, Democrat or Republican, gay or straight, **are right** and the others are wrong. Depending on what side you take in the conflict in our church today, one side is right and the other is wrong. And in whatever side we take, it seems we spend an inordinate amount of time fighting the wrong so that **our** right can prevail.

Now I might be mistaken but can anyone find any place in our Scripture where Jesus is calling us to fight wrong so that our right can prevail?

What we do find in numerous places is Jesus' call to us to spread the gospel...to spread the news of God's love. And what we have as the proof of God's love is that Christ died on the cross and through his death and resurrection we are all offered forgiveness and salvation.

And what we can proclaim as the shape of God's love is precisely what Jesus has just read to the Nazarenes: *"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..."* (Luke 4:18-19) Jesus' ministry is to reflect that shape of God's love...and that means Jesus is to minister to everyone, especially the out casts, the poor, the captive, the oppressed... There is no "other" here, no "in group."

What we reflect, I'm afraid, when we see everything as right and wrong sends a kind of mixed message. On the one hand, like the Nazarenes, we claim Christ as our own and would like to spread his message of God' love while at the same time we are saying we really don't like you unless you see things the way we do.

In late November, I drove down to Richmond to lead a clergy retreat on preaching in Advent. The proposed split of the seven Episcopal churches from the Diocese of Virginia had just been announced in the Washington Post. I confess that I wondered who might attend the retreat, but I never imagined that around that table, I would find 35 men and women who ranged from staunchly conservative on one side to wildly liberal on the other. When I asked that we go around the table and introduce ourselves, no one looked at anyone when they said who they were and what church they were from.

There we were, all seated at the same table, all in one way or the other representing the public face of the church, and no one dared look anyone else in the eye.

What came to me was the image of a group of people lost in a storm... it helped tremendously that outside the big windows of the conference room, it was pouring rain and thundering and lightening ...and what seemed really clear at that moment was that we all needed to be rescued. I was there to lead a workshop on preaching the gospels of Advent but I couldn't do that with no one speaking to each other. And then I had an idea. Or to be more precise, I believed the Spirit intervened.

I asked everyone to number off 1, 2 all around the table and then to change places so that all the ones were on one side and the twos on the other. When everyone was in their new places conservatives and liberals ended up seated next to one another. Then I asked them to close their eyes and imagine they were lost at night in a raging storm when suddenly someone they didn't know and couldn't see held out a hand

to them. I asked them to open their eyes and all the ones were to hold out their hands to the twos and rescue them. And the twos were to take the ones' hands and to thank them...and slowly in a room that had felt as if there was a line drawn down the middle, there were smiles and even some tears...finally together we prayed... It was at that point that I began the teaching and within a very few minutes, people had begun to raise their hands and to offer their ideas to one another. All of a sudden no one needed to be right or wrong... instead of protests and posturing, we found ourselves listening to each other's ideas about how to spread the gospel message of Advent.

The reason Jesus needed to tell those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth those two stories is that they were not listening to what Jesus was saying. They were anchored to their own view of right and wrong and assumed that Jesus was on board.

Jesus, on the other hand, had read their hearts and he knew they didn't get it. They weren't listening. He had chosen to read Isaiah's prophecy and he had even told them that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus was there to teach them that God's mercy and love is boundless....and it includes the rich and the poor, the church and the unchurched, liberal and conservative, friend and foe. It was a tough message...a radical message... and it jarred the ground of what they had always believed. Jesus blurred their vision of right and wrong and suddenly they felt lost. Scared and angry, they drove Jesus away before he could say another word.

But prophets are like that...jarring to the core. God did not send Jesus into the world to keep the status quo. Jesus already knows about the pain and suffering, the loneliness, the fear that sin has caused the world. Yes, he knows about it...being driven out of Nazareth that day is ample evidence...yes, Jesus knows about it and that is why he has come to give his life to transform the world...to rescue all who are lost and scared and in pain.

When Jesus died on the cross, God took care of the right and wrong question for all eternity. We don't need to fight about what is right and wrong. We, as a community and as the Episcopal Church, do need to reach out to a world that is hurting and we need to act...we do need to feed the hungry and free the captives...we need to be radical and take time for each other...to listen and to talk and to share. That's all Jesus was trying to say that day in Nazareth and he was run out of town.

I believe it's time that we got back to the joy of our being rescued by a God who calls us to rescue others by offering our hands filled with God's love. Or as the Quaker George Fox wrote, "Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

Amen