



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 27, 2019

“Throwing Jesus Over the Cliff”

(Luke 4:28-29)

Rev. David K. Groth

28 “When they had heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. 29 And they rose up and drove Jesus out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so they could throw him down the cliff.”

(Luke 4:28-29).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It's a precarious business preaching for the first time at your home congregation. As a second-year seminary student I had exactly one sermon under my belt when I was invited to preach a second sermon at Our Redeemer in Delavan. A few of my teachers from grade school and high school were members there. That was awkward. A girl I dated in high school was there. Again: awkward. Youth group leaders were there too, the ones that caught me with Rob Faltinson on my shoulders, next to the organ, with a small organ pipe dangling from his mouth. Several retired pastors were there, including one who never smiled, only frowned. Family was there: my parents and grandparents, a couple of aunts and uncles. My older brothers were there. I didn't dare look at them. Fortunately, there were all those other faces, people so supportive and kind and encouraging, people who knew and loved my parents, and had extended that love to me unearned. They just wanted to see me succeed, for the sake of my parents and for the church. And so they rigged it to ensure I would. They lowered the bar. By the time I stepped into the pulpit that bar (so high for others) was barely off the floor for me. So long as I was able to step over it without completely tripping, they were prepared to call it a smashing success.

We all made it through the ordeal, more or less. I don't think anybody was converted that morning, but the church survived. Afterward's they served cake and coffee in the fellowship hall, a far kinder reception than the one given Jesus in his hometown.

He had come back to Nazareth to preach there for the first time since his public ministry began. His reputation preceded him. They knew he had been traveling around Galilee, from village to village, teaching in the synagogues. They heard he even healed some people in Capernaum, but weren't sure what to make of that. He even had his own

disciples now. They probably thought that presumptuous given his age and inexperience.

On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue – the synagogue where he had grown up, the synagogue he attended weekly on the Sabbath. It was also the place where he, with other young boys his age learned to read and write Hebrew and maybe made life difficult for some aging rabbi. He was in Nazareth as “the son of Joseph the carpenter; Mary’s boy.” But now he’s come back as some sort of prophet and teacher.

The elders invited him to read scripture and to comment. Their lectionary assigned a reading from the Isaiah scroll, the 61st chapter. He unrolled it and read it. It happened to be a favorite passage of his people: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” They loved that passage. They saw themselves in it. They were the poor, they were the oppressed, they were the captives. Before it was the Egyptians and the Babylonians who oppressed them. Now it was the Romans. They were all waiting for the Lord to stir up his power once again and liberate them. It was a favorite passage, a hopeful passage.

Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the elder, and sat down, indicating it was time to preach. Luke noticed “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” All was quiet. Necks were craned. The elders turned their good ear toward him. “Today” Jesus says, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” I’m sure there was more to it than that, but that’s the summary of the first part of his sermon.

They loved it. Luke says “All spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.” And why wouldn’t they be pleased? Anyone who suffers would be thrilled to hear there is hope and help on the horizon.

If Jesus hadn't said another word, the day would have been a smashing success. He could have just enjoyed their pride and affection and a nice reception in the Fellowship Hall. Instead, he continues, and his sermon takes a dangerous turn. He knows they think he should be doing more for them. If he miraculously healed people in Capernaum, he should be doing that here, in his hometown. Verse 23, "Doubtless you will quote this proverb, 'Physician heal yourself.'" It doesn't come through in the English, but the meaning is, "Physician, take care of your own." Take care of us.

In response Jesus reminds them of two episodes in Israel's history in which God shows favor on a couple of foreigners and not on his own people. Jesus reminds them there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them; only to the one in Zarephath, in the land of Sidon. Of all the people, the Lord chose to have great mercy on her. He continues. There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them were cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. For some reason, God showed favor on these pagan Gentiles and not, for whatever reason, on his own people.

Jesus is telling the hometown crowd the Lord is no longer in it just for his people. Now he's doing something for the Gentiles, the outsiders, their historic enemies, and he's doing it through him, Jesus. It's hard for us to understand today, but that really touched a nerve. He was tinkering with something very dear and precious to them. They were God's ancient people, God's chosen ones, the elect. They were on the inside. Everybody else is not. It's that simple. But it seems like he wants to turn this plan of God inside out and upside down. What gives him the right? Just like that they are, "filled with wrath".

You can stone a man in a couple of ways. The traditional way is picking up stones, encircle the guy and hurl them. But it also works to pick up the man, and hurl him down toward the stones, and then heave more stones on

top of him, using gravity to assist. Either way works.

Well, what can we learn from this text? First, Jesus has a heart for the outsiders and he wants us to have a heart for them too. One of the things that got him crucified is how much time he spent with outsiders, with the sinners and tax collectors. They also didn't like it when he made a Samaritan man the hero of his parable, while turning their priests into villains. And they didn't like it that he healed so many Gentiles, the Centurion's servant, for instance, and the Syrophenician woman's daughter. He had a heart for the outsiders and he wants us to have a heart for them too.

Question: How long has it been since you demonstrated a heart for the outsiders? Maybe there's a coworker or neighbor of yours who has made lots of bad choices in life and is now suffering the consequences. What of it? Did Jesus go around telling people "You made your bed; now sleep in it!?" No, he reached out to them and had compassion on them. He spoke the truth to them in love. He forgave them.

Right here in Watertown, there are lots and lots of outsiders. Right now they may be warm and snug and quite content in their homes, but spiritually, they are outside, outside of God's grace, outside in bitterly cold temperatures. When is the last time you've invited someone in from the outside, not just into the church building, but into the warm grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? We can and need to do better. Jesus called us to go and make disciples of all nations. "Go." Don't wait for them to come here. Go into your work places and into your family gatherings and your apartment complexes, and start shifting the relationship, engaging them, showing them love, inviting and bringing them in. Jesus had a heart for outsiders and wants us to have a heart for them too.

Second, the pendulum swung dramatically in Nazareth. For a moment, Jesus was their pride and joy. But then he said something they didn't like and it's off to the cliff with him. That happens today. It's easy to praise and thank God when things are going well in our lives, but do we

also praise and trust him when things crumble around us? Remember what Job said? “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” (Job 1:21). I challenge you: even when you don’t understand his plan, praise him. Even when you don’t like his plan, thank him. You know it’s good.

Third, the people of Nazareth became hostile when Jesus said some things they didn’t like. There are plenty of things Jesus said that we don’t like either, and the sinful mind still gets hostile with God. When we start rejecting that which we don’t like in God’s Word, it’s another way of trying to throw Jesus over the cliff again! When we pick and choose our way through the Scriptures, accepting this, rejecting that, we’re manhandling God’s Word like they manhandled the Word Incarnate.

I ask again, is it God’s job to agree with you 100% of the time? Of course not! Therefore any pastor who is faithful to the Word will also say things you don’t like and with which you do not agree. It doesn’t mean that he’s wrong. It just means you don’t like it. Instead of just quietly rejecting that word, test it instead. Be like the Bereans, whom Paul commended because they “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

One last thing: The people of Nazareth were planning to throw Jesus over the cliff that day. The hostility shown Jesus that day, he took for us. He was thinking of us, the Gentiles, those who are not God’s people. We were outside in the cold. He wanted us within the warmth of his grace. That passion for those on the outside nearly got him killed in Nazareth, and is one of the reasons they crucified him at Golgotha. The wrath toward Jesus near the beginning of his ministry gives us a preview of the wrath at the end.

But we must be careful. It wasn’t really the Jews who put him to death. And it wasn’t Pilate. He’s on the cross because that’s what he came to do. “No one takes my life from me” he said. “I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn. 10:18). The cross is where he wanted to be. Why? To

become the ultimate outsider, the Great Pariah . . . rejected by men and by the Father in heaven. He's forsaken by men because he refused to back off from the truth even though they don't like it. And he's forsaken by the Father because he acquiesced . . . not to the will of the people, but to the will of the Father, to bear the crushing load of your sin and mine.

Afterwards, he did exactly what his neighbors in Nazareth worried he might do. He commanded God's mercy be taken to the nations, to all the Gentiles. That's us, who were captive and oppressed, not by the Egyptians or Babylonians or Romans, but by sin. The Gospel of Jesus, as he planned it, has leapt over the walls and has sailed the seas and traversed the centuries, from one generation to the next, from one person to another all the way to this part of Wisconsin, to you and me, outsiders who have been grafted in.

Now we are the custodians of that Gospel, the stewards. After all these years, all those miles, all those generations, it cannot stop with us!

There are people in your life out in the killing cold. Invite them in where there is eternal life in Christ Jesus. Amen.

