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Luke 4:14-30; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

OFFENDING WORK

Jesus' first sermon didn't go so well. By the time he was done preaching, the congregation attempted to throw him off a cliff. I've preached some dull sermons in my day and no doubt have preached some sermons that ruffled a few feathers. But thus far, no congregation has attempted to drive me off a cliff! But maybe that is not a good thing. Maybe the best indicator of when we are living and proclaiming the gospel authentically is if folks are offended.

Because while the gospel of God's love is indeed *good* news, it is not easy news. And it frequently is offensive news. If we don't find the gospel of Jesus Christ offensive, then perhaps it is because we have grown too comfortable with it. Perhaps we have domesticated the message, softened its true meaning. Maybe it is like a comfortable cuddly toy we turn to in order to soothe ourselves. Perhaps after all this time we think we know Jesus as the nice guy with a message about friendliness.

The people in the synagogue that day in Nazareth thought they knew Jesus. He was the hometown boy. They had watched him grow up. Maybe some of them had babysat him as a child, or others were his synagogue teachers. They had seen him mature from childhood into adolescence. They knew his parents. And now the grown man had come home. And maybe that familiarity was part of the problem. Maybe like us, their familiarity with who they thought Jesus was and what he should be telling them, did not match the difficult words they heard him preaching. And by the time Jesus finishes preaching, they are enraged by his message. Jesus declares to them, "I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

When Katie Hines-Shah was in her first few years as a pastor, her four-year-old son asked her a question one day as they were driving. “Mama, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Her son’s preschool class had been exploring this question and his interests changed daily. One day he wanted to be a fire fighter, another day it was a basketball player, another day a gardener. Katie responded to her son’s question by saying, “When I grow up I think I’ll still be a pastor. From the backseat came an exasperated sigh. ‘No Mom, I meant, what *important* job do you want? Something like a dog washer. Or a milkshake maker.’”

“Jesus was right,” reflected Katie. “No prophet is accepted in his own hometown. Or even in her own car.”

Jesus has his own important job—proclaiming the truth of God’s love. But in doing his job, he also deeply offends many of his neighbors. What is especially strange about Jesus’ declaration that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown,” is that up until that moment, the congregation *was* accepting him. In fact, as Jesus began to preach, they thought he was terrific. What a great reader he is, they murmured to one another. How well he speaks, they marveled. Things were going so well for Jesus. He had them eating out of his hand! If he had just stopped right there, everyone would have been so happy. But he didn’t stop when things were going well for him. Instead, Jesus pushes the envelope. He refused to temper his message to their expectations.

It all goes south when Jesus reminds the congregation about two stories in their religious history where God’s mighty acts of grace were extended to those considered to be the wrong people. First Jesus reminds them about a gentile woman who was the only one aided during a famine. Among all those Israelite people suffering, God comes to the aid of a gentile! And next Jesus calls to mind an enemy commander, an *enemy* commander, who was the only leper cured

during a time of occupation and war. Lots of people had leprosy, but only this foreign enemy was healed. And with these two stories, Jesus drives home his message—a message about God’s expansive care and love.

It may be hard for us to understand how these two references could so enrage the congregation that day. But let us try to enter their frame of mind. The Jewish people had been repeatedly conquered and mistreated by their gentile neighbors. And at the time of Jesus’ sermon, they were under the cruel occupation of Roman oppressors. Outsiders were the enemy, outsiders had suffering and harm. The Jewish people also understood themselves as having a special relationship with God. God had been faithful to them and they in turn were called to be faithful to God. Foreigners didn’t follow Yahweh. Foreigners had other gods. Many in Jesus’ community would have understood themselves as God’s chosen people, as God’s faithful people. And from this belief would have come a sense of exceptionalism. They might be suffering, they might be occupied by foreign powers, but at least they could rely upon their special status with God.

Americans have also had a sense of special status in the world—what is referred to as American exceptionalism. It is the belief that we are somehow set apart, set above other peoples and nations, even entitled to certain privileges and rewards. And so historically we have conquered lands occupied by others. And we have invaded countries to ensure our own access to resources we need. And we claim not only first and second doses, but even three doses of the vaccine before all peoples in other nations even have access to the first. Americans often live with a sense of entitlement.

I imagine that the congregation sitting before Jesus wanted to hear him tell them how much God loved them, how much God valued them, how much God was on their side. And

Jesus did do that. He begins his sermon by telling them that God is bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight, and freeing the oppressed. He tells them that God has seen them and cares about them and is with them. But he also tells them through these two upsetting examples, that they do not have the exclusive claim to God's love and care. He tells them about outsiders, even enemies, who get some of the very best of what God has to offer. And this, this is what offends. This is what led them to try to kill God's messenger of love.

Jesus escaped the murderous rage of the crowd that day. But he did not escape it for good. His sermon that day was really just the beginning of Jesus' offensive work. The gospel writer Luke will go on to record all the ways Jesus continued to offend: his acceptance of prostitutes and known sinners, his miracles often carried out on the wrong side of the tracks, his insulting of the religious leaders, his touching of unclean people, his gestures of compassion given on the wrong day of the week. His offensive behavior attracted a lot of notice—both within his community and among the Roman occupation. And when Jesus had finally let in too many outsiders and crossed too many boundaries, people could no longer abide his offensive behavior. And they crucified him.

Don't you wonder that if Jesus were to stride in here today and step into this pulpit, what offensive message he might bring to us? Consider who are the outsiders or the enemies we might resent benefitting from God's blessings. We live in a deeply polarized time where boundary lines between races and political beliefs and class and economic status, and even between those who do and do not wear face masks, are firmly entrenched. Now imagine being told that someone from an opposing political party or a leader we find so appalling has received God's love and goodness, has benefitted in ways we feel are undeserved?

It is extremely challenging to resist the mentality of “us and them.” When people hold such outrageous beliefs, when people support and perpetrate outright lies, when the truth has no meaning, when we see blatant efforts to disenfranchise entire groups, and a refusal to take actions that support the common good—when such realities exist it is extremely hard not to give in to divisions. But here is what the gospel seems to tell us over and over again: whenever we draw lines between insiders and outsiders, we can expect to find Jesus on the other side.

We are called to walk with Jesus in doing the offensive work of love. Jesus’ kind of love is what we hear spoken about by Paul in 1 Corinthians. This kind of love is called *agape* in Greek. It is not a romantic love. It is not a love that depends on warm feelings. It is not a love just shared among your family and friends. This kind of love is a steadfast, enduring, act of the will that is given to family and strangers, to enemies and friends. This is God’s kind of love. And it is an offensive love. And living out this kind of love will enrage some people. Our prophetic message of love may not be accepted in our hometown, or among our family, or in our community, or by our neighbors. But Jesus calls us to do this offensive work anyway. It is the work you and I have been given to do with our lives.

We know this kind of work is not only offensive, it is also hard—extremely hard. But we are not left to do it on our own. Scripture tells us we can only love this way because God has first loved us this way. Despite all our imperfections, God’s love is patient and kind toward us. God’s love is not irritable or resentful. God’s love does not laugh at our weaknesses or rejoice in our failures. God’s love rejoices in the truth, that we are all God’s children. God’s love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God’s love never ends.