

What Turned a Respectable Congregation Into a Lynching Mob?

January 6, 2019

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As Luke tells the story of the ministry of Jesus he begins with his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. As Jesus came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him as a dove and a Voice from the heavens said, “You are my son, The Beloved; in whom I am well pleased.” It is what God would want *all* of us to hear: “You are my beloved daughter, son in whom I take delight!” Then the same Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. The test? What kind of son of God are you? Basically the three temptations came down to these questions: Will you use your son-ly power to serve others or yourself? And, will you adopt the coercive power of the sword or the persuasive power of love?

Jesus proved his true identity. Then full of the Holy Spirit...there’s the Holy Spirit again...he began his ministry of teaching and healing. These were the “wonder years”, what I call his “Galilean days”: full of miracles and teaching and growing crowds. His fame began to spread.

Then he returned home to Nazareth, and we get a glimpse of what would be in store for him. I call this sermon: “What Turned a Respectable Congregation Into a Lynching Mob? Or, Amazing And Disturbing Grace.”

On the Sabbath, “as was his custom” the text says, or as we might say, “as he was brought up”, he went to the synagogue to worship. When the time came for the portion of the Prophets to be read, Jesus unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of God’s favor.

It was one of their favorite texts. It proclaimed all the ways God would come to save *them*, the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed. God will come to deliver and to heal. The text captured their greatest hopes as God’s people. The reading had the makings of a great sermon. The congregation leaned forward to hear the words of this “hometown boy made good.” Then he sat down, in good

rabbinic fashion, to expound on the passage. His first words could not have been more thrilling: “*Today*, today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!”

The congregation nodded their approval. The “Amen corner” said Amen. Jesus was Judy Garland singing “Happy Days are Here Again.” Israel was going to be great again! One person punched the one beside him and said, “That’s Joe’s boy, isn’t it?”

Then Jesus began to interpret the text, and as he did the mood began to change. That’s where preachers get in trouble: when they begin to *interpret* the text for today. It is safer when it is sitting there on the page. And Jesus’ first act of interpretation was where he chose to stop the passage from Isaiah. He stopped it at “to announce the year of God’s favor.” He did not read what came next: “And the day of vengeance of our God.” The salvation of God Jesus brought was a salvation for *all* people, not just for Israel. There would be no vengeance for Israel’s enemies.

Then he gave two startling and disturbing examples. There were many widows in Israel during Elijah’s time during a drought of 3 ½ years, yet Elijah was sent (meaning by God!) to a poor widow in *Sidon*, pagan country! And there were many lepers in Elisha’s day, but he healed a leper named Naaman, a top general in the enemy Syria’s army!

The kingdom is here, but here for foreigners not just the Hebrews. The kingdom is here but in Havana, not Nashville. There's healing happening, and look, it's a Shiite general in Iran being healed. God's salvation is beyond our clan, our nation, our religion. In other words the kingdom of God is broader than the kingdom of Israel, or America.

Here is where Amazing Grace turns into Disturbing Grace. If we want it just for ourselves, for *me*, and not for others and not for *all*, it is not the grace of God revealed in Jesus.

I heard the story of the little girl in Sunday School who was taught the well loved song "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." She loved it and returned home singing it. The next week she was taught this song: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." She did not like the song so much. When she got home she had a pout on her face. She told her parents about the new song. They asked why she didn't like it. The little girl said, "But Jesus loves ME!" I think we need both songs. God's salvation is for me, and it is for all.

All of a sudden Jesus the homeboy became Jesus the stranger. The congregation was filled with "rage", the text says. And they seized him and hauled

him up to a cliff where they meant to throw him off. Somehow he slipped away, but the scene is a foreshadowing of what was to come: a Savior whose grace was too wide, whose compassion was too deep and whose way would be opposed by both religious and political leaders.

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It's not exactly how a minister pictures his or her first sermon! Being hauled away in anger. (It did give me pause, this text, about a preacher coming to his hometown, preaching and the community wanting to throw him off a cliff.) But Luke underlines that this sermon was a programmatic sermon, an inaugural address kind of sermon.

Jesus had come to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. How many ways are there to be poor? To be captive? To be blind, to be oppressed?

In any moment of our lives we can be poor or rich, bruised or healed, blind or sighted, captive or free. Sometimes we can be all these at the same time. We can be "rich in things and poor in soul", to quote the hymn, we can be broken and on the way to being healed, and as the saying goes, "There are none so blind as those who will not see."

I think that there are two ways, and only two ways that we can enter the kingdom and experience its joy. The first way is to be *among* the poor, oppressed, bruised blind and broken-hearted to whom the grace of God comes as healing, comfort, justice and liberation.

The other way is to be among God's people who are *going to* the poor, the oppressed, bruised, blind and broken-hearted bringing God's healing, comfort, justice and liberation.

Where are you in that first group today? Among the poor, oppressed, bruised, blind and broken-hearted? Open yourself to the grace of God coming as healing, comfort, justice and liberation.

And whom do you know who are poor, oppressed, bruised, blind and broken-hearted? You can be God's healing, comfort, justice and liberation to them.

Let me give one example. There is an epidemic of loneliness in America today. By a recent study, fifty percent of Americans feel lonely. And this loneliness can have very negative effects on one's physical, emotional and spiritual health. There are also more singles per capita than there have been in 140 years. Can we bring a saving friendship and community to them as a church?

If you are not in the first two groups, there is a third group: the by-standers, the critics, the evaluators, those who have grown cynical and jaded. The bored of the earth. Novelist, philosopher Walter Percy wrote that the root word for boredom is the French word “to stuff”, or “be stuffed”. We can be so stuffed with the things of this world that we no longer care. That is what “apathy” means, no-caring, no-feeling.

Bud Wilkinson, the former great football coach at Oklahoma once defined football as “22 men in bad need of rest being watched by 40,000 people in bad need of exercise.” Let us leave the stands and enter the game.

You may have heard the words of Teddy Roosevelt, our President about a century ago:

It is not the critic who counts, or how the strong stumble and fall or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the ones who are actually in the arena, who know the great enthusiasms, the great devotion, and spend themselves in a worthy cause. If these fail, at least they fail while daring greatly, so that they will never be one of those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Jesus wants to move us from the third group into one of the first two groups: the poor, oppressed, bruised, blind and broken to whom the grace of God comes, or

those going *to* the poor, oppressed, bruised, blind and broken hearted with the grace of God.

I have a funny feeling that these two groups are the same people! We who have received the grace of God into our need, now pass it on to others. The grace of God changes us from “harmed harmers” into “wounded healers.” The grace of God is poured from broken heart to broken heart.

Are you among those yearning for healing, comfort and emancipation today? Are you among those going out with God’s healing, comfort and emancipation? Then do you know who you are? You are the *church!* God’s own people. You are the *us* who have entered the kingdom of God and experience its joy. And *today* scripture is fulfilled in you!

So, may the Lord bless and keep you,

may the Lord’s face be upon you and be gracious to you.

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short

The grace to risk something big for something good.

The grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but

truth

and too small for anything but love.

So may god take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them

May God take your hearts and set them on fire!