

**“Jesus’ Inaugural Address”  
Luke 4:14-30**

Some years ago I read an article by a nationally known columnist who lambasted the church for its declining membership and influence in the life of society. He wrote something to the effect that “if preachers would just preach like Jesus who illustrated what he had to say with little stories and parables, the church would be overwhelmed with the crowds.” Obviously he wasn’t familiar with today’s story from the scriptures. Had he forgotten that Jesus was crucified on a cross?

The story begins with the word that **“all spoke well of [Jesus] and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”** A couple of paragraphs later the story ends with the word that **“they ... drove him out of town and ... [tried to] ... hurl him off the cliff.”** That makes it an intimidating passage on which to preach. Can any preacher be faithful to this text and get out of here alive?

Matthew and Mark place this incident later in the ministry of Jesus. Luke, however, places it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry almost as if it was his inaugural address. In it he outlines his agenda and the people’s response is a preview of what is to come.

The church traditionally reads this story at the beginning of the year as the third epiphany or manifestation of Jesus after the birth story. The first epiphany was at his baptism when Jesus was declared to be God’s beloved. The second was in Cana of Galilee when Jesus performed his first miracle and turned water into wine. But as someone has said, “there is more to being the Son of God than making a wine steward happy.” That something more is outlined in the third epiphany, Jesus’ sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.

It all begins well. He was given the scroll that contained the prophecy of Isaiah. It’s pure conjecture as to whether or not Jesus chose the particular passage he read, or he read what was the assigned “lectionary” reading for the day. I like to imagine that it was the latter because those times when I preach from the lectionary text and it is particularly appropriate and pertinent for what’s happening in this congregation, or for the events in our nation or world, preaching is much more exciting and convicting than had I chosen the text.

Jesus read, **“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.”** It was no doubt a familiar passage to the people. Their own hopes for liberation rested on those words. They longed for the day of such deliverance from the oppression of poverty, disease and Roman occupation.

After he read the passage, he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and said, **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”** The crowd was excited. They must have thought that today was the day for their deliverance and that Jesus would be in the lead. They were

taken aback by one little detail that didn't fit the scenario: "Isn't this Joe's boy?"

No sooner had Jesus cautioned that no prophet is honored in his hometown when things started to turn ugly. Jesus illustrated the text he read with two stories, just as that syndicated columnist wants all preachers to do, except it had the opposite effect. What happened? It's one of those good news / bad news scenarios. Did you hear about the Cardinal who rushed breathlessly to see the Pope and announced, "Holy Father, I have good news for you and I have bad news." "Well, tell me the good news first," says the Pope. "Holy Father, the good news is that Jesus Christ is coming again this very day!" "This very day! That's wonderful," says the Pope, "but if that's the good news, whatever can the bad news be?" "The bad news, Holy Father, is that he's going to Salt Lake City!"

To Salt Lake City and not Rome! To Sidon and not Judea. To a Syrian and not to an Israelite. Jesus doesn't promise that as God had led Israel out of slavery from Egypt he would once again part the waters so they could be free from Rome. Nor does he tell them that God's coming kingdom means no more than political freedom and a chicken in every pot because it also means freedom from sin and fear and everything that prevents them from knowing and loving God. Instead, he refers to two periods of Israel's history when two other prophets took God's word of grace and healing, not to the community of Israel, but to those outside the community, even to their enemies. Elijah ignored the needs of his own starving people to feed a Sidonian widow. Elisha cleansed the leprosy not of an Israelite, but of a Syrian. A Syrian!! Syria was just as much Israel's enemy as it is today.

The people got the point all too clearly: God's grace does not belong exclusively to them. The promised salvation which they longed for was not to be theirs alone. Charity may begin at home, but it doesn't stay there! That's what turned the crowd against him.

**'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets,'** Jesus would later say.<sup>1</sup> Well that day, Jesus didn't have to worry about people speaking well of him. **"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."**<sup>2</sup>

That beatitude is descriptive of the way most people reacted to Jesus' preaching. One theologian tells of a friend of his who had "an audience with His Holiness, the Dali Lama. 'When his Holiness speaks,' his friend said, 'everyone in the room becomes quiet, serene and peaceful.' Not so with Jesus. Things were fine in Nazareth until Jesus opened is mouth and all hell broke lose."<sup>3</sup>

What's the rub? Jesus' message at the very beginning of his ministry and throughout his ministry sounds very much like the hymn we will sing in a moment: *There's a wideness in God's mercy, Like the wideness of the sea; For the love of God is broader Than the measures of the mind.*<sup>4</sup>

Not only were Jesus' words an affront to the people of Nazareth, but so were his deeds. God's love does embrace the enemy. Witness his association with Samaritans. God's love does embrace the unorthodox. Witness his association with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other "sinners." God's love

does embrace the unworthy. Witness the parable of the father foolishly welcoming home his wayward son; or the parable of the laborers in the vineyard who receive the same wages, even though some work part of the day and others sweat it out all day long in the scorching sun.

The God whom we meet in Jesus Christ is much larger, much freer and much more inclusive than we are prepared for. The hard cold fact that the congregation in Nazareth couldn't bear to hear was that God is not Jewish! Nor is God an American. Nor is God a Christian, and most certainly God is not a Presbyterian! God is simply too great to be exclusively identified with any one group of the world's people.

He still offends us by showing us that we can never have the truth locked up in our theological systems and church polities. He offends us by reminding us that neither Israel nor the church are the exclusive recipients of God's saving love. Rather we are people in covenant with God to make his saving love known to the world. **"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."** It doesn't read, "God so loved the church..." And Jesus offends us, as he always has, by his call to move beyond partisan love to embrace all people, even our enemy.

If Jesus is so offensive, how can we call the news about him *Gospel—Good News*? It is good, not because it fits in nicely with what we want; not because it blesses and affirms our status quo; not because we can boast about being God's people. It is good because it speaks to human need. It is good because it is not only about one particular group of people, but it is about all people. It is good because it will save the world. **"Only [Jesus] has the words of eternal life."**<sup>5</sup> Only Jesus redefines greatness as being the servant of all. Only Jesus breaks the cycle of violence by turning the other cheek and praying not only for those who nailed him to the cross but for all who reject him, **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**<sup>6</sup>

After the Civil War was winding down and it was obvious that the Union would win, someone asked President Lincoln how he would treat the southerners after the war was over. He answered, "Like they had never been away." "But, Mr. President," the questioner protested, "aren't we supposed to destroy our enemies?" Lincoln responded, "Don't we destroy our enemies when we make them our friends?"

Ever since Day 1, humankind has been at war with God. I'm not even convinced that those of us who fervently pray, "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,*" really want to live in God's kingdom because it would necessitate great change in our lives. But in the crucifixion-resurrection event, we know that the decisive battle has been won and the war is winding down. Someday, God will welcome us, as the father welcomed home his prodigal son, "as if we were never away." No longer will we be the enemies of God, because **"in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself..."**<sup>7</sup> *Reconciliation* is best understood as "making enemies into friends."<sup>8</sup> That's how God destroys his enemies—by loving them, by loving us. But not just us, even a poor widow in Sidon,<sup>9</sup> even a commander in the Syrian army.<sup>10</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Luke 6:26
2. Matthew 5:11-12
3. William Willimon, Christian Century, January 27, 2004, p. 20
4. Hymn #298, *Presbyterian Hymnal*, Frederick William Faber, 1854
5. John 6:68
6. Luke 23:34
7. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
8. See the way the *Good News Bible* substitutes that phrase for the word *reconcile* in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
9. See the full story in 1 Kings 17:1-24
10. See the full story in 2 Kings 5:1-15