

January 30, 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

¹⁸ “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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Did Jesus know his audience a little too well?

They turn on him at the point that he starts putting words in their mouths. Typically that’s not a good idea and it certainly gets Jesus into trouble, to put it mildly.

But the reaction he gets from those who knew him well, or at least believed that they did, indicates he was spot on. He struck a nerve. Jesus’ words to them didn’t just irritate.

They didn't just give his closest neighbors something to think about. They hit -- and they hit hard -- and the crowd reflexively pushed back just as hard as they could.

The way the switch flips to violence so easily is shocking and so is the surreal and almost nonchalant way Jesus escapes the mob. He breezily "passes through" and just goes along on his way to his next stop, where he is accepted and where he does heal.

It all happens so quick and then everything moves right along ... and it might be simple for us to do the same. To figure the townsfolk who went to worship with Jesus were just a bunch of fakes and frauds who couldn't tolerate being called out on it. And that Jesus came away unscathed because it wasn't his time yet.

What have we to worry about? We are about as far from Nazareth as it gets and we are the ones who benefited from God's knack for going beyond boundaries where miracles

and healing might be expected to occur. The message of Jesus as Savior of the World has made it to most of the globe in some form and we are glad for that.

But what does it mean to be close to Jesus, now? For centuries, the Christian church has claimed Jesus for our own and has had a privileged status in the Western world. Generations reaped those rewards as Christians identified with Jesus Christ that the Nazarene villagers wanted, but did not get that day from Jesus of Nazareth.

In recent decades and accelerating in the most recent years, the church has waned in influence. The institution is no longer widely seen as having a monopoly on morality, among other things. This isn't an easy adjustment. It brings about a lot of anxiety and in the worst cases, without even realizing it, we push Jesus to the edge of that proverbial cliff when we hear we aren't guaranteed first spot in line and God has good gifts in store for the "wrong" people.

Jesus might have had more to say to the folks in the service in Nazareth that day but he got as far as he got before they wouldn't listen to one more word. He recognized their sense of entitlement, their expectation that they could set some boundaries around where God's gifts should go and he rejected those. Behind that seemingly innocuous, "Hey, isn't this Joseph's son?" he heard the impulse to possess him and *take* first fruits rather than give them. Jesus then turns to speaking some hard truths: they don't get to have him on their own terms and God has a history of reaching out to those who clearly didn't do anything to deserve it.

If we see ourselves as the ones who are nearest to Jesus today, we should recognize when our attitudes and actions demonstrate we want Jesus for our sake and on our terms, and not for those whose merits don't match up in our way of accounting. When we look to him to solve every

problem ... within our own circles we draw. And only then might we be OK if he turn to where his presence might be needed the very most. But we --as the Nazarenes were long ago -- are called to let God be God, for we are not.

As Jesus reminded the Nazarenes of times within their own history when God acted in expansive and unexpected ways, we too can look at the history of the Christian church, and we can see stark contrasts in the effects of looking outward versus looking inward.

Earlier this week, I attended a Zoom, along with at least one other member of Grace, in which Pastor Irvin Porter, of Nex Perce and Pima ancestry, and who serves the church on the Puyallup Indian Reservation, delved into the history of the Doctrine of Discovery. The ELCA in 2016 became one of a number of church bodies who have recently repudiated the doctrine. What the doctrine is and what it did is draw on 15th century papal bulls that declared Christian nations the

rightful and legal owners to any land they claimed and conquered and possessed that had belonged to non-Christian peoples.

The U.S. Supreme Court recognized the impact the doctrine had on international law and almost 200 years ago codified it in a decision on a land dispute. It still affects legal issues of tribal sovereignty today. It helped lay the groundwork for the school systems that forced native children from their homes to be Christianized and “civilized” on terms that did irreparable harm and took innocent lives.

Admitting this was wrong doesn’t take away the pain of this kind of harmful misuse of Christ’s name but it’s an important first step in reconciling the church in America with native peoples, many of whom like Pastor Irvin have developed a strong and complex Christian faith themselves.

The church’s history also, of course, provides examples of saving and revering the lives of children from outside the

Christian community that serve to inspire us. Roman custom allowed for newborn infants to be left exposed to the elements when unwanted, often leading to a cruel death. In the early church, as Latin inscriptions attest, when these babies were found by Christians, they were taken to monasteries and convents where they were baptized and often raised there or by families with which they made arrangements. Even those who couldn't be rescued were given a proper burial. In any case, they were seen not as godless and rejected but as children of God with inherent value.

That latter status is true, universal and unconditional. It continues with innocent babies who become flawed and sometimes just awful adults. It applies to sympathetic widows and it applies to sneering enemy generals. As the poor and lowly are lifted and the proud and rich humbled, it still applies to each.

No, I don't know what more Jesus might have had to say to those who refused to hear him out. He may have had more to say to reassure them God's provision for outsiders came not instead of, but in addition to, that which God always had in store for them. We do know, though, what Paul had to say not too long afterward. For now, we see in a mere dimly ...

We have a lot clearer, better quality mirrors now than were available in the first century. But we are still finite human beings who see clearest what's in front of us and lack more on the peripheral edges, our imaginations filling in the blanks of what's there and not always with great accuracy. Indeed we know only in part, and God knows us all too well. We can't push God away, God will not be moved that way. But we can trust God to see what we can't and what we won't and to stay out ahead of us, stretching our preconceived limits and broadening our perspectives. And hopefully, we will be moved. Amen.