

## **What Went Wrong?**

**Sermon for 1-31-10**

**Scripture: 1 Cor: 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30**

Today we are continuing the sermon of last week on Jesus' reading Isaiah in his hometown synagogue and then stating, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Last week we heard how the crowd was so amazed and impressed with him. This admiration lasts only for two verses. Then today's gospel continues that reading and ends up with the crowd being filled with rage and wanting to throw Jesus off the cliff. Wow! What went wrong? I had always been under the impression that their rage had something to do with his claiming his special position as a prophet rather than being humble. In fact the gospels of Matthew and Mark say, "And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, Prophets are not without honor except in their own country (hometown) and in their own house." (Mt. 13:57; Mark 6:3b) However, as I very carefully studied the scripture and the commentaries in Luke I saw a whole new possibility.

First let's look at the background of these Israelites and more specifically the Nazarenes. The Israelites have struggled to rebuild their community after a long time in exile. Isaiah's vision gave them hope during that time. Then closer to the time of this scripture event, these people were under the heel of the Roman Empire.

Now to Nazareth itself. You may have heard remarks such as “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was in a lot of trouble with so called pagans all around. Phoenicians lived to the west and north, Samaritans to the south, Greeks to the west. They were far away from Jerusalem, their holy city. Surrounded by so many pagan influences, it was hard to be a good pious Jew in Nazareth. They were eagerly awaiting Jesus return, hoping Jesus would make things right. Maybe he could turn it into a godly city again.<sup>1</sup>

Because of all of their struggles, these home folk were very interested in the line that Jesus left out when he read from the scroll of Isaiah, “the day of vengeance for our God”. They were waiting for that day when their enemies would get what’s coming to them. All those Gentiles and others that had given them so much trouble would finally be avenged by God, and Jesus was the one they thought could give it to them. Jesus would run all of those ungodly people out of town. They were hoping that maybe Jesus was the one who could turn Nazareth around so that their life would be better.

In Luke’s gospel, a question is posed from someone in the crowd: “Is this not Joseph’s son?” I had always been taught that this was a negative reaction to Jesus. Tannehill, a Lukan scholar says, “This question is not intended to denigrate Jesus but to point out that he is a hometown boy. According to the culture, this involves obligations. One must give preference

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Stoffregen, online.

to one's own family and village." So now I'm thinking, this wasn't an insult; however, the obligations they felt Jesus owed them were not about to be promised to them by Jesus.

After the question about Joseph's son, it is Jesus, not his town folks, that leads the conversation in a negative way. Among other things he announced that no prophet is accepted in the prophet's own town. And then he goes on with his examples about God's miracles with the benefactors are clearly not the Israelites. He tells them a story from Elijah's time when God miraculously provided for a poor, pagan widow. Jesus says, almost to rub it in, "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah the prophet, when the heavens were shut up for three years and six months, and there were many widows who died of starvation, but he was sent to none of them, but rather to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon." Can't you imagine the crowd in the synagogue mumbling to each other: "Is he saying that God likes Gentiles better than Jews?"

By now the crowds were infuriated, seeing Jesus as a false prophet and wanting to destroy them. As a therapist, I know so well how anger and rage can come from deep hurt and disappointment. Jesus wasn't what they expected. He didn't do the miracles they expected. He didn't say the words that they expected. He had to be a false prophet, because he didn't act like they wanted him to act.

To bring their rage into perspective for our modern day, can you imagine the rage of the United States if a prophet proclaimed that God's

love and the gift of God's Kingdom would mean the healing of Osama bin Laden and giving protection to all of Al Queda. Whoever the enemy may be would be the target of God's love and reconciliation. Why? Because Jesus proclaims a new kingdom of peace, loving one's enemy and ending the cycle of vengeance. What a wonderful new government it would be, based on truth and grace and reaching out to heal one's enemies!

Paul tells the Corinthians that he will show them a more excellent way, a way of love. No matter what great gifts, including prophetic powers one has, if we do not have love we gain nothing. None of our accomplishments stands up before love, which never ends and which outshines all the other virtues, even the great ones of faith and hope. It doesn't matter who we are or what our position or what we do, if we do not do it with love, it doesn't matter. If we don't have love, our spiritual gifts are worthless. Love is at the core of our Christian identity. Jesus said that they would know us by our love. Love is the core of God. God is love. Early on, Jesus told us to love our enemy, to do good to those that persecute us. What a difficult teaching to put into practice!

Jesus made it clear to the people listening to him on the Sabbath in his hometown synagogue that his ministry would not focus on the "in group" but on the excluded, on the outsiders, even the enemy.

What about this church? Does it exist to serve its own members or outsiders? I know that I have said more than once when discussing the

disbursement of the Deacon's Fund that it's important to take care of our own members. Yet I am very much aware of how many of our programs are directed to the outsiders—to name a few: the chicken bbq originally focused on the folks in West Deering and as the years went by, it became more of a mutual sharing in community. We also did the Christmas party with the town focusing mostly on children outside the church. We had a wonderful Earth Day a couple of years ago for the larger community. Our Forums and concerts are given free of charge to members and non-members alike. In spite of all this, I continue to hear things like how Deering church is an elitist group. From my experience here, I don't find that to be the intention of our members; however, there is that thing of like attracts like and the Sunday worship and many of the programs we sponsor probably are more appealing to more educated, liberal people. I don't know the answer of how to change the perception; even though some of our most beloved members have been welfare recipients.

Somehow, I believe if we actively reach out with love as Paul describes, we will be well on our way to following Jesus' teaching, even if others don't respond by attending or joining our church. Let me share an interesting paraphrase of first Corinthians 13 that came to me via my Midrash email group:

*What if I could stand up here and say the most wonderful things, and sound impressive and answer everyone's questions, but I didn't love anyone - what would be the point?*

*What if we were the most incredible church where every pew was filled the preaching was always inspirational - we had a choir that always sang perfectly and served the best coffee in town, but no one felt love - what would be the point?*

*And if as a community we teach our children lots of information and knowledge and they can recite the books of the Bible and know all the right answers but they don't know how to love, we've failed them.*

*If we focus on some and say 'he/she was a saint' and welcome newcomers, and collect money for the Mission and Service Fund, and we pray every week for the poor of the world and yet we don't feed the hungry and reach out to the poor of our communities around us, and don't care for the sick and the lost in Deering, and our surrounding communities, where is the honesty in that? If we don't love what's the point?*

*Love is kindness in action, offered simply and humbly. Love is not meant to make me look good, score brownie points with God, or draw attention to ourselves.*

*Love is co-operative; there are all kinds of ways of doing good and God is happy to use every way there is. Love only cares that what's needed is done. Love has the best interests of the other in mind.*

*Sometimes we grow weary and give up - we can't think of what else can be done. But God never gives up - God's love continues, and new possibilities are always appearing. What we know now is never the whole picture. What we do now is never the whole story.*

*In some ways we're like children: we do what we can and what we know to this point. But there's still more for us to learn, to grow into, to accept.*

*Some day we'll look back on where we are now, and wonder how we could*

*ever have wondered and doubted and refused to accept what was happening.*

*In some ways, it's like looking in an imperfect mirror. There's a reflection there, but it's not quite right, not totally true. We are the body of Christ, the image of God - but not perfectly, not completely, not totally truly ... not yet. The day will come when we will see. The day will come when we will know. Until then, we live in faith, trusting God's love. Until then, we live in hope, hoping for God's love. Until then, we live in love, showing God's love as best we can. because love is the point of it all.<sup>2</sup>*

**Remember that Jesus has said that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is there. The Holy Spirit is always with us here in Deering. Let us be intentional in our prayers and in our daily lives to follow the mission of our church: Love God; Love our Neighbor; Seek Justice, Peace and Diversity. Bless each of you here this day. May God help us all discern how this church can best reach out to others with love and compassion, turning outsiders to insiders, and becoming more intimate with each other. Amen**

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<sup>2</sup> Aapted from a Loaves and Fishes resource sheet, Wood Lake Books, 1998 by Rev. Brian Donst, United Church, Winona, ONT