

January 31, 2010
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21:30

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Checking the Connection

Last week, we were speaking of Jesus' inaugural address in the synagogue of his little hometown, Nazareth. When we left off, we had mentioned several connections: to be specific, several that Jesus had made, and one that the people had failed to make. Jesus' connections were to the prophetic history of the people; to the radical reorganization and restoration called Jubilee, with an implicit connection to the earth and all that is in it; and to the people, that they might not suffer from poverty, but find good news, that they might be freed from whatever bonds imprisoned them, that they might come to have vision, and that oppression might cease. The people, impressed by his reputation and his words, began to applaud his agenda. But they failed, as we will see, to grasp the connection between God's agenda as Jesus proclaimed it, and their participation with him in fulfilling that agenda.

So, as we move to today's topic, let's return to the scripture, and start back at the beginning of the story:

(after his time of testing) Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"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."

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. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 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?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me the proverb, Doctor, cure yourself!" and you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at

Capernaum.” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this all in the Synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

What in the world caused this sudden reversal from praise to murderous rage?

After all, it was the wisdom of Isaiah, in the words of one scholar, “that had sustained the people as they struggled to rebuild their community after exile; as they have suffered under the heel of the Roman Empire, and as they have looked forward in faith to a day when God would make all things right and whole again.” (Richard Swanson)

And now? Was it fear of disappointment? Were they afraid to get their hopes up, or were they offended by Jesus’ call for a Jubilee? Did they, like we often do, find it offensive that a hometown boy appeared to set himself up too high? Were they furious because Jesus added a twist to their understanding of the Holy Scripture? Jesus did two things that might have sparked their fury. First of all, he left out a line; a phrase that humans love to hear. Isaiah’s proclamation, which they knew well, continued after the words, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” with these words, “and the day of vengeance of our God.”

Who among us, if having spent a lifetime struggling under foreign oppression, would not cherish those words, “the day of vengeance?” Then Jesus went even further, and let them know clearly that as far as he was concerned, God’s favor towards the chosen people, his wish for justice for them, did not place them above the rest of God’s beloved children; in fact, sometimes the very sense of being favored prevented them from being able to accept God’s grace; while others, outsiders and foreigners, had received grace and healing, rather than vengeance, from God’s hand.

Jesus knocked their sensibilities for a loop. He challenged everything they thought they knew about God and their relationship with God. And so perhaps he

should do for us. As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor put it, “we need people to upset our equilibrium and yank our chains so that we don’t confuse our own ideas about God with God.” You see, God does not respect our self-chosen boundaries. God’s ideas are always bigger than ours; God’s vision is always challenging to us.

I mentioned last week that when we idolize a leader, we sometimes put that leader on a different plane than the one on which we ourselves exist. We sit back and wait for that distinguished and distinct person to do everything for us. We do it to those we think of as ordinary human beings, and how much more tempting it is to do this with the one whom we call the Messiah, the Christ, God’s anointed one, Savior? And when that one dares us to change and to participate in change, we can get darned angry about it. We would much prefer that our hero tell others to change and offer us a pat on the head. While the people of Jesus’ home town got angry enough to want to throw him over the cliff, we today usually deal with it by not hearing it. By turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to the message, because after all that was a different time and a different place, and also because we have succeeded in thinking of Jesus as so different from us that we couldn’t possibly be expected to stretch our own minds and, like the Grinch, let our hearts grow two sizes.

You see, God’s love shone through Jesus, and lesser though we might be, God’s love can shine through us, too, to bring transformation to our lives and to the world. We have just celebrated Christmas, and since that was a whole month ago, maybe we have been able to separate ourselves from its message, also, enough to only remember the angels and the shepherds and the glory, but to forget the very human hope that was vested in the Christ child and is vested in every child of God. Someone commented that we don’t get to sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and forget about it. We don’t get to sing “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight” and then go on with business as usual.

As people of faith, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to follow. To get busy. If we believe that Jesus called for justice, for new vision, for freedom from our own prisons, we have better get about it. Our faith is expressed not in creeds, or in pious statements, or in ringing sermons, or even in satisfaction with our church, but in transformed lives. Our lives and the lives of those around us. What would it look like if we believed that Isaiah's vision and Jesus' sermon were fulfilled this day in our midst?

Let's check and make sure we have gotten the connection. Nothing Jesus does on the face of this earth is done without the help of people who, when their beliefs get challenged, when their chains get yanked, dare to open themselves to a new vision, a new hope, a new way of looking at life. Do you really want justice for all? Does that include health care and immigrants' rights? Does that include recognition that "the earth is the Lord's and the creatures thereof?" Does that mean sometimes dealing with discomfort, and sometimes fighting the desire to withdraw, the nostalgia for our comfortable but confining personal prisons? Check your connection. Stop and pray. Imagine the world actually existing as God would have it be. Ask what your role is in that transformation. And give thanks. Give thanks, for God is good to us.

This isn't the end of this sermon. There's one more installment next week, when the Bible message will lead us to think about activating the connection.