

Tracy Daub  
2/3/19--University Presbyterian Church  
Luke 4:16-30

## NO OTHER

The hometown crowd was very impressed. Jesus had come to Nazareth, his hometown, and when it was the sabbath day he, as usual, went to the synagogue. And there, before his neighbors and friends, extended family members, and the community that knew him from the time he was a baby, Jesus stood up and read from the scriptures. Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah: "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." The crowd was impressed. Here was Joseph and Mary's son looking so grown up. What a great speaking voice! What poise and presence he had before an audience! What a great command he had of the sacred text! What a fine young man he had grown up to be! They were so proud of their hometown young man that they probably didn't even pay much attention to the meaning behind the words he read from Isaiah, or what he meant after he rolled up the scroll and stated, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Everyone was very impressed.

And that is why what Jesus does next is so surprising. You know, every liturgist loves to hear after the service what a good job they did in reading the scriptures. Every preacher loves to hear after the service, "That was a great sermon!" We all like affirmation. But instead of basking in their praise, Jesus uses that moment to provoke his audience. What he says to them gets them boiling mad--so angry that they drive him out of the town and some of them even attempt to throw him off a cliff! So what just happened that caused this rapid mood change?

What Jesus says to them doesn't make a lot of sense to us all these centuries later. We need to unpack it if we are to understand it. Jesus reminds his audience of two stories about two prophets in their history. The first was about the prophet Elijah who during a time of famine offered assistance to a widow in Sidon. And then he speaks about the prophet Elisha who extending healing to a general named Naaman who had leprosy. What unites both of these two stories is that the people who received help from these two prophets were Gentiles. Elijah helped, not Israelite widows, but the Gentile woman of Sidon. Elisha cleansed not Israelite lepers but the Syrian Gentile. These were foreigners, outsiders, often considered enemies to the people of Israel. And here Jesus is proclaiming God's love, care, and assistance given to foreigners instead of to the people of Israel. And just like Jesus ruined the good mood of his audience. Just like that, Jesus ceased to be a friendly and benign presence in the synagogue that day.

Perhaps Jesus decided to preach this upsetting message because he sensed that his audience was failing to grasp the profound meaning of the Isaiah passage and what he meant when he proclaimed, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Maybe the hometown crowd was so taken with the hometown boy, Joseph's son, the kid they thought they knew so well, that they domesticated the message Jesus brought to them. They thought they understood Isaiah, they felt comfortable with their understanding of the sacred text, and they were at ease with this hometown kid who brought them God's message. And maybe Jesus took that moment to shock them awake with the full meaning of what God was doing. So Jesus says to them, "When I talk about God's good news to the poor, I'm talking about people right outside the door of this synagogue, people you pass by each day on the street, people you wouldn't want to touch or be seen with. When I talk about bringing release to captives, I'm talking about people

you don't approve of. When I speak about recovery of sight for the blind, I'm speaking about people you think are guilty of doing something wrong. When I read about letting the oppressed go free, I'm talking about people caught up in unjust systems that benefit you. When I read these words from Isaiah, I am speaking about people you don't like, people you don't trust, people you won't eat with, people you don't want to live next to, people you may even consider your enemies." When Jesus reminds the synagogue audience of the kindness God offered foreigners through the prophets Elijah and Elisah, and connects this to his reading of the Isaiah passage, Jesus is driving home a message about God the people don't want to hear. And doing so, Jesus challenges their sense of *exceptionalism*.

Exceptionalism is the idea that you and your people are exceptional in some way, that you and your kind are entitled to a greater share of life's bounty, a greater share of God's love, a greater share of God's favor than others. The idea of exceptionalism has been a strong factor in the history of the United States. The idea that the United States is entitled to a greater share of life's blessings has driven this country to expand its range from sea to sea, to seize lands occupied by others, to claim a greater share of the world's resources for ourselves, to engage the world with an attitude of prerogative. But the United States was not the first people or nation to adopt this attitude. People have always organized themselves based on insiders and outsiders. Insiders are those who are part of our tribe, our family, our nation, our political party, our religious group, our race, our gender. The insiders are accepted and receive the privileges associated with membership of the group. And the rest, the outsiders, are regarded as "other." In Jesus' world, the list of those in the "other" category was varied. It included Gentiles, who were not Jewish, Romans--the hated occupiers, tax collectors and other collaborators of the Roman government, sick and diseased and injured people who were regarded as sinners, Samaritans who

were close cousins to Jewish people but considered enemies nonetheless, women who were second class citizens, and many more. We today could craft our own list of those people considered "other": immigrants, whether legal or undocumented, refugees fleeing suffering and violence, Muslims, drug addicts, welfare recipients, the imprisoned, Republicans or Democrats. No matter who you are, your place in society, your income level or education, your politics, your religion, there are always people we consider "other."

But Jesus said in that synagogue, there are no "others." There are no "others." He doesn't care whether that person is your enemy. He doesn't care if that group espouses values you don't like. He doesn't care if they are foreigners without proper documentation. Everyone is included in God's care, God's love, God's grace. Jesus is not giving people a pass for harmful or hurtful behaviors. What he is doing is challenging us all to look beyond our tribe, to recognize that God's care extends beyond all the barriers we create. We may erect walls to keep out those we don't want or like, we may create legal barriers or social barriers that privilege our kind and keep the others at bay, but Jesus comes to tear down our barriers with the offensive message that God's care and love are not relegated to a select few. God's love and care are for all, especially the poor who need good news, the captives who need release, the blind who need healing, and the oppressed who need liberty. And if we are to follow Jesus, we must be prepared to tear down walls that divide, be they physical walls, social walls, or psychological walls. And that message is as likely to stir up an angry crowd today as it was in Jesus' day.

David Lose, preaching professor writes, "The hard thing about the God we know in Jesus is that whenever you and I draw a line between who's in and who's out, we will find Jesus on the other side."

We might then ask ourselves about the lines drawn in our world today and where Jesus would be standing today. Because that is precisely where he beckons us to join him.