



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 4 (C)

We Are His

[RCL] Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

“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.” – Luke 4:28-30

This is how it ends, the story that began last Sunday: it is Jesus’ first sermon in his hometown synagogue. Word had spread of all the amazing things he had been doing all over the place. We can imagine the headlines, “Hometown Boy Makes Good!” But how quickly things can turn—and turn bad. Ugly and very bad. They want to hurl him over a cliff and be done with him. And why? All because they wanted a piece of him and his power—which seems fair enough. They wanted to see water turned into wine, the lame healed, recovery of sight to the blind, the whole nine yards. They wanted to see it and experience it right here in Nazareth and right now, thank you very much.

And so do we. That is all they wanted. That is all we want. We are members of his community. We are his people. We are faithful. We want a piece of the action right here, right now, just like the good people of Nazareth.

They felt they deserved at least that much. Didn’t they contribute to his upbringing? Didn’t they put up with his unusual parentage? Didn’t they go to synagogue faithfully every week? Didn’t they study God’s word every day? And pray morning, noon, and night? Didn’t they feel proud when hearing accounts of his marvelous deeds that he had come from Nazareth? He’s one of us, they say! He is ours, they say! Isn’t that why we keep coming back Sunday after Sunday ourselves to eat his body and drink his blood? To claim him as our own? Isn’t he ours?

But listen to his unsympathetic response. He knows what they are thinking before they even say it. He goes to great pains to remind them that our God works in mysterious ways. That God’s power is often focused on strangers far outside the friendly confines of our cozy little communities of faith. He reminds them that Elijah was sent to a foreign widow in Zarephath; that Elisha cleansed a dreaded Syrian. A Syrian! There were people in need right here in our own community. Yet, he reminds them, God has always looked out

for those in need beyond the community of faith, beyond the boundaries of our towns, our countries. God's power is not ours. God is not ours. Rather, we are his.

They don't want to be reminded of the Biblical story, the story of the community of faith. They want to run him out of town on the proverbial rail, tarred and feathered, and leave him for dead at the bottom of the cliff—just as the people had done when they heard the young prophet Jeremiah, hurling him to the bottom of a well, so they could be done with his constant proclaiming of the Word of the Lord! And you should see the bottom of those town cliffs in Israel. Often, they are garbage dumps. They want to hurl him into the garbage dump, amongst the fires and the ashes that are always burning down there. Yet somehow, he manages to get away. He escapes like his people had escaped from Egypt so long, long ago in that first Exodus, after that first Passover.

All this because they really did not hear him in the first place. Our lectionary suspects we have missed it as well. This must be why we get this story two weeks in a row. He says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." "This scripture" is the 61st chapter of the Isaiah, where the prophet proclaims God's care and reversals of fortune for all those in need. The operant word, as always, is "all." They did not want to share God or God's care with "all." God's care is ours. This Jesus is ours. They do not want to hear about a God who cares about Syrians and Zarephathians and all those foreigners. We want God's power and care right here in Nazareth and in Nazareth only. He is one of us. He is ours.

They miss what he says. "This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Our hearing ought to result in our participating in welcoming strangers, even Syrians and Zarephathians and gentiles of all kinds from all over the world. Our hearing this Word ought to result in our doing the work Jesus does, and, he will tell them later at his Last Supper, those who hear God's Word will do even greater things than these – greater things than Jesus did (John 14:12).

Jesus reminds them that as covenant partners with God, going all the way back to the wilderness, the Exodus, and the Ten Commandments, that they were the people appointed and anointed by God to live their lives in such a way so as to be God's demonstration community of faith, hope, and charity for all people—or, as Paul would have it, God's community of Love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13).

What he is saying with all these stories and proverbs is, in effect, "Get with it. Turn water into wine yourselves. Bind up the brokenhearted. Give hope to those without vision. Liberate the oppressed. Release people from their debts. God has given you the vision of the Year of the Lord's Favor. Live that kind of life. You don't need me around here. You are already God's people called to do God's work, just like me."

He is also saying, "Do not think that just because you are faithful and in covenant with God that you have some kind of lock on God's power. You do only in the sense that you give that power to others. Real others. Really other others, like Syrians and Zarephathians and all manner of strange other people outside of Nazareth—outside of our little demonstration community."

That is, our God is not a God who lives only in Israel, our country, the Christian tradition, the Church, our denomination, our parish, or whatever boundaries we wish to set. God is not ours. Jesus is not ours. We are his. And we are to go beyond the boundaries we set just as Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah did. Jesus, Paul and all those who have truly heard the Word of God in their hearing, in their hearts, and in their lives, know this and live this.

God calls us to work where and when God pleases. If the scripture is to be fulfilled, it must be in our hearing it, our embodying it, our acting upon it – literally, our being it. And to become the fulfillment of the Word of God, we need to let go of all notions that Jesus, the hometown kid, is ours, and begin to figure out what it means that “we are his.” He has a special claim on us, not we on him.

What he said that day in Nazareth is just as true today: Live the life Isaiah proclaimed and God will see to it that all your water is wine—and not just any wine, but good wine, wonderfully good wine that will warm your hearts and make you glad that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed you to do these things and more. All these things and more. Our cups will be filled to overflowing, and all the world will see that the Good News of Christ shines through all that we say and all that we do. This is how we will become a community of Love, a people of faith, hope, and charity – a people who know that we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Amen.

*This sermon, written by **the Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek**, originally ran for Epiphany 4 (C) in 2019.*