



northminster presbyterian church

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SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

SERMON: Most Likely... To Change The World! (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

Two phone stories that remind us of the importance of *Call* in Jesus' life and in our lives: A woman meant to call a record store but dialed the wrong number and got a private home instead. "Do you have 'Eyes of Blue' and 'A Love Supreme'?" she asked. "Well, no," answered the puzzled home-owner. "But I have got a wife and 11 children." "Is that a record?" she inquired. "I don't think so," replied the man, "but it's as close as I want to get."

A college student joins a big corporate empire as a Summer Intern. On his very first day of work, he dials the pantry and shouts into the phone, "Get me a coffee, quickly!" The voice from the other side responded, "You fool you've dialed the wrong extension! Do you know who you're talking to, dumbbo?" "No" replied the Intern. "I'm the CEO of the company, you fool!" The Intern shouts back, "And do YOU know who YOU are talking to, you fool?!" "No," replied the CEO indignantly. "Good!" replied the Intern, and puts down the phone.

One important element of fulfilling God's call used by Jesus was preaching. The telling and proclaiming of the Word of God was key in Jesus' ministry. In all sorts of ways, in all sorts of situations, Jesus preached. On the highway, from a boat, picking up themes from the older Testament, using images and stories, to groups big and small, to the disciples, among the crowds, in the Temple, in the market-place and as we ponder again today, in the local synagogues each Sabbath.

Our passage today in Luke describes Jesus' first sermon and we can hear that Jesus breaks *all the rules* for good preaching. From day one, first sermon, Jesus goes on the attack. Instead of telling a corny joke, or offering some personal quip to win the hearts of the hearers, or some captivating story or pertinent piece of poetry, Jesus gets in their faces! This is the first record of a sermon by Jesus and in it He antagonizes all of those who listen, assaulting them all with a message from God that was hard to hear.

As we may recall from last week, things had been going pretty well for Jesus amid the hometown crowd. Things were A-Okay at Nazareth Synagogue, which had recently identified itself as a purpose-driven, seeker-sensitive community. But then Jesus opened His mouth and bedlam ensued. *What was Jesus thinking?*

On this Opening Day, with all the bunting in place and a large, eager, expectant crowd on hand day, including his own family, in His first sermon, Jesus throws the book at the congregation, hitting them right between the eyes. We preachers are a sorry bunch at times but no wonder. You see sometimes, most often, your Pastors love you in the name of Christ, believing, hoping, enduring just about everything with you. But then, sometimes we have to love you by throwing the Book at you, just as Jesus did.

For Jesus, and for all preachers in the Church, proclamation of whatever style has the goal of inviting listeners - you and me and you again - to "abandon the script" that up to this time has given our lives purpose and meaning, and to offer and suggest, proclaim and explain imaginatively, and gently, *and not-so-gently*, a new story. A different script, that when we adopt it, will change our lives. Such preaching is akin to surgery. Few of us approach surgery very willingly, even when it becomes clear that it is what we need. But what a difference that new knee or new hip or re-attached retina or removed cataract makes in our life. Embracing God's story will be a challenge. It will involve some pain. It will disturb our existence. But you wouldn't want to miss it ... *that is why you are here today!*

It was this act of offering the good people of Nazareth a new script, a new story to shape and guide their lives, that turned what had been a prideful homecoming into a riot!

The particular words of Jesus that saw this community's pride in their hometown boy turn so ugly so quickly were words about God, words of grace, love, welcome, hospitality and acceptance. Jesus offered this new story very gently, relating the truth that the news of God's deliverance was not to be restricted only to Israel, *but was to be extended to all people*. I think we can agree that the Nazarenes were impressed, very impressed with the way Jesus talks, the winsome words coming from his mouth. As such, they are fit to burst and to scream and to generally show their appreciation for Mary's boy, Joseph's son, taking a smidgen of pride that they helped raise this young un - but they are very far from receiving, accepting, and acting on the story Jesus offers them. Dogonit Jesus is telling fun stories, good stories, faith stories, but not about us or His own People - instead Jesus is highlighting the role of non-believers.

Jesus is making heroes out of Gentiles, friends out of enemies, neighbors outta furiners, first violinists out of banjo players, insiders out of outsiders. In telling these stories, it is as if Jesus actually brings into his hometown synagogue that widow from Zarephath and Namaan the Syrian. *And that is a scandal!* Jesus brings the unknown, unimaginable, unwanted, unkempt, unwashed, untouchable into the very midst of this community, *and it is a scandal!* A scandal, all the more, because it is one of their own who is doing this to them, who is stabbing them in the back, who is exposing how much they have not understood about their own faith, how far they have to go to put things right. It is the boy from down the street, across the road, round the corner who presents what they would rather avoid, it is their neighbor's boy who offers them a mirror in which they can see their disfigured, diminished, dulled, debilitated faith.

This explains the great force that lies in their query: *"Is not this Joseph's son? Jesus is no special person; he has no unusual lineage; he's just one of us, and since this is so, just who the *%#@# does He think He is? What entitles him to make such brash claims?"* In Nazareth that day familiarity indeed bred contempt, deep contempt, so much so that there was a chance that this would Jesus' first and last sermon.

It won't be Jesus' last sermon, but at least for a time it was a close run thing! Nor will it be the last time Jesus extends the Good News of God's love to the stranger and foreigner - a very common theme in Luke's Gospel. Time and again, Jesus' parables will lift up the ugly outsiders, the greedy tax collectors, the hated Samaritans. Time and again, the image of a party an or a celebration is used to stress and imply God's welcome not for the faithful but for the prodigal. The parable of the Great Dinner declares that all those invited to the dinner, the insiders, the people of Israel, will stay away because they think they are too busy or too preoccupied to attend. Instead the host invites those in the streets and lanes, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, *all outsiders*, and the feast of God begins and the feast of God continues, even today.

All of us desirous of welcoming Jesus into our church, into our lives, into our community should learn a mighty lesson from Jesus' visit to Nazareth: *The God who is really God is not ours alone*. God does not belong to us, we belong to God. A parochial God is not God; *God's revelation in Christ is to everyone*, Christian and non-Christian alike. If we are intolerant of others, of different churches or different faiths, we would merely repeat the rage of the Nazarenes in driving Jesus out of town. My friends, if we cannot accept that God's goodness and saving grace is offered to all, it will become impossible for us to receive this grace for ourselves.

Why do we not accept the prophet when we see them or hear him or her? Why do we drive the prophet from their and our home? We do so because we have allowed the everyday story with which we are surrounded and in which we are so immersed to control and define our lives. And even when we might seek something different, we would rather escape through entertainment, or be dazzled by impressions, or fads, or works of wonder, or the far out, than consider the very simple, yet much-needed truth that is right here under our feet: *The truth that God loves the whole world in Jesus Christ, and that God has something for each of us to do and to be in response!*

Thinking we know who we are, where we are and what we need, we ignore God's saving presence; thinking we understand the true message of Jesus, a message with which we have reduced to what suits us and with which we have become all together too cozy and comfortable. We are able to maintain our distance from God, for God's purposes, for our neighbors, from those

in need. Heck, *we even keep our distance from one another in the church.* And then, it gets worse because Jesus comes to us as a prophet and points out that foreigners are more acceptable to God than we are - *and we get furious.* When Jesus criticizes our own blindness and our inability to see God all around us, we get angry. We reject the One who speaks with authority, even though we recognize Jesus as One who tells us the truth and embodies the truth.

God, the Divine Lover, never stops seeking all of us. Remember that little saying: If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it! *Well, its true!* God sings an eternal love song. God keeps on coming to all of us, offering meaning and purpose and restoration. God sends us flowers, gives us chocolate, takes us out to dinner, listens to our moans and groans, our worries and problems. God bears our pain and endures our whining. God only occasionally punches us in the back when we are snoring. God leaves signs and messages to assure us that we are loved, God pours out the divine heart, *in love for all, for us, for you, for me.*

God's love invites us to riot, not in fear or rejection, but in a riot of compassion and welcome and prayer and care - hustling to show and share God's love as Jesus did. *"Most likely to change the world"* Yep, that could be Jesus. But in a final twist that other description of Jesus that we started with last week will also be fulfilled, *"Most likely.... to work with wood!" Amen.*

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4:21-30

21Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23He 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.'" 24And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25But 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; 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They 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. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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