St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21=30

In The Midst of Love

Anyone who has ever left home from west to east or east to west or even midway in between, to earn the degree, or to put it into real action, has learned that for all the success and accolades from the world at large, what one has, or has become, just won’t play the same way when you bring it home.

One can never escape the imprint of one’s childhood and it takes incredible courage and daring to call out all those one left behind when you ventured out beyond the village gates to become something more than you were before you left.

Mom and Dad, the relatives, and siblings, the neighbors and the just, plain curious have been hearing of your successes beyond those gates, and now that you have come home, they want to see, touch and hear the greatness of you. After all, you are one of them and thus they are more to you than the rest of the uncaring, unrelated world. You are like them, and they are like you. One and the same. Surely you will include them on the inside track, tell them what they want to hear, give them something from which the rest of the world is excluded.

Yet, at some point during the homecoming, much to their dismay and disappointment, they realize that you have changed. You are no longer who you were, and your words do not convey exclusivity for them or for anyone else.

It was like that for Jesus, coming home after creating quite a reputation for amazing miracles and healings out in the world beyond Nazareth. Here he was, after a long absence, Joseph’s boy, a good boy growing up, destined to be a fine carpenter like his father. One of us. One of our own, who thinks like us and knows us and will always put us first.

After some initial amazement and admiration at Jesus words, as he finished reading Isaiah, rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the priests in the synagogue, the murmuring began and rose in hostility as Jesus put forth the truth of his ministry, which is to love all people equally, regardless of who they are, what they are, or where they’re from. Being the home team doesn’t rate any more than people wo live in places nobody’s ever heard of.

This was shocking news to his listeners, who were certain he would pronounce them as special and therefore, perform miracles extraordinaire created exclusively for them. And now, the message is brought home to us. Jesus doesn’t belong exclusively to any one of us, nor does Jesus belong just to this church or to the Episcopal church, or any other denomination or Christian tradition. As we say in our Eucharistic prayers when we speak aloud of Christ’s “perfect sacrifice for the whole world.” In our Rite 1 scriptures, we quote the Apostles who taught, “if anyone sin, we have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the perfect offering for our sins and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The people of Nazareth were good people, trying their best to please God as best they knew how by loving God and their neighbor. Like us and like good people across the world. But they couldn’t help the very human belief, often like us, that all the good news that Jesus brings and all the possibilities of life-giving miracles, are mostly focused on us. It is a belief that set the relationship between Jesus and his hometown on a collision course, that would have to be reckoned with in the years to come. It is a belief that sends or keeps people who cannot reconcile the importance of others to the importance of self, away from the church and closed to the possibility of understanding of what Jesus is asking of us all.

We have the advantage of hindsight that wasn’t available to those listening to Jesus in the synagogue. We have learned that Jesus wasn’t here just to be a good guy to those who believed he was one of them. We have learned that Jesus is here, not to take sides, not to endorse any particular political position, not here to land with us on any side of any dividing line.

Which leaves every good Christian with some measure of disappointment. Surely Jesus believes as we do. Surely, Jesus would approve of how we think, how we vote, how we tackle some of the world’s greatest problems, or how we perceive them.

We want to love our neighbors, and we want to love ourselves. We don’t want to be racist, or angry or up in arms and this is a very good start on our way to understanding Jesus’ teaching and message to us. Jesus never said he was going to simply be nice, and he never intended that we would expect scripture to make us feel more comfortable. We just have to look at our Hebrew scripture from Jeremiah to recognize that prophets were never intended to tell the people only what they believed or wanted to hear. Just the opposite. As the famous quote about the press states, our job “is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”[[2]](#footnote-2) I’m pretty sure the author who came up with this phrase wasn’t quoting Jesus, but it’s highly likely that Jesus would have well understood the meaning of this from the work of the Prophets whose words he knew by heart.

Jesus wasn’t visiting Nazareth to receive pleasant accolades from his home town, nor was he there to make everyone feel good. And as much as we praise God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, it would do us well to remember that our Triune God is not here just to make all our problems go away or to give us an exclusive hug.

For the people of Nazareth, this comes as a nasty wakeup call, as Jesus, recognizing their misplaced adoration and expectation, does a very quick and unwelcome one-eighty turn, coining what would become another famous quote, “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” Ouch!

Then Jesus proceeds to teach the people listening and to teach us today. He speaks of Elijah, one of the greatest Hebrew prophets of all time, who didn’t turn his attention to feed the people of his own world of Nazareth, or Jerusalem or even Capernaum, but the one who would be considered an outsider, a simple widow in Zarephath, Lebanon. And then there was Elisha, remember him, he asked. Elisha did some amazing things in his time, but he was called on and administered to the outsider Naaman from Syria. Remember this, Jesus teaches, all blessings that come from God are meant for all that lives in Creation, from the mountains to the seas. In other words, good people, it’s not just about you.

It was these references that got the people of Nazareth so worked up that they wanted to throw Jesus off the nearest cliff. After all, if he is thinking about everyone else but us, how can he think he’s one of us anymore? Off the cliff with him!

But then, Jesus, really brings home his point, a detail Luke wants to be sure we don’t miss. Jesus will not be forced to take sides, us against them. He is not for this or against that. Not pro or anti. Not republican or democrat, conservative or liberal, favoring particular genders, age groups, nationalities, what we look like and what color we are, our economic status, where we work or went to school, the length of our resumes or the absence of them. And no, although it’s hard to admit, he wasn’t an Episcopalian!

He would not be imprisoned by any need to impress one group versus another and to make his point, Jesus simply passes through the midst of the yelling crowd of hometown sinners and disappears from the sight and sound of them to follow his own path.

His path led to you and to me and to the rest of the world. Through the midst of us, available to all, no matter how we look when he finds us. And whenever he comes across yet another call to take sides, he will walk through the midst of both sides, loving each as much as the other.

If actions speak louder than words, then his actions that day in Nazareth would resound forever as the foundational words of his ministry and teaching; to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” For it is, he said, “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

It is appropriate that part of Paul’s letter to the people of Corinth should be included as part of the conversation with Luke’s Gospel. While 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13 is most often called upon to be read at weddings, and seems to fit well for such occasions, Paul never intended it for a marriage ceremony. He was writing about the limitless width, breadth and depth of Christ’s love for all God’s people. It is about the limitless size of Christ’s love, a love that is bigger than any description we, or any newlyweds, or even Paul could give it.

And therein lies our problem. We see love as easy, as long as we love something or somebody we like. For Jesus, love could never be as limited or limiting or confining as that. Love cannot be that exclusive, cannot leave out anyone beyond those we know and love instinctively. Love cannot, whether within or outside of our close relationships, include jealousy, envy or hatred or even a little rudeness. Love cannot take sides, cannot pick one over another. In a world that seems to insist that sides must be taken and adhered to, to the detriment of those opposite, no matter in what way, where or for whatever reason, Jesus will continue to walk through the midst of it all, walk through our noise and lack of forbearance, loving us even in our unloveliness, loving us like the brothers and sisters we are.

We are not called to be enemies, to each other or to ourselves. Our enemies are real and cannot always be easily seen or identified. Yet they are there. Our sins, our fears, our self-protection against adverse opinion, our judgements and resentments, our sense of loss and lack of direction and purpose, can all vanish in the sight and faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, let us follow the God who walks through the midst of all that divides us.

Let us follow the God who offers sure and certain hope as a light to enlighten the nations.

Follow the God who broke the bonds of worldly confinement to embrace all people in every part of God’s world.

Let us notice the fulfillment of God’s word through the scriptures and in the moments of God’s greatness that happens every day, yet are too often shadowed by bad news.

Let us follow the God who is present in this very present time of trouble, within all the challenges and triumphs of our lives, and who has no need to be convinced, by what we insist is right or wrong.

Let us follow Christ, through the midst of all God’s people, especially those we do not know or understand.

To love big. To love wide. To love with abandon and without condition is to venture into the very midst of the length, breadth and depth of God’s love and to experience an inexplicable inner joy which the world can never extinguish.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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1. BCP 332 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ***“Th’ newspaper does ivrything f’r us...comforts th’ afflicted, afflicts th’ comfortable.”***[***Finley Peter Dunne***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finley_Peter_Dunne)***(1867-1936)*** *American journalist and humorist* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)