The Rejection of Jesus

LUKE 4:14-30 (NRSVUE) ***Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region.*** ***15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*** ***16When 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,*** ***17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:***

18"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 set free those who are oppressed,
19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
20And 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. ***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 this not 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 his 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 with a skin disease 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.***

The Word of God for the people of God!

This is a crucial passage in the New Testament, and its importance can easily be overlooked if we don't pay careful attention to the context. One reason is that Mark and Matthew more or less dismiss it, almost like, "Oh, by the way, they were offended by him."

But Luke takes great care in reporting it. Jesus is baptized by John, goes immediately into the wilderness for 40 days where he is tempted by the devil, and then Luke says he returned to Galilee, where he grew up, and began teaching in their synagogues, and *he was praised by everyone*. So, why was he rejected in his hometown?

Maybe we can get into the minds of the people in Nazareth through a memory from my childhood. I remember Christmas mornings growing up. My sister is five years younger than I, and our interests were different. She liked "Saucy Walker" and I liked dump trucks; so, there was never a problem.

But, over at my cousins' house it was different. I know some of them usually watch our services, and I hope they remember. We alternated Christmases: their house – our house. There were five of them—two boys, three girls—and the biggest age difference between any two of them was twenty months! When they opened

their presents on Christmas morning, it was always with one eye on what the *others* got. Just checking…

I saw many a pouting lower lip before Christmas morning was over; and more than once I heard my Aunt say, "But don't you like what *you* got? Didn't you get what you asked for?"

"But his is bigger!"

Remember the one-liner from the Smothers Brothers: "Mom always liked you best?" My cousins are very close today; but if that issue is not resolved by adolescence, it can become neurotic.

I recall an old TV series: "Sisters." There were lighthearted moments—moments of tenderness—even celebration; but, usually, the stories revolved around three women who, genetically, were sisters, but whose relationships and personalities reflected a dysfunctional family system.

Now, imagine a whole culture demonstrating that same neurosis, but not about "Mom." Israel considered themselves Children of God; and there were no sibling rivalry problems. As far as they were concerned, Israel was an 'only child'.

From the beginning it was made clear that they were God's *chosen* people; but they were not God's *only* children. From the first covenant with Abraham, 2,000 years before Christ, here is what God said to Abraham: ***"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. …and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*** **(GENESIS 12:2-3 NIV)**

750 years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah was preaching, ***"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."*** **(ISAIAH 2:2 NIV)**

So, Jesus went to his hometown synagogue. Luke doesn't say who chose the Scripture. I think I usually assume Jesus chose it himself. It was from Isaiah 61, a familiar passage many of them had memorized as children. One problem with memory verses is that they usually are taken out of context and the meaning often gets lost. Jesus read, ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*** The people understood it to mean *they* were the poor; *they* were the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. *They* were the ones Messiah would come to set free. "God loves us best."

But Jesus knew the whole context. He said to them, "No. God indeed has declared His love for us—again and again! But Isaiah says we are the ones sent to *do* the preaching of good news—to *be* the demonstration of God's love to all people!"

When asked, "Which of your children do you love best?" one wise mother replied, "The one who has a fever, while he has the fever; the one who is hurting, while she is hurting."

God's love, like a mother's love, is responsive. When a mother shows attention to one child, it doesn't mean she loves the other(s) less. But too often, God's children, like Mom's children, forget *all past expressions of love* when attention for the moment is on another. The people in Nazareth were unwilling to risk their favored status with God; so, Jesus told two stories from their own history: during a famine in the land, God sent Elijah, not to any of the starving widows in Israel, but to a widow in Sidon, which was a Phoenician city in what today is Lebanon. And when there was an outbreak of leprosy in the land, God sent Elisha, not to any of the Israelites who were stricken, but to a man named Naaman, who was a Syrian Soldier!

Those people in Nazareth got that loud and clear! And they were enraged!

Fred Craddock shared about watching a TV reporter ask Carl Sandburg, "What in your opinion is the ugliest word in the English language?"

Dr. Craddock said, "I was interested because I grew up with 'ugly words.' My mother's list of ugly words included taking God's name in vain, cursing, swearing and using profanity. Her long list of ugly words came to mind when the reporter asked, 'What is the ugliest word?'

"Mr. Sandburg said, 'The ugliest word in the English language is exclusive.' He said no more; he didn't explain his choice or attempt to justify it. His face said it all-what could be uglier?" Dr. Craddock said, "On a slip of paper, I wrote 'exclusive.'

"I dared not speak it lest my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth. As I sit here years later I can hardly say the word, it is so ugly. And when I think the word, I feel I should wash my mind out with soap." **~ Dr. Fred B. Craddock**

Many of the parables of Jesus describe God's love as responsive. The shepherd went out to look for that one lost sheep, but first made sure the other 99 were safe in the fold. When the woman searched for that one lost coin, she didn't throw out the other coins to make room in her purse for the one that was lost. And when the father went out to greet the returning Prodigal Son, he was able to do so wholeheartedly because he knew the other son was safe at home.

And notice what happens in every case: when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, when the woman finds the lost coin, when the prodigal son returns: *every time*, they throw a party—and invite everyone.

The people to whom Jesus told those parables should have known these things—*already.* They were there throughout their Scriptures. They should have known those things and should have been out telling the story themselves.

God has enough love to go around. It's so high you can't get over it; so low you can't get under it; so wide you can't get around it. You've got to go in at the door. And the door is always open. But who will tell the story?

Benediction

May the God who created a world of diversity and vibrancy,
Go with us as we embrace life in all its fullness.

May the Son who teaches us to care for stranger and foreigners,
Go with us as we try to be good neighbors in our communities.

May the Spirit who breaks down our barriers and celebrates community,
Go with us as we find the courage to create a place of belonging for all.

Pastoral Prayer

Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining God, thank you for not creating us all alike. We acknowledge that human diversity is an expression of your love that transcends our ability to comprehend. We rejoice that through your Holy Spirit you offer the gift of unity in the midst of diversity.

And yet we confess that in our brokenness we turn diversity into a source of alienation, injustice, oppression, and wounding.

Empower us to recognize and celebrate differences as your great gift to the human family. Enable us to be architects of understanding, of respect and love.

Lord, give us new strength as we relaunch our presence in this community—a strength to build places of belonging: to create a community in which all may know they belong, and all feel free to share their gifts. Grant us hearts of overcoming love and grace, so that everyone touched by our life and our ministry may know they are loved.

Help us to see the light of Christ in every person or group we serve—even those with whom we disagree. Remind us that every person you create is loved, that each of us is here because you will us to be, and that each of us is a necessary part in bringing your kingdom to reality on earth as it is in heaven.

Through the one who is the full disclosure of your love. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

Jarrett Banks is becoming a strong prophetic voice within our Disciples movement. Recently he wrote (and I have adapted it a bit):

"I deeply long for a time when churches can move past the language of "inclusiveness." If your community is inclusive, then that generally casts me as one that *needs* to be "included" — that, somehow, you're doing me a favor if you include me. That keeps the terms of the conversation as being ABOUT me rather than WITH me.

"I appreciate the intent, but the churches I want to be a part of are the ones that move beyond the very terms of that conversation. The churches that I want to be a part of know that our lives are transformed by the gifts each of us bring into every relationship.

"Welcoming me is lovely when I am a guest — but realize that my presence is disruptive, and if I stick around, we will both be changed. I don't want to be included in a church that has decided there's now room for me at the table, I want to partner in building a new table — one that is built with lots of room to continue expanding.

"The work of whatever is coming next for my religious tradition isn't about including the folks who have been pushed to its edges and bringing them into what already exists. It's about letting go—maybe even moving into their reality—and humbly entering relationships that risk mutual transformation."

Will you join me as we read in unison the Disciples of Christ Identity Statement:

> We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.