

## ENRAGING JUSTICE AND MERCY

Luke 4:21-30

Embry Hills UMC

January 31, 2010

My Dad. What are we going to do with him? I was thinking about my Dad's theatre habits this week. And, his theatre habits are connected to a kind of driven impatience that he would readily admit characterized his way of being when the three of us were small.

So, when I was a really young guy, we would sometimes go to the theatre. Sometimes, for reasons I can't recall, we would be late. We would arrive sometime after the movie had started. So, when the movie ended, we would hang around long enough to watch the beginning of the movie right up to the time we came in.

"This is where we came in. Let's go."

And, on the way out the door, my little brain had to piece things together from middle to end to beginning so that I would know what happened in the movie I just watched. No wonder my brain is a scrambled mess.

Well, if you listened to the Gospel reading today, you know what that feels like. We come in today right slap dab in the middle of a story. It's the story Luke tells of the day Jesus went back home preach in his hometown, among his kinfolks and all the people who had known him so well for all of his life.

Now, before we go any further, I do want to stop and paint just a brief picture for you of Jesus' hometown. It's more precise to call it "the village where he was reared." I mean, "hometown" can be such a misleading term. Some people call Atlanta their hometown. I did most of my growing up in Augusta, and when I go back there, there are 500,000 people in that area, most of whom were not there when I was a kid. You get my drift. There are hometowns, and then there are hometowns.

Jesus' hometown, the village of Nazareth, would have had a population around the size of our crowd this morning. Look around. This is the entire village.

And, that's not just an interesting little factoid for you. It's something to keep in mind when we arrive at the dreadful end of this story.

Well, back to the beginning of the story that we started this morning in the middle.

Jesus goes back to Nazareth. And, as is always the case when a grown preacher goes back to preach at the place where he or she was a kid, the town was abuzz. You just know that the long concrete table out in the back of the synagogue was filled with good things waiting for the homecoming service to be over. Mounds and mounds of potato salad and deviled eggs and squash casserole and green beans and fried corn and biscuits and country fried steak and gravy. It was a great day.

And, as you notice, in verse 22 of Luke 4, things were going so well. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

"He turned out so good." "He knows his Bible so well." "I remember when he was just a small fry, and look at him now."

And, pretty quickly, things turned pretty nasty.

Now, clearly, we are not privy to everything that happened that day. Clearly, something else went on. Because, we arrive at the end of the story, and everyone in synagogue is filled with rage. Just a few short minutes, an hour or two at most, between the crowd's mesmerized amazement and their utter rage.

Let me read you again what Luke says about the people who had made the tater salad and who had set the table for the dinner you know they were going to have. "They go 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 got away. And, as you know, they would get him eventually.

What in the world?

There are two things I want you to notice about this text, this delicious, disturbing, unsettling text. And, as you notice these things with me, let's take our rightful place in the drama of this text. And, our rightful place is frankly not as Jesus' best friends. Our place is in the crowd. That's one of the things about preaching and about listening to preaching. We always have to be aware of our location in the text.

The fellow who taught me to preach beat that into our heads like a drill sergeant. And, I will never forget how Fred Craddock said it. "Beware of your location in the text, so that your sin doesn't cause you to take the best seat in the house."

Our seat in this passage is in the congregation, the mesmerized, admiring, adoring, maddened, enraged, murderous crowd.

When Jesus preached that day, he read a text from the prophet Isaiah. And, as one person said to me last week, in response to last Sunday's sermon, "that's radical stuff." You bet it's radical stuff. Bringing the margins to the center. Stretching the center to the margins. Doing justice. Releasing people from bondage and oppression. It is radical stuff, because any time you're preaching good news to the poor, you're preaching a threatening message to the rich. Anytime you're preaching release to the captives, you're preaching a threatening message to the oppressors. Anytime you're preaching clear sight and God's vision, you're preaching a threatening message to those laboring in sightless ignorance. You bet it's radical.

But, there are two things about this day that are especially radical. And, this is what really ticked off the crowd.

Number one, all that talk of "the Lord's favor." The Lord has anointed me to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This is Jubilee talk. And, in this way, Jesus takes the traditions and the Scriptures of his own religion and turns it on the people in a way that leaves them breathless with rage.

Now, you can do your own homework on the Jubilee year in ancient Judaism, but let me give you the low down. Part of the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus, the Jubilee year came at the end of 7 cycles of Sabbatical years. So, every 49<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> year, property and wealth were returned to God. Since I'm not attempting to open any kind of can of worms, I hesitate to use the word "redistribution of wealth," because that's become such a code phrase in our present political discourse. But, that's about what it meant. And, as one commentator has said, "the good news isn't going to be good for everybody, especially those who want to hold on to excessive wealth and power and place." (Walter Brueggemann)

Let me read you what that commentator, a local fellow named Brueggemann, has to say. “The people did not want to hear about the Jubilee that would curb their accumulation.” “Jubilee is not just a kind thought or a good intention or a religious idea. It is about money and property being transferred.”

I don't have to tell you that Jesus would be mortified and utterly appalled at the church's that have taken his good news and turned into a path to financial prosperity. His good news was always good news about an equitable and just sharing of the world's resources. And, this is particularly important for Luke, who throughout his Gospel and his companion piece, The Book of Acts, emphasizes economic justice. Just read Luke and Acts this week with an eye toward such, and we will know why the crowd got so mad. Jesus was messing with their wallets. He was talking about money. And, whether we like it or not, he was talking about the day when the have-not's have and when the haves have less. That's what he was talking about.

One of the ways we soften the edge of this passage is to locate the Jubilee year in its historical context and to talk about all of the ways in which that would or could never work. All that misses the point. We have to do something with this text and with Jesus' message besides ignoring it.

Brueggemann goes on to suggest that we sometimes find a comforting reassurance in the historical fact that the Jubilee year was not always widely practiced. He further suggests that we should be ashamed of such a reassurance, which blinds us to the truth that one of the primary concerns of the Bible from front to back is the struggle for economic justice and for an equitable sharing of the world's resources. “Preoccupation with money and property is central to Biblical faith.” And, the practice of Jubilee underscored what Moses understood and what Jesus surely understood as well—

That you cannot have a viable, peaceable, safe urban community when deep poverty must live alongside huge wealth, when high privilege is visible alongside endless disadvantage in health and housing and education. You can have some inequities, but the inequities must be curbed by a practice of neighborliness that knows every day that rich and poor, haves and have-nots are in it together and must find ways of being together in common. From Inscribing the Text.

We are in the same boat. Haves and have-nots. Rich and poor. Oppressor and captive. Perpetrator and victim. The human family will sink or swim together. Especially in this global village which turns out to be not much larger than the village where Jesus was reared.

The second unsettling thing about this text. Jesus quotes from Isaiah chapter 61. These were important words to the people. They had labored for so long. Rebuilding the community after exile. Living under the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire. Longing for the day when God would make things right. And, making things right, they always thought, would involve God avenging their oppressors, vindicating them by punishing someone else.

When you read Isaiah and Luke 4, you notice one noteworthy difference.

In his reading of Isaiah 61, Jesus conveniently omitted verse 2b. “And the day of vengeance of our God.”

Jesus hacked ‘em off not only by what he said, but by what he didn’t say. And, then he went on to give them a couple of examples of God’s gracious acceptance of detested Gentiles. They were angry because Jesus was preaching about a God who is bigger than hatred and resentment. Jesus was preaching about a God who does not harbor grudges, who does not exact revenge, who does traffic in retaliation, and who does not respect our boundaries. “God keeps plowing right through them, inviting us to follow or get out of the way.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

No wonder they were enraged and tried to kill him. The truth most often makes us angry. Especially when that truth comes from our own religious tradition, turned back upon us, held up to us like a mirror. Jesus has always been maddening like that.

If you came to church today and are unsettled, disquieted, disturbed, disrupted by the message of just sharing and boundless kindness, then join the crowd. The crowd that went up the edge of the hill on which the town was built. But, this time, you and I have the opportunity to re-write the story. We have the chance to change the script, to re-finish the ending.

This service today affords us the opportunity to go to the edge, to that dangerous precipice. And, instead of hurling him off, we have the chance today to take the plunge ourselves, to make the always-frightening leap of faith he’s hoped we would make all along.