



The Trinity Pulpit



The Outsiders

Luke 4:14-30

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It was Dr. Fred Craddock who wrote “I wish God would call people into ministry loud enough for their family to hear.” I think we could also say their friends, village, and church. Sometimes it is hard for those who knew you as a child or a teenager to recognize God’s call in your life. That was the case with Jesus when he returned to his home town to preach. Jesus had not only grown up in Nazareth but was related to people in Nazareth and had worked among them as a carpenter with his father Joseph. We can assume since he was already 30 years old by the time he began his ministry that he had shared much of his life with the people who gathered that Sabbath day to worship and hear the word of the Lord. No doubt by the evidence of Joseph and Mary’s faithfulness in traveling to the Temple for festivals, the weekly gathering in the Synagogue was something Jesus was accustomed to.

Can you picture it? Imagine the man Jesus returning to Nazareth. As he walks into the synagogue, there are memories which flood his mind. He recalls his own father sitting with the teachers and elders of the village. He remembers the faces of boys and girls who are now grown men and women as they gather around him. He recalls other Sabbath days of sitting, discussing and learning “his heavenly Father’s business.” It is a surreal moment when we come home to a place where we have spent so much time in another role. It can feel like two different lives – comfortable and reassuring all at the same time. I think that must have been something of Jesus’ experience that day.

If there was a local newspaper it would have had for headlines or at least buried in the religion section an article that would have read

“Local man returns after successful preaching and healing tour.” The article would have gone on to explain how Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, and former carpenter was returning to Nazareth after spending some time away. According to Mark’s gospel this trip back home had occurred after Jesus’ baptism, Jesus’ temptation in the desert, and an extended ministry of healing and preaching. Matthew’s gospel has it even later in Jesus’ life. Luke’s account seems to be orderly but not chronological as well, since Luke indicates Jesus has already been in Capernaum before he came home to Nazareth. Whatever the case, Jesus’ ministry had begun and his reputation was growing. So, when he entered the synagogue that Sabbath day there was anticipation.

Jesus entered with his disciples and was invited to participate in the time of worship. The worship at the synagogue featured about 8 movements that included singing a Psalm, reading from the law in Hebrew with an Aramaic translation, a reading of the prophets with an Aramaic translation, the reading of the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, a repetition of the 18 blessings and then a sermon on the scripture followed by a blessing by the ruler of the synagogue.

It seems that this day Jesus was invited to participate by giving the sermon on the passage. Luke says Jesus was given the scroll containing Isaiah but Jesus found the passage he chose to read. This means that this passage was intentional for Jesus’ purpose that day. So Jesus read Isaiah 61:1 and 2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me be-

cause he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then Jesus handed the scroll back and gave a short sermon: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus was announcing that the promise of the Kingdom of God was now at hand. That did not seem to bother the synagogue crowd. In fact the first reaction was that everyone spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words.

It was the next line that got Jesus in trouble with his own synagogue:

Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel and Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy at the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.

The reaction to this statement was completely different. All of the people of the synagogue were furious when they heard this; they got up, drove him out of town, and took him to the brow of the hill in order to throw him down the cliff.

What a drastic change in attitude. What makes this crowd of family, friends and fellow believers go from being amazed and speaking well of Jesus to being ready to kill Jesus? I think it has something to do with welcoming the outsider. One of the parts of this story we miss is that we do not realize that Jesus did not finish the passage he read from Isaiah. Isaiah 61:1-2 does not end with the Lord's favor but the Lord's vengeance. The passage Jesus read ends with proclaiming not only God's favor on his people but God's vengeance. The passage of Isaiah was about God finally setting the record

straight – that he had a favored people and they were the Hebrew people, and when the Messiah would come they would find favor and everyone else would get their due. Yet, Jesus does not include that part of the passage in his reading. He stops short and instead begins to proclaim that God has included everyone in his love and that this was nothing new; in fact, the examples of Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath and Elisha and Naaman were two prime examples of God including the outsiders in God's love.

Is there anything that makes us madder than having our friends and family not share in our disdain for our enemies? In the Eastern mindset it is said that an enemy is a personal matter. In fact, the way you identify yourself is with your name, your wife, your family, your profession and your enemy. Yet, Jesus would not exclude even the enemies of those in the Synagogue that day. On the contrary, Jesus includes them in God's love; more so, he suggests that they are more receptive than his own people to God's work.

I think this text has something to say about our connecting with those we would describe as outsiders. We have been looking at what it means to connect to God and to each other, but we are also called to connect to those outside the church. I think Jesus' two examples are great examples for us when we consider who the outsiders are.

The first example is the widow of Zarephath. If there is a more pathetic and pitiful person presented in scripture they would be hard to find. There is a great famine in the land and Elijah is being fed by ravens and finding water at a brook. Yet, the brook ran dry and God told him to go to the Sidon and there a widow would care for him. Yet when he arrived, Elijah found the widow in a desperate situation. When Elijah asked her for a piece of bread she describes her situation this way "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour and a little oil in a jug. I am out here gathering sticks to go home and make a meal for myself and my son so we might eat it and die." In other words, "This is our last meal." Yet miraculously as the woman shared what she had with Elijah the flour and the oil lasted. Not only this, but when her son died Elijah's presence and God's power restored his life.

The widow of Zaraphath was blessed by God and included in God's plan.

The second example is Naaman the Syrian. Naaman was not a Hebrew like the widow but that is about where the comparison stops. The widow was alone, poor and without resources. Naaman was a man with endless resources. He is described as a military hero, the commander of the army, and highly regarded as the king. So much is he regarded that when he is afflicted with leprosy, the king himself sends him with wealth, chariots, horses, men, and an official letter to the king of Israel, that he is to make sure that Naaman is taken to Elisha's house so he can be healed of leprosy. This so intimidated the Israelite king that he tore his robe in despair. Yet, Naaman the powerful, the rich, the man with endless resources, goes to Elisha's house and humbles himself to Elisha's instructions, and he dips himself in the Jordan and he is cleansed. Naaman, the powerful, is blessed by God and included in God's plan.

The outsiders...one poor and helpless and the other powerful and capable and both were on the outside, at least that is what those in Jesus' synagogue thought. Yet, Jesus had come to remind his people that God's love and favor had come for all and not a selected few. I don't think the outsider's identity has changed much in 2000 years. It seems to me that outsiders come from all races, ethnic groups, nationalities, and socioeconomic standing and even religious backgrounds. God's love and Jesus' mission has included them all.

Who are the outsiders at our church? Well it can be the poorest of the poor. Mother Teresa once said it is easier to talk about the poor than to talk to the poor. Think not only of those we know who are destitute but who are the working poor in our community. How many conversations have you had with those who are the common laborers of our economy? How many times have you invited the waitress, the maid, the yard worker, the fast food cashier to church? How many times have you stopped to have a conversation with some of our Jobs for Life students on Wednesday night? Yes, they are at the table, but are they at your table or my table?

Yet, before we turn our attention completely in the direction of the poor, what about the wealthy and powerful? Naaman had every resource to care for himself, but he still found himself destitute and, like the widow, helpless without God. Jesus says that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, yet with God all things are possible. I think the hard part comes from us the insiders. We view those with wealth and power as those who don't need God, and if they do, they should figure it out for themselves. Many times, we view them with envy and jealousy and really think in our minds that they have everything, why would they want the fellowship of my church? How long has it been since you invited the CEO of your company to your church or invited someone you work for or has hired your service? Outsiders come in the same shape as they did in Jesus' day.

What are we to do with outsiders? We must first love them. Jesus told us to love and pray for our enemies. The example of caring for those who appear on the outside is as old as Abraham bartering the lives of those in Sodom and Gomorrah, to Jesus declaring that his Father had sheep of other pastures, to Paul's declaring that in Christ there is not male or female, slave or free, Jew or Greek.

Leonard Sweet reminds us of the importance of others in our lives when he writes:

Pursuing God ordained relationships with those outside God's family requires that we understand that others are at the center of our own relationship with God, that we literally meet Jesus as we are in relationships with others, that we are indeed strangers and aliens (in this world). If we shun relationships with others we are shoving Jesus out of our lives.

In *Blue Like Jazz* Donald Miller writes about his learning to love jazz music. He had always had distaste for this music genre. He found the musical themes never resolved themselves and left the listener hanging. Of course that is the point of jazz. Then one day Miller noticed a man playing jazz on a saxophone outside the Bagdad Theater in Portland. Miller writes that he stood there listening for fifteen minutes as he watched the man play. The whole time the saxophonist never opened his eyes.

Miller comments that sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself.

Sweet commenting on Miller writes:

I have learned to love many things because the people I love choose to love those things. I love Avril Lavigne because my daughter loves her. I love SpongeBob Square pants because my son loves him. I love Linda Ronstadt because my wife loves her voice. I've learned to love others deemed oddballs and odd couples because Jesus was a soft touch for lost souls and last place finishers. I've learned to love certain people because I've watched Jesus love them.¹

We must not only love the outsiders, but we must accept them into our lives. The word for this is hospitality but that does not simply mean being a host or hostess. The word actually means "to take aside" or "take with." We must take the outsider alongside us or with us in this life journey. It is the act of receiving others into our lives. It has been said that Jesus was a receiver of wrecks. That is our task as well, to receive others regardless of the wrecks they have caused or suffered in their lives. We take them with us, we take them to our side, and we accept them.

Jesus told a story about two sons and a father. One son was impatient and demanded his inheritance. This younger son took his father's inheritance and squandered it on wild living. The result was that when a famine came the boy was left destitute. He came to his senses and chose to return to his father with the hope that he could, at the very least, be his father's servant. This younger son was lost in a far away land. You know the story. When the younger son returned the father received him, gave him hospitality, forgave him, loved him, and threw him a party. The oldest son returned to find a party going on while he had been hard at work, just like he had everyday of his life and more so, since the younger son had left. When he discovered that the party was in honor of

his wayward brother, he refused to go in and join his brother at the party table. Although the father pleaded with him, the elder son would not accept and forgive his brother. The older brother was also lost. He was lost right at home. Sometimes it is harder to find our way to the father's table when we are at home than it is when we have wandered far away.²

As we come to the Lord's Table today I want you to think of three tables. I want you to think of the table or tables where Jesus reclined and dined with those whom the world had rejected. So often did he go where others thought he should not go that he had the reputation of eating and drinking with sinners. Jesus could be found with the outsiders. I also want you to think of the table in that upper room on the night Jesus was betrayed. Who gathered there? Those who would disappoint him, desert him, deny him and even betray him to death were all there; yet, Jesus met them at that table. Lastly, I want you to think about the table in the house of the loving father of the two sons. At that table there is a grateful son who has tasted of the father's love and grace but there is a chair that it is empty. It is empty because there is an elder son who is lost at home and refuses to join the party.

As we come to the Lord's Table we are invited to come and taste of God's mercy and love, but we are also invited to a table where we will be joined by those who have disappointed us or deserted us and hurt us. Here at the Lord's Table we are all invited and welcomed. Here at the Lord's Table we come to understand that we are all outsiders who, through Christ, have found their place in the presence of God. There is a place for you... there is a place for me... there is a place for us...come and taste of God's grace. ❁

¹Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question and Into the Mystery* (WaterBrook Press: Colorado Springs, CO 2004) 149.

²Sweet, 146-147 (Concept borrowed from Sweet).

