

## Fourth Sunday After The Epiphany – Christopher Byaruhanga

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

Have you ever heard about fights in the church? When God's people cease to be what they are supposed to be, they begin to engage in unholy fights. At the mere reading of Luke 4:21-30 one is bound to ask: what happened on this day in Nazareth? Could it have been a misreporting by Luke? For those of us who believe in the Bible as the word of God the answer is, "No." Luke is telling us what exactly happened on that day. The picture is that Jesus comes back home to Nazareth after having been anointed by John the Baptist and having overcome the temptations by Satan. He joins his friends and family for an evening of worship on the Sabbath. Jesus is surrounded by the people he grew up with.

The people in Nazareth had heard a lot about the miracles Jesus had performed in Capernaum. I guess they came expecting him to do the kind of healing he had done in another city. Why then did God's faithful worshippers of Nazareth turn on one of their own—and try to smash him on the rocks?

We have to appreciate the fact that Jesus was not a passive participant on that day. In fact he led worship by reading and teaching from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, verses 1-2a. Scholars of homiletics are not agreed on whether Jesus actually chose this passage or it was assigned to him by the leader of the synagogue. I tend to agree with those scholars who say that the passage was chosen by Jesus Christ himself, because at the time of Jesus assigned lectionary readings were usually from the Torah, the Law of Moses. The reading from the Prophets was usually the choice of the reader—in this case, Jesus. Remember Jesus had a specific message for this congregation, and therefore he was at liberty to choose his own passage if he had to infuse it with his own meanings.

Everything had started out so positively. With careful attention they listened as Jesus read the words from Isaiah, promising good news for the poor and the downtrodden, freedom from oppression, liberation from illness, and the fulfillment of God's promise to set things right. I can imagine every eye in the synagogue was on Jesus, and every heart waited expectantly as he began to speak. Jesus' message was a one-line sermon. He said, *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Luke's account doesn't just tell us about how Jesus came to Nazareth and announced the good news. The announcement itself **embodies** the good news. Through this announcement, Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of one of the most profound prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. The hope of the people of Israel will be fulfilled in him. Jesus is the Messiah, **the anointed one**, because he has been especially chosen by God to bring good news to the poor. In the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3) we read that *the poor in spirit* are blessed, and they will receive the kingdom of heaven, but in Luke the good news brought by Jesus is proclaimed for those who are economically poor. And what is this good news? The good news is: those in the group of debtors will be pardoned, the

blind will see, and the politically oppressed will be freed. Why? Because the year of God's amnesty had arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.* The congregation was not only amazed but was also puzzled.

While all this was going on in their minds a question was posed: *Is not this Joseph's son?* This is an interesting question because it has two implications: a negative reaction to Jesus, "Where did this simple boy born of Joseph get this wisdom?" and a positive reaction to Jesus, "This is our hometown boy!" In Uganda we would say, "He is the son of the soil." He should carry out his due obligations. He must give preference to his own town. When he says, *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,* does he mean this is it? Is this the year we're finally going to get rid of the Romans? Is this the year we're finally going to get rid of all these people who are causing so much pain and trouble? The thought was electrifying! People in Nazareth were waiting for that day when their enemies would get what they deserved. All those Gentiles and others that had given them so much trouble would finally be punished by God, and Jesus was the one they thought could give it to them. Jesus would chase all of those ungodly people out of town. They were hoping that maybe Jesus was the one who could turn Nazareth around so that their lives would be better.

Remember, Jesus avoided reading Isaiah 61: 2b, which talks about *the day of vengeance of our God.* At this point the congregation remembered this very part of the verse Jesus had avoided reading. The congregation murmured.

Let us look at the background of the worshipers that evening. First, the Israelites had struggled to rebuild their community after a very long time in exile. Isaiah's vision had given them hope during that time. Closer to the time of this scripture event, these people were under the oppressive rule of the Romans. Finally, Nazareth was in a lot of trouble with so many pagans all around. For example, Phoenicians lived to the west and north, Samaritans to the south, Greeks to the west. Surrounded by so many pagan influences, it was hard to be a good pious Jew in Nazareth. Because of all of their struggles, Jesus' audience was interested in the line that he deliberately left out when he read from the scroll of Isaiah, namely, *the day of vengeance of our God.*

Jesus wasn't at all pleased with their murmuring; he said, *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 in Capernaum.* He announced that no prophet is accepted in the prophet's own town. But Jesus didn't stop there! To the shock of his audience, Jesus went on to tell them two Bible stories that the congregation would already be familiar with. He told them a story from Elijah's time when God miraculously provided for a poor, pagan widow, not from Israel, but from the land of Sidon. Of course God blessed Israel through these prophets as well, but that wasn't what Jesus was emphasizing. He stressed the theme, running all the way through the Old Testament, of God reaching out to save people who were outside the bounds of Israel. What made these

stories troubling was that, in both, the people to whom God showed favor were foreigners.

The message was that God came to people outside their protected circles. Jesus took what was most precious and most personal to his audience. He spoke of their God, but to their surprise Jesus declared that the God they knew was not really theirs to keep. He announced that God's grace was going to be made freely available to everyone and anyone who wanted it.

For the Israelites, the question was: Why should a foreigner be singled out for special treatment by their God? Again the sense of injustice arises. At this point Jesus gets the blame. This is their God, and he has no business sharing his blessings with other people. I can almost hear the crowd in the synagogue posing the question, "Is he saying that God loves the Gentiles more than the Jews? No! That is not fair." I can assure you the mood was now changing. But they can't be angry at God whom they have not seen. So they take it out on the messenger, on Jesus, who points out to them what they really should already know. God has never been their private property. By now the "godly" worshipers were infuriated. To them Jesus was a false prophet who was trying to destroy their spirituality. Jesus wasn't what they expected him to be. He didn't do the miracles they expected him to perform. He didn't say the words that they expected him to say. Since he didn't act the way a true prophet was supposed to act, therefore he had to be a false prophet. They couldn't handle this message from a false prophet. Why? Because it made them uncomfortable.

When I was in seminary training for ministry, I was told by one of my professors that one of the dangerous things to do as a church minister is to preach a sermon. "If you can," he said, "please avoid it and concentrate on parish administration, because as you preach you never know on whose toes you are stepping!" In the case of Jesus, he had criticized his own people by telling them that they needed to change—that God's love is not a spiritual gift only for those inside the church. The gift of God's love comes not only to us but also to those outside of our race, class, gender, country and beliefs. It is usually easy to change the way we act but very difficult to change the way we believe. Jesus was saying that it isn't about following all the laws as prescribed in the Torah. It isn't about God blessing them if they do the right thing. What Jesus was talking about is the change that comes to all people through him and not necessarily to the insiders—the Jews. Those are the people who will have the visa to God's kingdom. Jesus was telling his audience that he was going to bring about justice where there is none, release where people are captive, comfort where there is suffering, hope where there is hopelessness, good news where there is bad news, and the love of God where there is hatred.

These are beautiful things, but this is not what the people of Nazareth expect Jesus to say. It isn't what they expect him to do. They think Jesus will tell them that **they** are the elect, the ones who will be first. Instead, Jesus tells them that God loves not those who are perfect, but those who know that they are imperfect. Imagine hearing that message! It

sounds like Jesus is saying either, “God doesn’t love you because you are perfect” or, “God loves you because you know that you are imperfect.”

On that day the worshipers could hear Jesus, but they didn’t take his message seriously enough. They didn’t see what serious implications and challenges it held for them. It didn’t occur to them that good news to the poor is perceived as bad news for those who have good spiritual records to stand on. What’s the use of being good if God is going to welcome sinners anyway? This was indeed the scandalous mercy of God.

Throughout his ministry Jesus preached the scandalous mercy of God. He said God’s kingdom is set up like a vineyard, and the owner of the vineyard pays the ones who get hired at the last minute the same wage as those who have toiled faithfully in the cold (if they were in the USA) or heat (in the Kalahari Desert) all day! Jesus said that God is like a shepherd who leaves the 99 faithful sheep while he goes out searching high and low for the wayward one. He told a story about a son who had really messed up his life who came shamefully back home to seek for mercy; even while he’s a long way off, the father goes running after him to embrace him, lavishes luxury on him, gets a party going before the faithful, dutiful older son can even get home from the fields. In the same way God is always running to embrace the undeserving. On the cross Jesus welcomed a very late-comer, one of the crucified thieves who cried, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. And Jesus said, **I will**—*today you will be with me in paradise*. Thoughts of insiders and outsiders, higher-ups and lower-downs are irrelevant to God, because God is longing in love for all of his children to come back home. He wants to lavish his grace on all, and he will do it whether people like Jonah and the prodigal’s older brother like it or not.

The people of Nazareth didn’t like it at all. They heard Jesus’ message and were enraged. Matthew and Mark say: *and they took offense at him*. How dare Jesus speak to us that way! In effect Jesus is saying, your God is not yours alone. He has other people whom he loves, he will bless other people just as much as he has blessed you. Your religion, that history and that set of beliefs that so much defines your identity—you are going to have to loosen your grip on it, and be ready to share it. And while that might sound like good news, these people’s old instinct was still there; they were burning with anger that forced them to chase Jesus out of the synagogue. As they pushed him out of the door and through the town and up the hill I can almost hear them say, “Don’t lay that on us, Jesus. Lay it on the real sinners—crooks, cheaters, tax collectors, liars, people that do all manner of disgusting things. Don’t lay it on us. Our record with God is clean. We’re on God’s side, and God is going to reward us.” The message of God’s love for the stranger was so heretical that they tried to kill the hometown boy who preached it to them. They took him to a high hill outside of town and tried to throw him off. Luke 4:30 tells us that *he passed through the midst of them, and went on his way*.

The new kingdom which Jesus has announced is going to be all about generosity and openness, for that is the very nature of God. So if they want to be part of it they had better get their heads around it. There are echoes here of the story of Jonah. Remember, Jonah

was the man who would rather die than see God's forgiveness and grace extended to the ruthless Assyrians in Nineveh. Now the people of Nazareth would rather kill Jesus than allow him to share their hope with others. Human nature does not change. The desire to cling on to things even extends to the things of faith, the things of God.

What does this say about us? How high is our **fear factor** for learning the truth about God's love? Do we hoard it, or are we capable of living out the idea that the whole human family is my neighbor, and when one hurts we all hurt? Africans are led by the "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" philosophy. This is what is called Obuntu among the Bantu of East Africa or Ubuntu among the Bantu of South Africa. Jesus told them a story and let an uncomfortable truth dawn upon them. I wonder, as we hear their story, if there might be some uncomfortable truths ready to dawn on us. Could it be that we have received blessings in our lives that we want to cling to as our own? What if God has other people whom he loves as much as he loves us, people who might not have everything they need? Are we still saying, by our actions if not our words, "It is mine and you are not getting any"? Perhaps we should ask ourselves, not just what we believe, but what our actions demonstrate. Where is the evidence, the proof, that we follow the teachings of Jesus Christ?

For the kingdom of God, that Christ has opened up in our midst, is not something we can ever own, but can only participate in. And love, which is the greatest thing, is not something we can keep to ourselves, but can only ever share. The Corinthian church was emphasizing a good thing, spiritual gifts, to the neglect of the best; they were using their gifts apart from love. Paul makes the point that the use of their God-given gifts would amount to nothing if they did not make love their priority. Paul tells the Corinthians that he will show them a more excellent way, a way of love. No matter what great gifts, including prophetic powers, one has, if we do not have love we gain nothing. Love is at the core of our Christian identity. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to do good to those that persecute us. What a difficult teaching to put into practice! But remember, Jesus does recognize our imperfections. That is why we begin our worship service with the confession and forgiveness. We need to speak those words about who we really are—sinful, broken, in need of help—and then we hear the promise of who God is for us, the one who reaches down into our darkness and restores the light. The one who helps us change for good. The one who recognizes us even when we are trying to cover up the real pain in us and brings us comfort and peace that passes all understanding, releasing us from what binds us and freeing us to live as God's people in the world. It is with that promise that we can worship God. It is with that forgiveness that we can then go out and share God's love with the world.

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to bring sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. And that good news is fulfilled when we hear these words and believe them. Jesus made it clear to the people listening to him on the Sabbath in his hometown synagogue that his ministry would not focus on the **in group** but on the excluded, on the outsiders, even the enemy. Amen.