

## Christina Smerick

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Last week we celebrated Mary's baptism, and in the midst of that celebration we were reminded of our own. During the time of Epiphany, this is part of what we're called to do: "We remember our baptisms" during Epiphany. "We are known, claimed, called by God." This may be a reversal from what we usually do, which is to assert ourselves, insist upon ourselves, as first and foremost. Instead, in Epiphany, we are called to remember and announce our dependence, not our independence—our 'being-known' rather than our knowing. We are called to a radical passivity, the passive voice, in which we are the objects, not subjects, of the sentence. "I have put words into your mouth...you shall speak what I command you." "Upon you I have leaned from my birth." "I have been fully known." We are the acted-upon, the already-called, the already-known—we are Jeremiah and the Psalmist and Paul, already marked out. Not in a predestination way as one of the 'elect', but in a far more metaphysical and universal way: each of us are known.

And how. In our Luke passage this morning, Jesus reveals the people of Nazareth to themselves, and they don't like what they see. So they do what everyone does when confronted with unwelcome news—they try to throw the messenger off a cliff. The scapegoat theme here couldn't be more clear. However, as we take a closer look at exactly what Jesus is saying here—and he's being kind of mysterious at first, speaking in little proverbs that are hard to follow—we can see the source of their anger. Jesus had just finished reading from Isaiah; and what a passage! "...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 let the oppressed go free." Then he tops THAT by stating that they are witnesses to the fulfillment of this Scripture! Yippee! Why yippee? Because the people of Nazareth do what we all do in this situation: they think about themselves. Ooh, I'm kind of poor! I feel oppressed! I need healing, I'm sorta trapped! And of course the Jews of Judea during this time period did have some things to complain about, specifically the heavy hand of Rome in the person of Pilate. They hear this Scripture, they hear of its fulfillment, and they think 'me me me!'

And Jesus calls them on it—they say "Do here in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum", that nasty town that is half-Gentile. Surely, Jesus, if you're going to do some things for those people, you're going to bless us. We're your own! You're one of us. But Jesus takes it in another direction, first by warning them of the proved fact that prophets are very rarely popular amongst their own...(Jeremiah has a lot to look forward to!) Jesus cites two examples of prophets—oh, the poor prophets, we know what happens to prophets—who, when many were suffering, saved but this one or that one, and those who were blessed were...not Jewish, no, but Gentiles and Syrians and enemies. This is not the example the Nazarenes were hoping for. What were they wanting? What do people want to hear? They want to hear that no

matter how blessed they really are, they're still suffering, and that God will heap blessings on their heads—we're funny this way (Nietzsche has a lot to say on this point but I'll spare you the details). Ironically, rather than reveling in their strength, people really do, a lot of times, want to be pitied. They also want something for nothing. The people of Nazareth want the guarantee that this passage from Isaiah is speaking about them, not Gentiles, not Syrians, not Others who aren't of the tribe.

It's not too difficult to wince at this, and to recognize ourselves in these Nazarenes. We're the ones who say 'me me me' when we hear of blessings, and we're the ones who get resentful to the point of rage when we hear of other people getting what we want, or what we think we 'deserve'. We're the Christians, after all—shouldn't we be getting all the blessings? No matter how much power we have, no matter that we live in a country where no one but a professing Christian could possibly be elected President (unlike those poor Nazarenes, living under the yoke of Rome), no matter that we have hot and cold running water, our religious holidays marked as national holidays, cars and central heating and the freedom to be here this morning...when we hear Isaiah, we too get giddy and think, "we're the oppressed! We're the poor! We're the captives!" And we're quite tempted to shove anyone who says differently off a cliff. But if we're honest, really honest with ourselves, we know we're not persecuted, we know we're not suffering under some horrible yoke, and we know that we are called to something different than demanding from our Savior-prophet more blessings, more miracles, more more more.

There's an alternative set of behaviors we are called to, rather than this selfish shrieking and complaining. It seems fairly clear by, well, Scripture that we are not called by Christ to seek out our own self-interest. We are not called by Christ to insist upon rights and privileges for ourselves. We are not called by Christ to seek favor for ourselves in the marketplace or the halls of government. We are called, as Paul so eloquently writes to the fractious, complaining Church in Corinth, to agape. Which is significantly less fun than getting stuff for free.

Which takes us to our 1 Corinthians passage, which lays out for us something more along the lines of what we're called to do and be. It's a difficult passage to preach, because we've all heard it waaay too many times before. So it's helpful to remember who the original audience was—not some wedding crowd eager to get to the reception, not some cross-stitching club that thinks it needs to hang in the bathroom. No, the original audience for this letter is the fractious, argumentative, bickering Corinth church, that sounds, if you read between the lines, like a group of children arguing over who is coolest. As Cousar puts it, they are a "quarrelsome people who need to know that their fervent religiosity isn't worth a tinker's damn apart from a new relationship to one another, apart from love." (128)

Doesn't matter how smart you are, what genius theological tracts you can write, how amazing you are in the pulpit, how beautifully you sing and make others cry, how generous you are with your money, how great you are at conveying the Gospel. Doesn't matter how many people bought your CDs. It doesn't even matter how much God has carried you through—there are those of us who get caught up in broadcasting just how much God has gotten us through,

loudly. It is easy to glorify any of these people, us, easy to take these signs as signs of faith and loyalty and a kind of righteous belief we could only hope to possess. But all of these things are nice but not enough. They don't really bless anyone else if love is not the motivator behind them. The prophecies and worship songs and testimonies don't do anything, really, on their own. They're not bad—they're just not anything at all—without this other-focused love that takes me out of focus. Love operates in situations of stress "and conflict" in a "practical" fashion, in real time, in real ways, with real (often annoying) people. (129) And that is what lasts. When one is faced with the temptation to seek all the blessings and resent those Others who get them instead; when one is faced with the temptation to feel persecuted and to fight back for one's 'rights'; when one hears that perhaps one isn't supposed to be the recipients of the 'good prophecies' and gets ticked; then one is called to these passages, called to love rather than to be loved, called to somehow pour oneself out instead of holding oneself in. It seems impossible. "How can one ever love in the way the passage describes? There is a clue tucked away... 'I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'" In other words, once again we are back proclaiming our baptism, recognizing our lack of ultimate agency, recognizing that it is not Me, but the One who already knows me, who makes it possible to do this.

**"The prophets rescued, not the hometown folk, but those regarded as outsiders." (130)**

So placing the Luke passage with the Corinthians passage is a stroke of lectionary genius. What a comeuppance! We are reminded from Jeremiah that we are thrown into this world by the hands of a knowing and loving God, that we are the objects, not the subjects, of this life sentence. We are reminded by Jesus that, as much as we love to think of ourselves and even revel in our own supposed sufferings, God's mercy and grace extend to whom God wills—and it is our task to will what God wills, to quit seeking out our own protections and instead seek to serve others; and this is reiterated and defined by Paul, who calls us to remember that ego-gratification and the seeking out of power are never the call for the Christian; that when we seek our own glory alone, individually or collectively as "the Christians", yet fail to love the atheist, the Muslim, the Jew, and seek their welfare and their blessings and their healing, we are just noisy gongs signifying nothing. Love does not insist on its own way. As objects not subjects of the work that is God's, we are not privileged to know in full...but there is a greater blessing that comes from this realization, greater than all the things we hope for, and that is that we are fully known, already and always. May we have the strength to become vulnerable, the will to become weak, the power to resist power, the presence of mind, when hearing the words of Isaiah, to hope for others' freedom and others' healing, rather than always seeking our own.

#### **Themes:**

1. Passive Voice: being known v. knowing. (Jeremiah; Psalm; even Paul "I am fully known.")
2. Recipients of grace: not who we think should be. Not us getting our reward.
3. Rather than revenge or retribution, or even justice as we think it should look like, we are called to love, and are only able to love because we are known.
4. This undermines our egos. This empties out our pride. The Corinthians passage should be read at weddings, to scare the bejezus out of those getting married.