

4th Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*'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 let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*

And 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. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

I never thought I'd find a scenario in which I felt that a scene from the iconic movie "Anchorman" would be applicable in one of my sermons. But, lo, it has happened.

Anchorman is a tongue-in-cheek 2004 comedy featuring Will Ferrell playing Ron Burgundy, the head of a 1970's news crew in San Diego. One of its funniest scenes is when all of the local news crews gather in an abandoned warehouse complex for a Westside Story-esque gang fight.

Ron Burgundy's news crew gets surrounded by a rival news crew on bicycles and they start bad mouthing each other. Then, the folks from NPR show up and want to join in the heckling. Then PBS shows up.

Then the folks from Telemundo show up. And then, the fighting breaks out with an assortment of weapons including a hand grenade, a flame thrower, and - somehow - a trident.

After the fight, while nursing his battle wounds, Ron Burgundy takes a drink of his Miller High Life and says to his fellow crew members: “Well, *that* escalated quickly!” What had started out as a friendly little walk around San Diego ended up with people throwing tridents at each other.

Today’s passage from Luke works in a similar fashion. The first part of today’s story has Jesus reading the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown’s synagogue. Everyone is impressed. One can imagine the whispers as Jesus stood to read the scroll and then sat down to expound upon it.

“Is *that* Joseph and Mary’s boy?! Wow, the last time I saw him he couldn’t even grow a beard.”

“Well, Jesus, must have done pretty good for himself! Look at him, reading the scroll!”

“Yeah! That’s *our* Jesus! He’s one of us! He’s from here!”

The people respond with positivity, with good old fashioned home-town pride. Like when the winner of American Idol returns to their tiny hometown in rural America and the people of that community are just happy to have their name in the news cycle for once.

The people in today’s passage respond this way because, so far, Jesus hasn’t said anything too controversial. So far, he’s just been reading from the scroll of Isaiah, a passage that they’ve heard many times before. Almost so many times that they don’t really hear it any more.

Things are going great. But then things, well, escalate.

You see, up until this point, Jesus’ audience in his hometown have thought that the good news he is proclaiming is for them and them alone. But Jesus perceives their misunderstanding and clarifies his original point by saying the following: “there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Jesus reminds them of two stories that they already know very well. One is about a widow who was fed. The other is about a leper who was healed. Neither the widow nor the leper was an Israelite. Both of them were Gentile. Both of them were “other.” Both of them were the kind of people the folks of Jesus’ hometown wanted *nothing* to do with.

And that made them angry. The idea that God would extend God’s blessings to people other than the Israelites created a mob mentality that resorted to violence in order to silence Jesus. Everyone loves to hear about God bringing down those on the mountain and lifting up those in the valleys until they realize that *they’re* the people on the mountains and “those people” are the ones in the valleys. And when people come that this realization, they tend to lash out.

I heard a story this week in the news that was so uncanny in its resemblance to today’s passage that I have to share it with you. I’ve been listening to a podcast lately that chronicles the journey of a few journalists

as they drive the entire length of the southern border, all the way from Brownsville, Texas to San Diego, California (nearly 2,000 miles from end to end).

Along their travels, these journalists came across a man named Eddie Canales. Eddie is a resident of Brooks County, Texas, where many immigrants cross the border and brave the deadly conditions in order to make a better life for their families. It is a common occurrence in that part of the country to find human remains of people who have died of dehydration or exposure to the elements on the journey. Eddie decided to do something about it. For him, the rationale was simple. He didn't care about the politics of the situation. People were dying, literally, in his backyard and he decided that that was unacceptable. He decided that there was nothing he could do to keep people from trying to make that journey. But Eddie realized that he *could* give them water to decrease the number of bodies in unmarked graves.

So he started a non-profit that puts up water stations on properties (with people's permission, of course) in order to provide water for the families that are traveling across the harsh land. Friends, the Jesus we worship would be out there in the desert helping Eddie build those water stations. Eddie Canales and his non-profit are literally doing the work that Jesus said he was sent to do when he addressed the crowd at his home synagogue in Nazareth in today's passage. Bringing good news to the poor. Releasing the captives. And bringing freedom to the oppressed.

Sometimes, the work of the Gospel is giving water to desperate people, regardless of the politics of the situation.

But that is going to rub some people the wrong way. The violent opposition that took place in today's story from Luke's Gospel is still around today.

Eddie Canales regularly finds his water stations destroyed by people who are offended at the thought of extending kindness to strangers, as Scripture commands us. People are so offended by his Gospel-work that they bend the flagpoles to the ground and slash the water tanks.

And, yet, Eddie and his non-profit continue their work. In addition to putting up water stations for the migrants, they also work diligently to identify and return to their families the remains of people who die along the journey. Why do they continue the work? It's simple really. Because people are suffering and need good news.

Friends, that's the work of the Church. If an undocumented person comes to the doors of this church, parched and starving, what would we do? I certainly hope that we would open our doors and provide them whatever they need because, you know, Jesus.

But to do such a thing would certainly rub some folks the wrong way. We might become known as "that church that helps *those* people. But Jesus reminds us that the Christian option is not always the most popular option out there. As far as I can tell, Jesus didn't waste much time worrying about how popular he was. Instead, he put all of his energy and passion into caring for those who needed an ally.

So the question for us, dear friends, is this: are we, the Church, willing to do the unpopular thing if it is the thing that God is calling us to do? Are we willing to do the right thing even if it means that people want to push us off a cliff, or say bad things about us, or decide not to give us money, or leave for another church that doesn't challenge them? Are we willing to follow Jesus even if that means ridicule or hardship?

Today's story serves as a sobering reminder that there have certainly been times in my life when I've chosen convenience instead of what the Gospel commands me to do. So when I hear today's passage, I'm challenged to understand that our job is not to be the most popular, or the most influential, or the richest, or the strongest, or the biggest. Our job is to be as faithful as we possibly can to the Gospel that we receive through the body and being of Jesus Christ.

Maybe, for some of us, that means putting some water out for travelers at risk of dying from dehydration.

Maybe, for others of us, that means calling out a coworker or politician who exhibits racist behavior.

Maybe, for still others of us, that means inviting someone in the LGBT community to attend Beaumont Presbyterian Church.

Maybe, for us, it means having an uncomfortable conversation about substance abuse.

The Gospel takes on many forms. And many of those forms stir the pot and threaten the status quo. Let us discern together how we can first and foremost be faithful to what God is calling us to do, no matter how hard it is. We are called to show compassion and love to everyone: regardless of whether they are a widow, a leper, and addict, or an undocumented immigrant.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.