

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² 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?” ²³ He said to them, “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 at Capernaum.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers^[a] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Today’s passage picks up where last week’s left off. In fact, it actually picks up before last week’s left off in one of the rare occurrences the lectionary repeats a text: the last text in last week’s passage is the first text this week, “Then (Jesus) began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The passage serves as a hinge text on which the proverbial doors of the temple, the synagogue, the church are attached to the foundation of the faith. In this passage Jesus pushes open such doors, which seems to unhinge those gathered in his hometown synagogue. You see, the doors had been closed so long the worshippers mistook the doors as walls, yet the faith community was never meant to be walled

off from its greater community. In pushing the proverbial doors open, Jesus was exposing both those on the outside and those on the inside to the good news of their connection to one another, and God's connection to them, whether inside or outside the faith.

Pray

Holy Spirit, touch our mouths and our hearts with your word today, that we may build on it in our lives, in the church and in your world. Amen.

We don't know how long it had been since Jesus was in his hometown, but we know a lot happened in his time away. He had been baptized, the Spirit had descended upon him, for forty days he was tempted in the wilderness, he traveled through Galilee as an itinerant preacher and we don't know why he returned to Nazareth, but he did. Maybe his hometown football team made the playoffs for the second consecutive year, and he wanted to join the celebration. Maybe not, but maybe. Or, more likely, he went for the very reason as captured in the biblical narrative, to return to those who knew his humanity most intimately, and to proclaim from the scroll of Isaiah that, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me...anointed me to bring good news to the poor...proclaim release of the captives...sight to the blind...let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke's reader gets the sense that what followed was one of those quiet, holy moments in the sanctuary. Jesus sat down among them, and had the audacity to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Maybe said with a little bit of attitude like if he was speaking into a microphone he then would have just held it out and dropped it. And that is where last week's text leaves off, and this week's text picks up.

And the people in the synagogue? They loved it. They could not take their eyes off of him, amongst themselves spoke so highly of him, amazed by his gracious words and were astounded, perhaps proud, that this was Joseph's son – a local kid all grown up, preaching in his own hometown synagogue. The problem became, Jesus kept preaching. And just as they knew him intimately, Jesus knew them the same. Perhaps that is why he turned his tone a bit. As David Ostendorf highlights in his commentary, "Here, now, was the beginning of a new narrative. Here, now, was the insider who suddenly becomes the outsider. Here, now, was God acting in the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth."

Gathered in the synagogue, in the sanctuary, were a people who inherited the faith that had been handed down through generations. They clung to the promise of being God's chosen people. In many ways, especially living in an occupied region, their faith carried them. And a portion of that faith held to the promise of a coming messiah, who would prepare the way for them to live into their chosenness which then seemed so elusive. So they gathered themselves in the synagogue to worship and pray, and to be reminded of the promises God had made to them.

And, then, Jesus just keeps preaching. "All the things you have heard I have done in Capernaum, even among the Gentiles, you will ask me to do the same here, among you." And he offers a couple very strong hints, that this will not happen. The mood in the synagogue quickly turned, and Jesus just kept preaching. He spoke of Elijah, the prophet through whom God worked many miracles.

Remember the years of the drought, Jesus said, and the severe famine when God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow – instead of a Jewish widow? Remember Elisha, another prophet through whom God worked many more miracles? When leprosy was rampant in Israel and God sent Elisha to heal Naaman, who was not only a

Gentile but an enemy. The hometown prophet is making it clear that God is interested in more than the hometown. One gets the sense that Jesus could have just kept preaching, that even in a peoples' chosenness God also chooses others. It was a hard pill to swallow that God chooses others beyond the faith community, that God chooses those who live beyond Nazareth, and even today God's love extends as far as Kansas City – and beyond. It was unwelcomed news. Those in worship chased Jesus from the synagogue and out of town. Some even wanted to hurl him off the cliff.

Jesus certainly struck a nerve and not only with those who were gathered in that synagogue, but with any peoples who gather in God's name, who embrace God's chosenness. All of humanity, throughout time, tends to be a jealous people. Perhaps because we place our own limitations on love, we feel that God too limits God's love. But in the end, no matter how much we attempt to contain it, God's love cannot be limited. God' love for those gathered in that ancient synagogue was unlimited, and they were okay with that. They simply could not comprehend God's favor, God's blessing falling on another, especially on one outside of their faith. Though Jesus was ushering in a New Covenant, nowhere do we find that God diminishes God's love to those of the Old Covenant. Those of us of the New Covenant risk the same temptation of trying to limit God's love.

A few days ago was the International Holocaust Remembrance Day – which should not only serve as a reminder of the atrocities of history, but that anti-Semitism remains present today. A few week's ago I received a phone call from one of Westminster's friends, Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein. He served as one of your references during your pastoral search process, and he spoke so highly of

Westminster when we talked last summer. A couple days after he reached out to me was the hostage situation at the Texas synagogue, and I texted with him letting him know his community is in our thoughts and prayers. I learned that the Rabbi taken hostage is actually a friend of Rabbi Alex. I had flashbacks of course of being in Pittsburgh during the Tree of Life shooting, with the synagogue just up the hill from the church. I had difficulty reaching my Rabbi friend that morning, but I found him at the Jewish Community Center setting up a shelter for those to gather and mourn. Entering the center I don't remember saying anything, I certainly remember that I didn't do anything (because I wrestled with knowing what to do), but I simply walked in and embraced a friend momentarily. Lamenting to my Rabbi friend weeks later, I said something like I wish we could have done something more on that morning. He was taken aback, and spoke of the impact of simply showing up; of being present. In showing up, I was assured of one thing that morning: God was certainly present in that place, among those people in mourning. I was privileged to enter that holy place amongst such holy people.

God is certainly present among the church, within these walls, within those who gather in worship. And God is certainly present beyond the church, beyond the walls and beyond ourselves, working in and through others within and beyond synagogues, mosques and temples; living rooms, and board rooms; in coffee shops and beneath bridges. A limitless love; a limitless grace, abandoning none and leading us to show up amongst another; to be present with another. To rejoice in the reality of God's presence beyond ourselves.

Through the one who creates, the one who redeems and the one who sustains.
Amen.