

**Epiphany 4C
Luke 4:21-30
January 31, 2010**

OK, so when television shows do two-part episodes, they always begin the second part with a little flashback montage. And because our Gospel story today is actually the second half of a story that started last week, I thought I might try the same technique.

“Here’s what you missed in last week’s episode” – Jesus came back to his hometown and went to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath. Everyone was really happy he was back, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah so he could read and interpret it to them. So he found the place he wanted in the scroll and read:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach 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 that’s where this week’s episode begins, with Jesus handing the scroll back to the attendant, taking a seat and beginning to teach. “Today,” he tells his friends and neighbors, people who have known him since he was just a little boy, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

And boy, do things go downhill fast. The next thing you know, all his old friends are filled with rage and they’ve dragged him to the edge of a cliff and they’re about to push him over the edge. What happened? What went so terribly wrong?

Well we pondered this question a little bit last week, how Jesus rubbed their noses in the indiscriminate, all-encompassing love of God. It must be hard, when you think you are the Chosen People to discover that you’re not as chosen as you thought you were. That God might bypass all the Jewish widows in order to send Elijah to a pagan widow, a Gentile widow, in Sidon. Or that God might ignore all the lepers in Israel in order to send Elisha to cleanse a leper in Syria.

And it becomes increasingly clear to the hometown crowd that the poor and the oppressed and the blind and the captive folks that Jesus is talking about are not his poor, oppressed, blind, captive friends from Nazareth. He's talking about poor tax collectors, if you can imagine such a thing. He's talking about oppressed Romans, if you can imagine such a thing. He's talking about blind Samaritans, if you can imagine such a thing. He is talking about captive client kings like evil Herod Antipas. Can you imagine ?

Jesus sits among his old friends, looks them in the eye, and says, in effect, "It's not all about you."

And his life and ministry through the rest of this gospel according to Luke will hammer that point home. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is not interested in people who already have it made, who are in the know, and who have found their way home to God. In Luke's gospel, it's all about the stranger, the outcast, the foreigner.

It's about the lost sheep and the prodigal son. It's about the Good Samaritan, the outsider who extends mercy when the faithful Israelites pass by and do nothing. It's about thieves being promised Paradise, even when they don't repent. It's about Jesus hanging on the cross, looking down at the soldiers and the religious authorities and the screaming abusers and the curious bystanders and saying, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

The kind of God that Jesus introduces offers a kind of radical hospitality that opens the doors of the kingdom to anyone and everyone. This is a God who extends a gracious welcome that can surprise and provoke us at the same time. This open-armed, openhearted acceptance is so broad, so indiscriminate, that it can make the best of us squirm in our seats and the worst of us want to push someone off of a cliff.

Because all of us carry within us a fear of the other. That other might be someone who speaks another language or practices another religion. It might be someone who threatens us socially, economically, even physically. It might be someone who looks or sounds or smells unappealing.

It might be someone who speaks with too many big and educated words, or it might be someone who uses too many obscenities. It might be someone smarter and more skilled. It might be someone raising their children according to a completely different standard from our own. It might be someone rich. It might be someone poor.

And all of them are welcome at God's table. We don't get to pick who comes to God's party. God gets to pick, and the folks he's looking to invite are exactly the ones who will make us the most uncomfortable, angry and anxious. He's going to invite us, sure. We'll get to go. But when we get there, we'll discover that all those others, those disconcerting others, got invited to the banquet as well. And they're sitting right next to us. And they want us to pass them the salt.

That is the heart of the sermon Jesus preaches to his hometown audience. That's what makes them so nervous that they hustle him up the hillside to the edge of a cliff.

We are called -- as individuals, but even more importantly, as a Christian community -- to extend God's welcome as broadly and indiscriminately as Jesus did. And that is a question your vestry has been struggling with for the better part of a year now. What does it mean for a church to extend the kind of radical welcome that Jesus proclaimed in his inaugural address there in Nazareth?

When you look around this room, at these good people here, who do you see? Is this a church for just a certain sort of people? Could you feel comfortable worshipping here if you didn't wear the right kind of clothes, or if you didn't read the right kind of books, or if you didn't hold the right kind of political opinions, or if you didn't understand the many secret codes of Episcopal worship?

When you look around this room this morning, who is not here? What age groups are not well represented? What ethnic groups are not well represented? What socio-economic groups are not well represented? When you go to a movie at Eastwood, or a festival in Old Town, or a store in Meridian Mall, are the people who surround you there the same sorts of people you see here on Sunday?

All Saints is a welcoming community. To a point. But we can do better. We can always do better. And the place to begin to do better is exactly at that point where we most want to draw a line.

Each of us has our own discomfort zone, and that is where Jesus confronts us this morning. That is the place to begin.

When you think of welcoming someone into your life, or into this parish, where do you feel the wall come down? Where is that edge where your sense of hospitality shifts into hostility? Who would you rather not discover sitting in the chair next to you this morning ... that woman at work who is driving you insane? A punked-out kid with tattoos and a pierced nose and lip and tongue? A quiet old man who talks too slowly? A person who believes the exact opposite from you about gays in the church or health care reform or who should be the next governor of Michigan? An entire family who can't or won't speak English?

Find your own discomfort level, and start there. This is the truth the vestry has begun to discover over the past year. You have to start at the place where you squirm. You have to begin where it pinches, where it scandalizes, and where it offends.

Only then can we enlarge our own boundaries. Only then can we open our hearts just a little bit wider, and taste the grace of God's hospitality.

This is indeed the year of the Lord's favor; it is ALWAYS the year of the Lord's favor. And that is a kind of favor that God intends to grant to all kinds of people we would never have welcomed on our own. Jesus embodies that favor as he sits in the synagogue in his hometown. We, as his people gathered here in East Lansing, are called to embody it as fully and as radically ... and as offensively as he did.

I pray we can continue in that way. I pray that some day our welcome to the stranger will be so broad, so loving, so scandalous, so indiscriminate, and so hospitable, that someone will try to push us off a cliff.