

“God’s Offense”
Luke 4:21-30
Andrew Foster Connors
4th Sunday after Epiphany
February 3, 2019

I heard it once said that the great theologian Soren Kierkegaard noted that many great minds of his century had given themselves to making people’s lives easier -- inventing labor-saving machines and devices. Kierkegaard said that he would dedicate himself to making peoples lives more difficult. He would become a preacher.¹

I’m sure it might sound odd to some of you that I’d be dumbing down your expectations on a Sunday when so many preachers have come to embrace as Jesus at his best. Jesus, unafraid to challenge the hometown crowd for their exclusivism! Jesus, unafraid to take all his notoriety and spend it all for the message that God welcomes more than just people who already think of themselves as chosen. Jesus, announcing that the Good News isn’t about me and God, but about God righting the wrongs against the poor, releasing those who have been in prison, freeing those who have been held captive.

That’s certainly an uplifting message and one that needs to ring all throughout the church. This good news is for everyone! In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north. It’s an easy turn from there for us to ask each other, who have we left out in our surety about God’s favoritism? Who have we assumed is outside the bounds of God’s healing and God’s grace? Who are the foreigners, the outcasts, the outsiders who we’ve maligned or excluded or ignored? That’ll preach.

¹ My memory is that Will Willimon shared this perspective at some place in some time which I cannot remember.

But Jesus didn't preach it that way. I really wish he had. It would fit so much better with our theology – God loves everybody, no exceptions! God is good all the time. All the time, God is good. It would fit so much better with our hymnody. There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty. And it would fit so much better with the liberal politics of the region where we live. I really wish he had preached it that way. And if he couldn't I wish he had just read the text, rolled up the scroll, sat down, and kept his mouth closed.

But Jesus is way more offensive than that in Nazareth. It's true that he lifts up examples of God's reach beyond the family of Israel – Elijah reaching out to the widow of Zarephath, a Phoenician town – a successor to the Caanaanites, Israel's old enemies. Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian, a soldier of one of Israel's long time foes. Certainly evidence that God reaches beyond the ethnic and religious bounds of Israel to bring healing and help. And if Jesus had said just that to the Nazareth synagogue crowd and they still tried to throw him off a cliff, then I'd be preaching that sermon about our rejection of the wide reach of God's grace and heartily as anyone.

But that's not what Jesus says. He says, there were many widows in Israel and the prophet wasn't sent to any of them. There were many lepers in Israel, and the other prophet wasn't sent to any of them. It's not God's mercy to outsiders that is so offensive to the hometown congregation. *It's Jesus' argument that God chooses a few outsiders over and above the faithful for healing and help.* It's not the expansiveness of God's grace beyond the bounds, extending help and healing that offends. *It's God's selectivity of some over others* especially people we would agree are less deserving.

Comparisons are dangerous because they're always asymmetric, but I think it would be like saying, there were a lot

of sick people in Alabama in the 1960s, but Dr. King was sent to none of them but Bull Connor. Or maybe it's like saying, there were a lot of poor Baltimoreans in the 1960s during the time of Juanita Jackson Mitchell and none of them was freed from their bondage except Ben Carson. You wouldn't have to throw me off a cliff if I said that – I'd want to do it myself.

I can't fully subscribe to a God who chooses a few people for healing – people who obviously are a lot less deserving than some others. I can't go around preaching a God who overlooks the suffering of the many in favor of the healing of a few – some of whom obviously do not deserve it. And yet the more I wrestle with what Jesus is saying the more I see how I can't stay with that earlier, inclusive reading either-- the one that says that the hometown crowd was enraged because Jesus implied that God loves and includes more than just them.

For one thing, it's not all that inclusive. If we're basically saying, all those Jews in Jesus' hometown synagogue were so exclusive that they tried to kill Jesus when he suggested that God loves more than just them, well, that sounds more like anti-Semitism than inclusivity. And while that might fit easily with the anti-Jewish interpretations of Scripture threaded all through the history of the Church, we've already seen that the objections of the hometown crowd are reasonable. How can you say that only a few are healed at others' expense? Why would you imply that God chooses enemies or at least outsiders at the expense of those who already give their faith to God?

No I think the harder and more truthful message in this text is Jesus' insistence that God's ways are outside our control. That God refuses to dance on command, refuses to be manipulated like some puppet under our control. That's what Jesus is signaling to the hometown crowd. But more than that, *God's activity in the world is beyond our comprehension. Jesus doesn't say why* Elijah was sent to one widow in the midst of

others. *He doesn't say why* Naaman was healed and no one else. In fact, God's name isn't even mentioned. Jesus just points out the alarming fact that even when the prophets are doing good, God's motivation, or character is difficult to understand.

Sometimes that news provokes the deepest rage imaginable. I've seen it – onetime when I was still in seminary doing a chaplaincy class in a hospital. A man in his '50s had been brought in with a major stroke -- healthy guy – a runner. And I'll never forget standing with his wife in the waiting room as she pounded her fists against the wall and screamed the question, "Why? Where are you God? Where are you?" I learned early that this question has no reasonable answer. And the anger underneath it, borne of grief, is more than reasonable.

And maybe that's the good news that religious folks especially should take from this text. *God's ways are inscrutable.* We do not get to know why some find healing and some do not. Why some testify to the fullness of God's grace and others do not. And to claim more than we know for ourselves or others is to pin God down in a way that God defies, to box God in in a way that God rejects. The journey of faith isn't always from confusion to clarity. Sometimes it's from comfort into discomfort. From understanding into confusion. From a deep sense of God's presence to a perplexing sense of God's absence.

The God revealed to us in Jesus leaves us with as many questions as it does answers which is more truthful to the experience of life than any closed theological system. This is why getting to know God is so much riskier than just thinking about God. Christian Wiman, a modern day mystic says it this way, "to say that one must live in uncertainty doesn't begin to get at the tenuous, precarious nature of faith. The minute you begin to speak with certitude about God, [God] is gone. We

praise people for having strong faith, but strength is only one part of that physical metaphor: one also needs *flexibility*.”²

I met recently with someone from a very fundamentalist Christian background. This person grew up in a church that gave her all the answers, went to a school that taught her how to respond to every liberal challenge. And contrary to some liberal stereotypes about her childhood, she was not unhappy. Actually she was quite content. She could spar theologically with the best. Her theology did not require a dumbing down of her intellect. Her intelligence made her a better warrior for the faith.

So I asked her why in the world did you ever leave that? It sounds pretty wonderful. And she said, “Because one day I realized that if I was worshiping a God who was smaller than my understanding of God, then I wasn’t really worshiping God at all.”

I think that’s what Jesus was preaching to the hometown crowd. Yes, God cares about outsiders as much as you. But also, life gets more complicated when you get close to the living God. Yesterday, many of us witnessed an extraordinary event. Our brother’s life was saved right here on the floor. I know there are ten ways to explain it. Doctors did what doctors do. But we had three doctors in the room – you can’t get that many doctors in the same room in a hospital. Yes, but it speaks of the privilege of our congregation. True, but Jesus I prayed as hard as I can pray – I told Hilbert last night I don’t have any of those prayers left – I am spent. How exactly was God involved? We’ll never know.

Jesus came preaching, making our lives more difficult. Thanks be to God.³

² Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2013, p. 72

³ It yet another odd twist: two weeks after preaching this sermon I went to update the manuscript. As I turned to the front of the Christian Wiman book in search of publication details, I realized the book was a gift from Spencer Hammond, the legendary Baltimore church musician whose funeral was the occasion for the extraordinary event named at the conclusion of this sermon.