**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Sunday January 30, 2022**

**“A Hometown Welcome?” (Luke 4:21-30)**

When Jesus visited his hometown of Nazareth, he created quite a stir. On that Sabbath, he went to the village synagogue for worship, prayer, and the study of the Scriptures. After he read the morning Scripture lesson from Isaiah 61:1-2, he offered a brief commentary on the reading, saying, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (4:21). By doing this, Jesus clearly defined his messianic mission in terms of this Isaiah passage, establishing it as a mission that would be Spirit-guided and Spirit-empowered, a message of good news for the marginalized, a declaration of freedom for imprisoned and oppressed, and a pronouncement of a time of the Lord’s favor (4:18-19). This morning’s Scripture lesson presents the aftermath of Jesus’ speech in the synagogue, depicting the people’s response to his bold mission statement. As we consider the passage, we’re going to discover that it is one thing to articulate one’s mission statement, but it’s quite a different thing to wrestle with its implications.

At first, the response to Jesus’ pronouncement was mixed. On the one hand, some people were positive about his message. Verse 22 reads, “*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.*” Yet others were a bit dismissive of Jesus, posing the question, “*Isn’t this Joseph’s son?*” Now, I’m a bit curious about this question and its meaning. Were the townspeople sceptical about Jesus and his mission because he was so familiar to them? Did they wonder how this hometown boy could have grown up to have such grand ideas about his identity and vocation? Or did they simply fail to make the connection between the hometown boy they knew and the person that he had become? Did their amazement stem from the fact that this humble carpenter’s son spoke with such authority?

Whatever the reason behind this question, Jesus understood the people’s reference to his hometown roots as an expectation of special treatment since he was *one of their own*. Jesus had just announced the “*year of the Lord’s favor*” and so the townsfolk may have been anticipating a whole lot of divine favor to come their way because of their familiarity with him. Sensing that this may be the case, Jesus confronted their misunderstanding right away. He began by quoting a common proverb that nicely summarized their expectations. He said to them, “I suppose you’re going to quote the proverb, ‘*Doctor, go heal yourself’*” (4:23). From their perspective it was quite natural to expect that the great healer from Nazareth would first take care of his own relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Furthermore, reports of his activity had spread throughout the whole region (4:14). The hometown crowd had heard about the great things that he had done in Capernaum, and they anticipated that he would do similar things in Nazareth (4:23). After all, if Jesus could reach out to the Gentiles in Capernaum, surely, he would help his own people in Nazareth. The villagers assumed that proximity to and familiarity with Jesus was their golden ticket to getting special privileges. But they seemed to have missed that a key part of Jesus’ mission mandate was *to reach out to those on the margins.*

Jesus’ prophetic mission clearly put him at odds with his own people, who were thinking that they’d be the exclusive recipients of the Messiah’s ministry. No wonder, *a prophet isn’t welcomed in his hometown* since prophets often did unpopular and unexpected things(4:24). Jesus went on to tell the townsfolk about the actions of two of Israel’s most famous prophets, *Elijah and Elisha*. The full implications of his earlier mission statement would be encapsulated by the acts of these two prophets who reached beyond the boundaries of Israel and ministered to non-Jews.

Jesus emphasized that there were many needy widows in the land of Israel, but God sent Elijah into Gentile territory, to the village of Zarephath in Sidon, in order to minister to an impoverished widow (1 Kings 17:7-24). With her food supplies running low, she still baked some bread for the prophet. Due to her kindness, God blessed her with a miraculous supply of flour and oil. Later, when her son died, the prophet miraculously revived him back to life. In a similar fashion, Jesus stressed that there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but the one leper who got healed was Naaman, a pagan military leader from Syria (2 Kings 5:1-15). Elijah and Elisha were channels of God’s grace to these outsiders as they gave healing and help to them.

The repercussions of Jesus’ reflections were very dramatic. The people in the synagogue did not like what they heard. Verses 28 and 29 read, “*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*.” They were so furious with Jesus that they wanted to throw him off a cliff to his demise. His words certainly touched a nerve that day.

But what was it about Jesus’ little sermon that caused such an uproar? It is quite likely that when Jesus confronted these devout people with some uncomfortable truths from their religious texts, it created a great deal of uneasiness within them. This discomfort erupted into anger and violence toward the messenger. This sometimes happens when people are challenged with difficult ideas that shake up their preconceived notions. The implications of the mission of the Messiah did not sit well with the people, especially since it was supported by their sacred texts. Much to their surprise, God’s grace extended to outcasts and strangers.

This little story provides a lot of food for thought for the modern church. Amidst the shifting cultural landscape in the Western world, the Christian church struggles to find its place in society. Why are we here? What is our purpose in a secular society? What is our mission in the world? On the one hand we are joined together in this faith community to help each another to grow in Christ. We support, care, and pray for one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. We are Christ’s body, therefore, “*If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”* (1 Corinthians 12:26). At the same time Christ calls us to go out into the world to communicate, in word and deed, the message of God’s love. We are meant to reach outside the walls of the church to our neighborhood. This does not present us with an either/or, us/them, or an insider/outsider set of choices. Ministry to those inside and outside of the church at the same time is quite achievable. The church in the book of Acts fostered a close, caring community while reaching out to those outside the group. Community building and outreach are both part of a healthy church life.

The real challenge, however, is to reach out to those outside of our four walls and to do this, we may need to change our thinking about ministry. In days gone by, churches drew in outsiders in by hosting events. The goal was to get people inside the church building, and this would be the recipe for success. This approach was safe because it required less risk and commitment on our part. We simply opened the church doors and welcomed people in. But this method of ministry is no longer as effective as it once was for several reasons. For instance, people like to sleep in on Sunday or spend time with their families, so going to church doesn’t fit in with their lifestyle. Others are indifferent toward organized religion, so a privatized spirituality is much more common.

In order to engage in the mission of the Messiah to the marginalized we will need to shift from an event-based approach to a relationship-based one. We’ll actually have to relate to people who don’t believe in God, spend time with them and care about their lives. We need to love people with no strings attached. We need to reach out to our neighbors, not with the aim of filling our pews, but because Jesus calls us to love people. This approach to ministry involves much more risk and commitment on our part. It will require us to walk alongside of people who are quite different than us. Uniformity is comfortable, while diversity and difference are hard to manage.

This year as a congregation, let’s consider why we’re here in this neighborhood. What is our purpose? What is our mission? As we wrestle with the implications of the mission of the Messiah for our church, we may feel a bit anxious as our Lord challenges us to step out from our comfortable pews and go out into a hurting world. But remember, we are not alone for *the Spirit of the Lord is upon us* as we are sent out in mission.