

Not What We Expected
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:16-30
January 28, 2007

Have you ever looked forward to a show with great anticipation – only to be disappointed? The reviews were good. Friends had given positive reports. But as the show progressed, you realized that it wasn't what you expected at all. That's what happens one day in Nazareth when Jesus comes home for a visit.

As the people gather for worship that day, there is a sense of excitement. Their hometown boy, Jesus, has finally come back to preach. Imagine the buzz in the congregation: "I bet that Mary and Joseph are very proud to have him here today." "I've heard he was really popular in Capernaum. I can't wait to hear him myself." "I wonder if he will perform miracles for us. Ol' Jacob is really ailing; he could use a miracle."

The crowd settles as Jesus is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The opening words of his message follow the reading. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." This causes quite a mixture of responses. Some feel a sense of relief, for centuries of waiting for God's deliverance and blessing are finally ending. Others are perplexed, for Jesus is one of their own; their children were his playmates; how can he be God's anointed one? There is a sense that this hometown boy called to great privilege will offer special favors to the community that raised him. The unspoken assumption is that as God's chosen people the Jews will be the exclusive beneficiaries of this new liberation movement.

Jesus catches wind of this parochial attitude and addresses it even before it is voiced. Jesus enlightens them to the fact that God's promises are not meant only for Israel. God will bless all the poor and all the captives, Jews and Gentiles alike.

To illustrate his point, Jesus draws upon two rather unpleasant stories in Israel's history. He reminds them of a long-term drought suffered by Israel. During that time, God called the prophet Elijah to go to a Phoenician widow (I Kings 17). Phoenicia is the center of Baal worship. Elijah's ministry to the widow and her son, offering food and healing in the midst of drought, demonstrates that Gentiles are included in the circle of God's concern. The story is distributing because many Jewish people also suffered during that drought, but they did not receive the special favor granted the widow and her son.

The second story Jesus recalls adds insult to injury. He reminds them that the prophet Elisha offered God's cleansing power to Naaman, the

commander of the Syrian army (II Kings 5). Syria was Israel's enemy, yet its military commander was healed by washing in the Jordan River, the holy river of Israel, while many lepers in Israel continued to suffer.

Jesus is blurring the lines between insider and outsider, the saved and the lost, the privileged and the expendable. More than blurring the lines, Jesus is erasing the lines. God is as eager to save the Israelite and the foreigner. God is concerned about the leper and the leader, the widow and the prophet.

Jesus' message is not a comfortable one, neither in his day nor today. The people don't want to hear that God's promise is not for them alone. All people of the earth, all nations, are included in God's design. All people. From the high and mighty to the lowly and insignificant. From the chosen people to those we call "enemy." From those who are like us to those who are strangely different. From those who speak our language to those who speak in other tongues. From those with citizenship papers to those who are fenced out.

If we are honest, the idea of an exclusive God who makes covenant with us alone is appealing. We can understand the discomfort with Jesus' message that God's good news is not for the Jews alone, but for all people. Jesus announces an inclusive God, a God whose people cover the entire earth. This isn't what they expect from their hometown son. They want him to protect their privileges and secure their private claim on God. He's not one of them after all.

It's evident that the people resist the message of God's expansive, inclusive love. The embrace with which they initially welcomed Jesus suddenly turns to a desire for execution. Filled with rage, the congregation wants to get rid of Jesus and halt his crazy way of thinking. They drag him to the edge of town to throw him over a cliff, but Jesus escapes from their hateful grasp. He passes through and goes on his way. He moves beyond the parochialism and possessiveness. He travels past the narrow-mindedness and territorialism. He goes out of the city limits into a broader space to share his message of God's love with all people in all the earth.

Jesus does not go elsewhere because he is rejected. It is just the opposite. Jesus is rejected because he goes elsewhere. He goes beyond his hometown, his family, his kind. He goes outside the establishment. He thinks "outside the box" that proscribes who is chosen of God and who is not. The next verses tell us that he goes down to Capernaum, a Gentile community, where his teaching is well received.

My sense is that Jesus' first sermon is as difficult for us to hear in the twenty-first century as it was in the first century. Just as it called his hometown folks out of their comfort zone, so Jesus continues to call us out of our comfort zones. It shatters our treasured stereotypes and exposes our cherished assumptions. It causes us to look inward, to examine our sense of self-importance and superiority. Jesus clarifies that "God loves us not because we're more special than somebody else, but that everyone is made special by God's great love."¹

The promises of God are not limited to our congregation, our community, our race, our nation, even our religion. We can never set limits on who may receive the grace of God. We can't make God in our image, bound by our prejudices and phobias. God does not belong to us, but we belong to God.

Mr. Swiller was known far and wide as a hard-nosed boss who watched his employees like a hawk. He was making one of his regular tours of the factory when he spotted a young man leaning against a pile of boxes just outside the foreman's office. Since George, the foreman, wasn't around, Swiller stood off to the side and watched to see just how long the young man would stand around doing nothing.

The young man yawned, scratched his head, looked at his watch, and sat on the floor. He took out a nail file and began cleaning his nails. Then he stretched, yawned again, and leaned back on the pile of boxes. Swiller stepped from his hiding place and walked up to the young man. "You!" he boomed. "How much do you make a week?" The young man looked up indifferently. "Two hundred and fifty dollars," he said.

Swiller swooped into the cashier's office, took \$250 from the cash box, and returned. "Take it," he said, "and get out! Don't let me see you around here again!"

The young man took the cash, put it in his pocket, and left. Swiller snorted at his lack of remorse, embarrassment, or any other feeling. Then he went looking for George. When he found him, Swiller was red with anger. "That idler in front of your office," Swiller said. "I just gave him a week's pay and fired him. What's the matter with you, letting him stand around as though he had nothing to do?"

"You mean the kid in the red shirt?" George asked.

"Yes! The kid in the red shirt!"

George replied, "He was waiting for the twenty dollars we owe him for lunch. He works for the coffee shop around the corner."²

The boss may have had good values in terms of faithfulness on the job, but his prejudiced assumption led him to act in a manner that was rash, foolish, and costly!

God takes a broader perspective than we humans often do. That's why God sometimes sends prophets like Jeremiah and Jesus "to pluck up and pull down" attitudes and stereotypes that do not represent God; "to destroy and overthrow" flawed assumptions about who belongs and who doesn't; "to build and to plant" holy values and perspectives.

One of the qualities I appreciate about this congregation is that as a downtown church our campus is open to a wide variety of constituencies: adults learning the English language; senior citizens; children receiving a joyful beginning to life; high school students learning civics; developmentally disabled adults; recovering alcoholics; residents walking through on their way to somewhere in town. Most of these are not our own ministries, but by opening our doors to these, we are implying, "You belong here and you belong to God." The challenge is that sometimes it is easier to open our doors than it is to open our hearts and minds to those who are different from us.

Last week Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister wrote an article about the current conflict over the wearing of traditional Muslim garb. Several European nations and now the United States are wrestling with banning the burqa or limiting the public use of the Muslim headscarf or hijab. The issue raises some difficult questions for our time. Does freedom of religion extend to those of different religions or only to those who are homogeneous, those who are like us?

She writes, "In the global village in which we all now live there is a simmering dis-ease everywhere. You can live here, the world seems to be saying from one end of it to the other, but you must look like us as well as behave like us, behave like us as well as be like us. Whoever 'us' is. In some Muslim countries, the expectation is that women – all women, Muslims or not – must be covered from head to foot. In the West, on the other hand, those who are covered from head to foot make us uncomfortable."³

This issue has some similarities to the situation in the Nazareth synagogue when Jesus first preached. Times are changing. The ways in which God is at work in the lives of individuals and in the world may be different than what we've always expected. How is God calling us to respond to our increasingly pluralistic culture and world? Does God really love all people or just those who are like us? If God's grace is not limited, what does that mean for our relationships with one another? Can we venture

to know the fullness of God's ways, or are they mysteries we're still probing in our increasingly complex world? It's a matter for deep soul searching, prayer and study.

Last year *Atlantic Monthly* asked ten historians to name the 100 most influential Americans of all time. Abraham Lincoln was number one on the list.⁴ As the Civil War was winding down and it was obvious that the Union would win, someone asked President Lincoln how he would treat the southerners after the war was over.

He answered, "Like they had never been away."

"But Mr. President," the questioner protested, "aren't we supposed to destroy our enemies?"

Abraham Lincoln's response was a piece of divine wisdom: "Don't we destroy our enemies when we make them our friends?"⁵

As Jesus revealed the wide embrace of God's love, may we broaden our comfort zones to experience the stranger and perhaps find a friend.

¹ Rev. Patricia E. Farris, "Leadership Can Be Dangerous," First United Methodist Church, Santa Monica, January 28, 2001. Retrieved from www.gbgm-umc.org/monica, Jan. 22, 2007.

² Rev. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, "Tolerance," Westwood United Methodist Church, January 28, 2001. Retrieved from www.westwoodumc.org, Jan. 22, 2007.

³ Joan Chittister, "Freedom of Religion has its own demands," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 23, 2007.

⁴ *The Atlantic*, December 2006, p. 21.

⁵ James Moore, *If All Else Fails, Read the Instructions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp. 55-56.

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