
THE DANGEROUS ACT OF WORSHIP

Today's gospel reading continues from where we left off last week.

- JESUS is preaching to His home congregation and the message HE brings is at first well-received.
- HE tells the folks from His home town, who have heard about the miracles and healings that HE has been performing in the surrounding area, that in HIM the words of the prophets are being fulfilled;
 - that His mission is to preach good news to the poor,
 - to proclaim freedom to those who are prisoners,
 - to bring recovery of sight to the blind,
 - relief to those who are oppressed,
 - and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Now that's a message I can get behind!

- That's the kind of good news I want to hear!
 - GOD is doing something great and amazing, and all I can say is, "You go, GOD!"
 - No wonder the people are pleased with their hometown kid.

But then look what happens. JESUS starts to unpack the prophet's words and His interpretation is not what the people want to hear.

- They don't like what HE has to say.
- In fact, they become so angry that they want to stone JESUS to death.

(You see, there were two ways to stone someone in those days.

- One was to pick up a bunch of stones and throw them at the target until s/he was dead.
- The other was to pick up the person and throw him/her off a cliff onto the rocks below and kill him/her.)

JESUS' words made them *that* angry.

- Apparently, they didn't understand that worship can be dangerous, not just for the preacher, but also, and even more so, for the congregation because the message can be comforting or afflicting.

There is a saying that the purpose of the gospel is twofold:

- that it will comfort the afflicted, and that it will afflict the comfortable.
 - You'll know which you are—comfortable or afflicted—by the way you feel when you hear it.

I guess those folks in Nazareth were feeling more the afflicted part by what JESUS had to say, so they decided to make HIM feel afflicted by the rocks at the bottom of the hill on which the town had been built.

- If they didn't succeed in killing HIM, at least HE would know better than to come preaching that kind of message in their town.

But what exactly was it that JESUS was saying that was so confronting or disappointing for those folks? What was it that upset them so much?

After announcing this good news of release and redemption and healing for those who have been cast off by the world, HE clarifies what HIS ministry is about and who it is most intended for,

- and it sounds like HE is saying that it isn't them.

- Furthermore, it's as if HE is saying, "When I talk about GOD coming to free the oppressed and bless the poor, I'm talking about GOD blessing the people you can't stand,
 - the people you don't want to be near,
 - the people you think you are better than,
 - and the people you think are your enemies.
- HE does this by reminding them of a couple of stories where GOD blessed, not Israel, but Israel's enemies—a woman from Sidon in Phoenicia, and a military leader from Syria.
 - These people weren't Jews—they were the enemies of the Jews.

But they missed the point that JESUS was really making,

- that after Israel rejected GOD's messengers, Elijah and Elisha, GOD sent those prophets to Gentiles,
 - and the same would be true if this congregation refused to accept that JESUS and HIS ministry was for all people, not just the Jews.

But, you see, that's what makes the act of worship dangerous.

- Because in it, we may be confronted with a message we don't want to hear.

We may want the preacher to choose a text that talks about GOD's love for *us*,

- and we don't want to hear about GOD's love for people we may not care for, or like, and may even hate.

But you see we don't get to choose what GOD is going to say to us.

- It's not our choice; it's GOD's choice.

If someone is called to bring a message from GOD, of course s/he will likely deliver it in a place where GOD's people come together to worship or to hear the Word of GOD.

- That's precisely where JESUS brought His message.

HE described the nature of His ministry as one of liberty to those who are oppressed, which actually *was* the people in that synagogue.

- They were oppressed by the Roman government who occupied their lands.
- They were oppressed by the religious leaders who judged them for every mistake they made and told them they were failing GOD.
- They were oppressed by the weight of their sin—a burden from which they could never free themselves on their own.
 - But they didn't want to be confronted by their own shortcomings and need for more of GOD in their lives.
 - And they definitely didn't need to hear that they were in the same boat as all of those foreigners around them and among them.
 - So, they did the very thing against which JESUS was warning them—the rejected HIM.

I have a note in my Bible next to this passage that asks, "What could I say that would make the congregation want to kill me?"

- Though that may be an outcome of preaching, that's not the goal of preaching.
 - The purpose of preaching is to take GOD's Word and make it accessible and understandable for people so that GOD's will for them and for the world might be clearer.
- The trouble comes when we assume we already know what GOD's message is for us, and then try to get scripture to fit what we want.
 - And when someone comes along who says that our understanding is not what GOD intends—well that's when we want the preacher to get caught between a rock and a hard place—literally.

GOD chooses the message that we need to hear.

- GOD chooses what it is with which we need to wrestle.
 - That doesn't mean we don't have a choice, however.
 - We can always choose to accept or reject what God is saying to us.
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Robert Frost wrote a poem called "Mending Wall".

- Its most famous line is one that most of us know: "Good walls make good neighbors." The poem tells of two farmers who are out for their spring ritual of replacing the stones that have fallen from the wall separating their two properties.
 - One keeps wondering, though, why they need wall at all.
 - You see, one has apple trees and the other pine trees.
 - There is no livestock.
 - So, he wonders what he was walling in or walling out.
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JESUS' congregation would agree with the farmer that says, "Good walls make good neighbors."

- Walls, after all, keep you safe, mark off important boundaries, and keep less-than-desirable things away.
 - (Sounds like a campaign promise, doesn't it?)

But Jesus disagrees.

When you live into your identity as one of GOD's beloved children, you see, there is no more need for walls to keep the enemy out, because *there are no more enemies*.

And I know that can be hard to hear. And even harder to live.

- And at times, it can feel like pie-in-the-sky sentimentality.
- After all, we live in a dangerous world where walls and locks and laws and even weapons seem absolutely necessary to keep us safe and bring us a measure of peace and order to our lives.
 - In this life, perhaps good walls really do make good neighbors.

Perhaps. But perhaps we also fall prey too easily to a deep-seated insecurity that labels portions of the human race and prompts us to overestimate risk,

- to fear those we don't know instead of welcoming them,
- and to resort to violence far too quickly when we feel at risk.

So perhaps, when we lock our homes at night to keep our family safe, maybe we can do that with just a bit of remorse, knowing that this isn't what GOD intends or desires.

- Because here's the thing—the hard thing about the GOD we know in JESUS:
 - wherever you and I draw the line between who's in and who's out, we will find JESUS on the other side.
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So, what do we do when we hear that GOD's grace includes people we don't think deserve it?>>>Accept it or reject it?

- And how do we respond when we are told that GOD's plan involves action and sacrifice on our part?>>>Accept it or reject it?
- And what do we do when we learn that GOD's plan for our lives isn't what we planned?>>>Accept it or reject it?

If there is one line that sums up the JESUS we discover in Luke's gospel, it is this: *GOD came to redeem everyone.*

- When we focus on “redeem”, this is good news.
- When we focus on “everyone”, and call to mind those we believe have done us wrong, or who frighten us, or who seem different, or who seem unnatural, well, that same line can be terrifying.

The dangerous act of worship means that sometimes we will be confronted with messages that discomfort us and challenge us to move to a different place—a different way of living.

- It also means that our loving GOD wants more for us than we often want for ourselves and our world. But, that’s a good thing!
 - What you do when you hear those messages is up to you? Accept it, or reject it?

By the way, after worship I’ll meet those of you who wish at the edge of the cliff.