

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 6/5/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, June 6 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who struggle financially. Pray for those who are in debt and who have limited resources available to them. Ask that we might find just ways to help those who are in need so that they may find freedom from anxiety in their lives.*

Luke 4 provides the narrative of JESUS returning to HIS home town of Nazareth, now as a rabbi. On the Sabbath, JESUS went to the local synagogue, read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and then preached on the text. Things went well at first, but by the end of HIS message, the people in the synagogue grabbed JESUS, took HIM to a cliff outside the town, and prepared to throw HIM off. (You see, there are two ways to stone someone. One way is to pick up rocks and throw at the person. The other way is to pick up the person and throw him at the rocks.) JESUS, though, passed through the crowd safely and continued on HIS way.

I've often wondered what I could say in church that would make people so angry that they'd want to throw me off a cliff. Not that this is my goal, but I've thought about JESUS' message and what HE might say to us today. Because of the sudden change in the crowd's response to HIM, it's worthwhile to look at what JESUS said that suddenly made the worshipers so angry.

The passage that JESUS read is from Isaiah:

*“The SPIRIT OF THE LORD is on me,
because HE has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
HE has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor.”*

It's a good, hopeful message with which the people would have been familiar. JESUS proclaimed that this message had been fulfilled on that day. Likely, HE was talking about HIS own coming. Some may have heard it that way, and some, just as an optimistic announcement of GOD'S involvement in their lives. In any case, the people liked HIS words and spoke well of JESUS. Some even expressed surprise that their local boy, Joseph's son, could have preached such a fine message. But they were all pleased.

Then JESUS went on to expand HIS message. First, HE compared HIMSELF with Elijah, the greatest prophet in Israel's history. (Remember at the Transfiguration that it is Moses and Elijah who appear to speak with JESUS?) Even this isn't problematic for the people. But when JESUS pointed out that, though there were many widows among Israel's people in Elijah's time when there was a great famine in the land, Elijah went to the home of a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. In that story, while Elijah resided with the widow and her son, their food resources never run out. JESUS continued by pointing out that, though there were many in Israel who had leprosy during the time of the prophet Elisha, it was Naaman the Syrian who was cleansed of his leprosy.

While these were stories of hope and possibility as GOD'S power was shown in provision and healing, the people of Nazareth were furious. In JESUS' sermon, HE was saying that GOD'S provision was given to foreigners. Not to needy Israelites, but foreigners. Remember that the people of Israel, including those from Nazareth considered themselves above all others because they were GOD'S chosen people. But JESUS was saying that GOD'S blessings were also for others, for those upon whom the Israelites looked down. And perhaps, not even also, but only for those foreigners. And that's what made them mad. How could JESUS suggest such a thing. How could HE say that GOD loved others as much as or even more than GOD'S chosen people? They couldn't stand hearing this, so they tried to get rid of the messenger.

Sometimes, the message of the Gospel can be troubling for us. Sometimes, we may not like what the Bible says about who GOD loves and blesses. We may not want to believe or hear that it is for those others. And we really may not want to believe that it could be for others at the exclusion of...well...us. The truth is that GOD'S love *is* for all people, including those who we may not want included. And what JESUS' words are really saying is that we can accept that message and even rejoice in that divine hope for everyone, or we can cling to our beliefs and find ourselves left out of what GOD has to offer.

It's GOD'S call and not ours. And if you don't like that, well, I'll be waiting for you on the edge of the cliff.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey