

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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Luke 4:16-30
“Just as They Are”

Something went wrong in that synagogue in Nazareth long ago. Something went terribly wrong. Jesus took his turn reading the scripture on the Sabbath – Jesus, who grew up right there in Nazareth; Jesus, Joseph’s son. When he spoke, they were all amazed at his words and self-confidence. But when he spoke some more, they became furious. So much so, that the boy they’d raised to an adult they now wanted to destroy by throwing him off a cliff. What happened?

It’s actually not that hard to decipher what went wrong that day. Jesus began by reading a passage from Isaiah 61 how good things would now come to all God’s people. The poor would hear good news; the captives would gain release; the blind would see and the oppressed would be free at last. It’s an upbeat, hopeful message, and when Jesus told them that all these promises had come true, they were ecstatic at what Joseph’s son was telling them.

At that point, Jesus had to decide what to say next. He could have said something like this: “God is so gracious, that in addition to granting release to prisoners and sight to the blind, God, in the days of Elijah, also fed the Gentile widow of Zarephath, and in the days of Elisha, God healed Naaman, the Syrian army’s commander, of leprosy. Isn’t God grand?” In this way, the God worshipped by the people of Nazareth would be shown as one who loved them mightily and even had love left over for others beyond their borders. But Jesus didn’t say that. Instead he told them this: “No prophet is accepted in his hometown. For though there were many widows in Israel, Elijah saved none of them but the Gentile widow of Zarephath; and there were many lepers in Israel, but Elisha cured none of them but Naaman the Syrian.” Jesus quoted back to them their own tradition. But what they heard was that God at times passed them over and showed favor to outsiders and Gentiles. As Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes has said, “The people take offense not so much with what Jesus claims about himself, as with the claims he makes about a God who is more than their tribal deity.”¹ Ouch!

Now I can turn down the temperature on this incendiary passage by making an academic observation. Luke’s gospel, coupled with his follow-up volume of Acts, is intent on showing how God is the Lord of the Jews and the Gentiles. Therefore there are stories and parables about how God cares for the children of Abraham and all the other children of the world. Jesus started this conversation through this sermon about the Zarephath widow and Naaman the Syrian. Peter later added his two-cents’ worth with his vision about the things that no one was to call unclean if God called them clean. And finally Paul preached how there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, but that all are one in Christ Jesus. But I don’t want to turn down the temperature. I want you to hear it as something Jesus said that got people boiling mad. And that we would likely still be mad if he said it today.

General question: How many of you are happy with the state of national politics today? Doesn't it seem that we have lost the ability to discuss rationally, to disagree with civility, and to compromise if necessary so that we might serve the common good? After the last few election cycles, we've been quick to think in terms of red states and blue states, with people on both sides complaining that they can't imagine why "those people" are voting the way they are. Here's an interesting statistic: In 1976, the average American was very likely to live alongside people of the opposing political party. In that year, only about one-quarter of us lived in a county that went in a landslide for one presidential candidate or another. But by 1992, over one-third of us lived in a "landslide" county. And by 2004, nearly one-half of us did, and I assume this trend continued in the last presidential election.²

What does that mean? It means that, as Americans, we are choosing to live, shop, and I would add worship, in communities that are more homogeneous than truly diverse. Does this matter? Some argue that mixed communities moderate behavior, while homogeneous communities march toward extremes, whether that means Keith Olbermann or Glenn Beck or worse. The bottom line is that if you do not know anyone who votes differently from you, or have a relationship that is respectful and caring with someone who does not echo all your opinions, you run the risk of wanting to toss someone over a cliff if they challenge your point of view.

Let's turn up the thermostat some more. This past week a realtor called our home to let us know that a house on our block was going on the market soon. On the one hand, that was a savvy marketing move in that we likely have friends who have visited our home and know what a fun neighborhood it is; so if one of them was interested in purchasing a home on our street, this realtor can be of assistance. On the other hand, the call felt a bit like having "insider information," a whispered suggestion that the neighborhood was special and perhaps a deserving, "like-minded" buyer could be found before a sign appeared in this home's front yard. I don't know if the realtor was trying this approach to keep some people from buying on our street or integrating our Point Breeze neighborhood, but it felt that way. I know that such practices have happened in the past. I am not naïve enough to think it doesn't still happen today. Connections matter. Whispered comments at work or over the phone, on the golf course or in a quick e-mail demarcate who is in power and who is intentionally being kept out of the loop. But if someone calls us on this behavior, naming such prejudices for what they are – or worse, if someone claims that God's favor rests on the very people we would red-line and keep at the margins, why, it would make us mad enough to toss them over a cliff!

There's an old beloved hymn: "Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou biddest me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!" We sing that hymn, just as the people of Nazareth sang their psalms to God, and profess how God is near to us and cares for us. But what if Christ's sacrifice and God's love are not for me "just as I am" but also for others "just as they are"? What if God cares for others without demanding that they look like me, talk like me, pledge allegiance to the flag like me, or become Presbyterian like me? It is one thing to pontificate about how God loves us so generously that God has enough mercy for that widow in Zarephath, that Syrian leper, even that South African orphan, that Sudanese refugee, that Haitian earthquake victim. It is something else to say that God will not be held captive to our personal narratives, our versions of who can live in our neighborhoods and worship in our churches, our stories about race and power and privilege. It is something else to re-read our own scriptures and announce that God passes us over and goes to none but the widow of Zarephath, none but the leper of Syria, none but the single mother, the immigrant who can't speak English, the person without health insurance struggling to get by in a Medicaid room at a state hospital.

To say that is to say something that has a ring of truth but still feels quite uncomfortable. It caused a crowd to try and kill Jesus. In the end, though, he faced them down and passed through them. I see that as a reminder of God's ultimate power over all anger and violence and sin in this world. I see in Jesus' passing through the crowd something similar to the parting of the Red Sea, when the hostile Egyptians failed to kill Moses and the Hebrew people. Or perhaps as a foreshadowing of the resurrected Christ walking on earth Easter morning after an angry mob had tried to defeat him by death on the cross.

But as was pointed out to me at Wednesday's bible study, this act of walking through the crowd was no easy miracle or simple stroll through the park. The Greek verb for passing through the crowd was also used when Jesus spoke about how it was easier for a camel to "pass through" the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Lk 18:25). Ouch again!

When Robert Coles was a young Air Force doctor stationed in Louisiana in the late 1950s, he happened to be in the same city where a six year old girl named Ruby Bridges had been chosen to integrate a local elementary school. Everyday she was escorted to school by federal marshals, passing through a gauntlet of jeering, spitting, angry white people. Coles wondered how she would hold up. He was sure the verbal abuse would undo her. So he told her teachers to call him if they saw any sign of the little girl breaking down under stress. One day the call came for Coles to come quick, since Ruby was beginning to talk to herself. When he arrived, the teacher was confronting Ruby saying, "You were standing by the window and I saw your lips moving." To which Ruby replied, "I wasn't talking to myself. I was praying 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.'"³

If hope is from God, then it comes to me “just as I am” and to others “just as they are.” I don’t get to write the script or define the rules; that’s just how it is. If hope is from God, it will offer a word of comfort: good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captives. But hope is also explosive, because by definition it means the status quo much change (since the status quo can’t provide what hope says must be). So by definition God isn’t in the business of preserving the status quo. That is why we need to know others’ stories, and know what our own story and faith tells us about God’s care for others; because it’s in the combination of their hopes and our hopes that we come to see what God hopes for all people. And when it comes time to pass through the angry mob, it won’t be easy; but it has been done before. So may we speak the truth in love and then pass through safely. And if necessary, may we have the grace also to pray, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

AMEN

¹ Peter Eaton, *Feasting on the Word*, Luke 4:21-30 – Homiletical Perspective, p. 313; quoting Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, 2007, p. 39.

² Scott Stossel, New York Times Book Review, May 18, 2008, p. 19; review of Bill Bishop’s *The Big Sort*.

³ Quoted by Charles Riddle III, *Christian Ministry*, May/June 1997.