

"No Inalienable Status"
Sunday, January 31, 2010
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector

Today's Gospel lesson is the second half of a two part story. In part one which we heard last Sunday, Jesus is in the synagogue in Capernaum for Sabbath services. Evidently he's been scheduled as a lector that day, because we are told, "he stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him." Jesus reads:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

At the conclusion of the reading, Jesus sits back down, and he looks out at the congregation and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Our story today takes up with the reactions of the congregation to this statement, which was stunning, quite frankly. It's a pretty gutsy comment to make about yourself. Jesus understands that the words of the Isaiah define his own vocation. The Spirit had in fact come down upon him at baptism. And from that moment Jesus knew he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. Jesus would be doing what the prophet had promised.

The crowd was astonished! In these words Jesus indicates that he is the awaited Messiah. Like I said, it was a pretty gutsy claim. But there was one problem; everybody knew this kid. He had grown up among them. They had watched him play kick ball in the dusty streets and go to school to study Torah. They knew his dad, Joe the Carpenter. How could anyone they knew so well - someone who seemed so common, so ordinary - make such an outlandish claim about themselves.

Jesus, aware of their skepticism responds, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." In other words familiarity breeds doubt, if not outright contempt.

But if these words of Jesus riled the congregation, worse was yet to come. For not only was he indicating his messiahship, he was also about to proclaim that the good news of his message was not only for the Jews, but for all of humanity. And like a good trial attorney he verifies that this is God's real intent for the world by citing two circumstances where great Hebrew prophets did just that; bring good news to non-Jews. He proves the point.

The first prophet is Elijah. During a great famine in the land, it was to a foreign widow at Zarepath - a Gentile - that Elijah was sent by God to bring God's help and relief. There were plenty of hungry, needy Jewish widows in Israel at that time, Jesus tells them, but instead God sent Elijah to help this foreigner.

The second prophet is Elisha. During the time of his prophesy Israel was full of people who suffered with leprosy, but Jesus tells the stunned crowd, it was not one of these that God sent Elisha to heal, but yet another Gentile; Namaan the general of Syria's army's.

We have to understand this was about the most shocking thing that an Israelite could have been told. The notions that God is present and is compassionate to all those in need, regardless of their ancestral ties, enraged the people. An analogy would be telling a God and country, patriotic American, who thinks that the United States of America is ordained by God to be an exclusively Christian nation, and the only nation that God blesses that no, this is not true. God blesses all God's children of all faiths, cultures and nations equally.

Just imagine the roar of anger and violent response that would evoke.

But this is exactly what Jesus did. He tells the congregation that there is no inalienable status in relation to God. God cares for and loves all people. And because Jesus proclaimed this truth, the crowd rejects him; in fact they wanted to execute him

by throwing him off a cliff. That's a pretty angry crowd.

There have a few angry folks in my ten years of ordained ministry that have wanted to throw me off a cliff for preaching this Gospel truth. Well, maybe not literally throw me off a cliff, but certainly they have doubted my credentials and theological education because of what I say. They reply no, that's wrong, there is an inalienable status for certain people with God; and I'm one of those people!

Or they accuse me of being political in the pulpit and of mixing politics and religion; of not honoring that Church/State separation. Since when was the concern for justice not the concern of the faith community?

Others have also wanted to toss this parish over the proverbial cliff as well, because we strive to incarnate this truth in our common life. So we get written off by folks who disdain us as being squishy liberals or ignorant of Biblical truth, whatever that means. All this is despite the overwhelming scriptural warrant that the embrace and care of all humanity are God's ways. This despite the fact that not all of us at Christ Church are so liberal, that many of us have a reasonably good handle on the scriptures, and that the last word I would use to describe the congregation of Christ Church is squishy!

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32)

Not a lot of people seem to be yearning for the freedom which this truth brings lately.

This past week a man named Andre Bauer was pretty clear he had no desire to know the truth of God and be set free. Bauer is the Lt. Governor of South Carolina who is known for making some very controversial statements. Apparently being controversial - if not downright reckless - is a prerequisite for holding a highly elected office in South Carolina of late.

In his comments, Bauer compared needy people to stray animals. In his opinion, providing food assistance, like school lunches or food stamps, encourages dependence:

"My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals," Bauer told an audience in the town of Fountain Inn, South Carolina. "You know why? Because they breed."

"You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply," Bauer continued. "They will reproduce, especially ones that don't think too much further than that. And so what you've got to do is you've got to curtail that type of behavior. They don't know any better."

As outrageous as Bauer's words are, they are not thoughts exclusive to him. Bauer and others who hold similar opinions that certain types or classifications of people are less worthy (i.e., less human) than others, and can therefore be discounted, hold considerable sway in our nation. It is one more reason why our particular voice of faith is needed in the public arena.

Ultimately Bauer and those of his persuasion instill a deep and profound sadness in me. I find it borderline incomprehensible that anyone - regardless of their political, religious or cultural beliefs - would hold such a callous, inhumane, attitude toward hungry, needy people . . . or anyone. And as much as I wanted to toss this guy off a cliff when I first heard this story on the news, now I just want to pray for him. Pray that God touches his hardened heart: pray that Lt. Governor Bauer can come to a place where he will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Our work as followers of Jesus is not done, my sisters and brothers. I suspect it never will be in this lifetime. But that's okay. Our work is Jesus' work: our work is to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the sick and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor for all people.

That's pretty awesome and holy work. And if it's squishy to some people, I'm perfectly okay with that too.

Amen.

