FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Outside With Jesus”* Luke 4:21-30

As you heard, this morning’s Gospel lesson picks-up from where last week’s lesson left us. Jesus is at the beginning of his public ministry. As last week’s reading told us: he has been preaching in synagogues throughout Galilee and, *“was praised by everyone.”* [15b]

Finally, he has come home to Nazareth. He is in the synagogue. He stands up, to indicate that he would like to read holy Scripture, and is given a scroll from which he reads Isaiah’s proclamation which relates to God’s promise to rescue and care for the downtrodden Israelites who are returning from exile in Babylon. After he finishes the reading he sits down—which then is a sign to the assembly that he is now ready to offer a reflection on the reading—and so he says to them: *‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’* [v.21]

So far, things have gone very well. The people in the synagogue are pleased with what he has just told them—how wonderful to hear such a proclamation! This is, indeed, good news for all! These wonderful words of promise and liberation—all was to be accomplished through him, Jesus, the hometown boy made good!

We can well imagine them leaning-in to hear more. The Gospel says: *“The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.”* The soft, muted conversation began to buzz as people said to each other: isn’t he eloquent? And, wonderful news! And, “isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

Mostly, what I think they were thinking and saying to one another was this: “Hooray for *us!* God is going to trample all of our enemies! *We* are going to be the favored ones and all others will be like a footstool for our people, our nation!”

It really seems as though they thought he had promised *them* preeminence, a lone but favored place in all the world. They were the *in* group, and everybody else is *out*. I can imagine them all being ready to celebrate. After all, who would *not* like to hear such good news?

It was at that point that Jesus lowers the boom.

In anticipation that the Nazarenes were going to ask or *expect* him to perform the same kind of miracles for them, Jesus immediately squashes their hopes. Healing and raising loved ones from the dead? No.

How about first in line among all people in the world? Well, no, not really.

And he begins to remind them of how God has acted in the past. He reminds them of two stories of God’s special provision. Two stories of rescue and healing from the hand of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. These are two of the stories that the people would have known well. One was the story of famine and the generosity of a widow. And later, it turned into the story of the resuscitation of the widow’s dead child.

The second the healing of the Syrian general, Naaman, of leprosy—it was a story of rescue and restoration to family and community.

After reminding the synagogue assembly of these two acts of God’s power and generosity, Jesus (very pointedly) recalls to them the fact that neither of the people who received these blessings were Israelites. Both were *outside* the circle of the “chosen” people. The implication is that God’s generosity was going to touch *all* people—not just the ones the Nazarenes knew or loved.

Unlike them, the God Jesus had come to proclaim the good news about was the God of *all* humankind.

At least two things are happening in this morning’s and last week’s readings. First, Luke’s recalling of Jesus’ interaction with the people in his own hometown, and his rejection by them, foreshadows the relationship Jesus will continue to have with the Israelite authorities. Indeed, it will culminate with them accomplishing what the Nazarenes could not: Jesus’ death.

Second, in anticipating Jesus’ rejection by the Israelites he is also anticipating the mission and ministry that will go beyond Israel and into the midst of Gentile people and cultures.

For many years after, followers of Jesus will continue to gather and worship within the Israelite community. As they do, they will begin to include more and more Gentiles. Unfortunately, this will widen the gap between Jesus’ followers and the “old guard” until the two groups become distinct and separate from one another.

This morning’s reading is a rather literal portrayal of what is to come—Jesus, and anyone who professes his name and commits to following in his way are going to be “outside” of the dominant community. Such people may even be *forced* out of the established community.

In the story we heard this morning, the Nazarenes—Jesus’ neighbors, friends, possibly even members of his family—were so enraged by him that they threw him out of the synagogue and were ready to throw him off a cliff. They *physically* removed him from relationship with them, and they did it with a violent intent that would have been impossible to reverse.

He was *out*, and he would never again be welcome in the synagogue, nor even in “respectable” people. I do not think it is possible to become more of an outsider than Jesus made himself that morning.

However, the point (especially for our purposes) is that Jesus did mkde himself an outsider when he preached a sermon of non-exclusiveness God. God, says Jesus, accomplished great things in the lives of people *outside* of the Israelites.

Even more specifically, Jesus and the ministry that bears his name even to this day, will bring the good news of God’s desire to heal and make whole to *all* people. God, through Jesus, declared God-self to be a God who will always go *outside* the “traditional” boundaries of human custom or habit that separate people, that judge one category of people to be “worthy,” and another to be undeserving of God’s notice, or God’s love. God will seek out those who have been judged unworthy and rejected, and God will love them and make their lives, their hearts, and their spirits whole again.

What we have in this story of Jesus being rejected, I believe, is also a story of invitation. Just as Jesus was forced outside of the circle of human power, authority, and community, we are all asked to listen, reflect, and decide whether we will remain *inside* a system or establishment that does not honor the dignity and worth of all of God’s children and creation, or if we will go *outside* with Christ?

Make no mistake, to go outside with Christ is not the easy, or even the most natural or obvious thing to do. To begin with, it is going to involve some cost. When we go outside with Christ, we can expect to spend time, effort, treasure (of course), but also comfort, familiarity of habits and customs. We may even run afoul of our nearest and dearest family and friends.

As I was preparing this sermon, I was reminded of one such situation of a pastor who did an amazingly brave thing. This memory comes from an article called, *Seek and Save the Lost,* writer John Gilbert recalls the story like this:

*In 1994, a famous serial killer was baptized in a metal whirlpool in prison in Wisconsin by a small-town pastor named Roy Ratcliff. Ratcliff’s congregants recoiled at the idea that their pastor baptized a convicted serial killer. Some congregants would say to Ratcliff that if heaven welcomes serial killers, they want no part in it. Ratcliff’s congregants express something that perhaps even we struggle with sometimes. In our fallen world, some people have committed crimes so great, it’s difficult to imagine that God could forgive them. It can be difficult to accept that grotesque and wicked crimes could be paid for by Christ on the cross (e.g., murderers, rapists, serial killers). Yet Pastor Ratcliff says this, “Can an evil person turn to God? I have to believe that. What part of the blood of Christ can’t save him but can save you?”*

*The question that Ratcliff raises is an important one. Is anyone beyond the reach of God?*

Our stories may not be as dramatic as this one, however, such questions like this are going to come up because we are loved by, and we worship a God whose love and mercy no one bounds. Ours is a God who never gives up on us but will always extend God’s hand of help and healing. God will always offer us an opportunity to be healed and to offer healing to others. It all depends on whether or not we are willing to go outside with Jesus.

As each of us reflects and prays on what this can mean for our own lives and for our lives as Nu’uanu Congregational Church, I give thanks that we have committed ourselves to being a church in mission, a church that willing to go outside with Jesus, and I pray that God will lead us into all sorts of new adventures and will continue to bless our ministry and mission which we will do in our Savior Jesus Christ’s holy name. Amen.