

**Second Sunday after Epiphany**  
January 15, 2017  
Haven Lutheran Church  
Readings: Psalm 146; Luke 4: 14-42

*“Lord, help us hear your Word and see your glory. Amen*

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of attending a weekend retreat with about seventy other people. The opening exercise was to tell a story about someone who had been Christ for them in their lives. She writes:

After we had all thought about it a little while, some people got up to tell their stories to the whole group. There was one about a friend who stayed put through a long illness while everyone else deserted, and another one about a neighbor who took the place of a father who self-destructed. One after the other, they were stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue. The conference room turned into a church, where we settled into the warmth of each other’s company. Jesus our friend was there with us and all was right with the world, until this one woman stood up and said, ‘Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, ‘Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’

[Taylor continues:] She burst our bubble, but she was onto something vitally important that most of us would be glad to forget: namely, that the Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us. The Christ is also the one who challenges and upset us, telling us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s exactly what is going on in the synagogue in Nazareth in today’s gospel. The people in Jesus’ home congregation, his home synagogue, invited him to be the guest speaker during worship. They had heard Jesus had done impressive things in other places, like Capernaum. They were expecting he would honor his hometown with equal or greater wonders. At first they were pleased. Jesus reads from Isaiah — words of hope and promise first spoken to the dispirited Hebrews who found their homeland in rubble when they returned from Babylonian exile:

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

When he rolls up the scroll, all eyes are upon him. You could hear a pin drop. “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” “There it is..... Here it comes....Hometown boy about to “wow” them. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” Until.....

Until Jesus reminds them that God’s love, God’s plan for redeeming creation, God’s understanding of community went beyond the Hebrews, went beyond them. And this deeply offended them. You can almost see the wheels turning. “God favor a gentile widow and an enemy Syrian soldier, not Israel? God heals in Capernaum, not Nazareth. That’s heresy. And you know what we do with heretics.”<sup>2</sup> This response **despite** the source being the Hebrew Scriptures, God’s Word. Jesus spoke the truth that had always been imbedded in their sacred Scriptures — God loves all God’s people, Jewish or Gentile. Jesus trampled on their myth that their race and nationality gave them an exclusive, most favored status with God that extended to no others. God’s truth or not, Jesus quickly went from favorite, hometown son to a degenerate heretic who they decided to kill. As Martin Luther King Jr’s dream of equality remains unrealized and we seem to struggle more than ever to have peaceful, respectful, civil discourse about our differing opinions, it seems we aren’t responding much better than those Nazoreans to the radically inclusive nature of the gospel.

Anger and violence seem to be the last defense of those made to confront a truth that challenges long held traditions of privilege. That is how mad we get when someone suggests that God loves our enemies and the people we won’t sit next to. That is how threatened we can become when we’re told that the people who disturb and deeply offend us belong to God just as surely as we do. No matter how hard we try, God just won’t

respect the limits or the boundaries we want to put on God and the gospel. As Jesus will show us, God keeps plowing right through our categories and qualifiers, inviting us to follow or to get out of the way. “The hard thing about the God we [come to] know in Jesus is that whenever you and I draw a line between who’s in and who’s out — [whether that line is based on political affiliation, race, social class, gender or religion] ---- we will find Jesus on the other side.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus announced that God came to redeem everyone. When we put all our focus on the “everyone,” we can miss the good news of God’s redeeming power at work. So miffed about God’s love for those who offend us, we could miss, like those Nazoreans, being set free from our poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression. After leaving Nazareth, Luke gives us “day in the life of Jesus.” Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus teaches, frees people from debilitating demons and fever, heals others and goes on to continue his mission in other cities. As Jesus reveals, the saving work and time of God is today ---- not just in the past or some vague “someday” but today. God is loving, seeking, saving today, whether we accept or recognize it. We could miss it if we insist on our own version of truth, our own limited vision of who is loved by God.

There are times Jesus makes us squirm. There are times we collide with the unnerving truth that we keep trying to make God into our own image and insist God only love, forgive and save those we deem worthy. Jesus reminds us that while God is with us, God does not belong to us. And when our personal prejudices and preferences run into the wide and vast love of God revealed in Jesus, we have to choose like those people in Nazareth long ago. Do we follow Jesus and let him change and challenge us into all God meant us to be or do we chase him away because we prefer the comfort of our own version of truth? Do we cling to our fears and pride or let the love of God open wide our hearts to the bigness of God’s love for all people?

God will not force us, you know. We can let Jesus pass through the midst of us and go away. But he keeps coming back in the Word, the Meal, through the people in this community and music, worship, and ministry... Jesus keeps showing up to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free and invite us to follow. Connected to God in baptism, the Spirit enriches and empowers us to chose God-focused lives, “to choose grace rather than judgement, [respect rather then name calling,] engagement rather than indifference, and forgiveness rather than revenge.”<sup>4</sup> Because God is more stubborn than we will ever be when it comes to loving, God will persist in offering us the chance again and again and again to know living that is fearless and that includes a bigger view of grace and neighbor than the world has imagined. The truth Jesus brings us may not always be comfortable but it will set us free to follow God’s more excellent way: to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. Today is the continuation of the fulfillment of the scriptures for all people. Today is the continuation of the fulfillment of God’s redeeming dream, through those who choose the wonder and challenge of following Jesus . Amen.

Linda M Alessandri

#### ENDNOTE

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1. Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Company of Strangers,” Home by Another Way Boston MA: Cowley Publications 1999 pp 42-43
  2. David Lose, “Three Questions and a Promise,” January 27, 2013 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  3. David Lose, “Moving Beyond Mending Our Walls,” January 25, 2016 as posted on [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net)
  4. Charles Morris, “Gospel Living Made Simple” January 27, 2013 as posted on <http://day1.org>