

“The Grace of God”

February 2, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Luke 4: 22-40

Our Scripture lesson comes from the 4th chapter of Luke, which means we are still very early in Jesus’ ministry. Way early. In the 6 verses prior to our reading, we read the very first moment of Jesus’ public ministry that Luke reports. Jesus is in His hometown and is speaking in the synagogue. He reads from the prophet Isaiah which says, “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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then He looked at the people and proclaimed, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus basically took that passage from Isaiah and made it His mission statement: good news to the poor, release of the captives, free those oppressed, proclaim God’s favor. This was His vision of the Messiah, the anointed One of God. And the people liked it. Verse 22 says, “All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His mouth.” But things changed quickly. In just 6 verses, Jesus moves from “All spoke well of Him” to “all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Him out of the town, and led Him to the brow of the hill... so that they might hurl Him off the cliff.” That is a pretty big swing in public opinion.

What happened? What happened in those 6 verses that moved Jesus from hometown boy done good to run Him out of town and throw Him off the cliff? Well, let’s look. Apparently, Jesus wasn’t living up to expectations. The people wanted to see some tricks. They had heard about Jesus’ ability to heal people and that He might have the ability to turn stones into bread, but Jesus didn’t do anything like that. Matthew and Mark say His inability to do any miracles was because the crowds just saw Him as Joseph’s son, and did not believe He was anything special. Their lack of belief meant Jesus couldn’t do much. But here in Luke, it sounds more like Jesus is saying, “I have major gifts I am ready to give, but they are not for you.” He says remember when God was punishing Isreal with a 3 and half year drought, and God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow and her son. And because he was with them, their last little bit of food never ran out. The widow and her son were not Jewish. God didn’t pick any of the chosen people to receive Elijah. He went to a foreigner and helped them survive the drought. Jesus went on to say remember in the time of the prophet Elisha, there were plenty of people living in Israel who were suffering from leprosy and other diseases, and Elisha didn’t heal any of them. But he healed Naaman the Syrian, a foreigner, an officer in the enemy’s army. Jesus is basically saying, “I have the ability to multiply food like God did with Elijah, and I have the ability to heal like God did with Elisha. But like both of them, I will not be doing it here.” “I have major gifts I am ready to give, but they are not for you, because you can’t see Me as anything more than Joseph’s son.”

With that, the people got mad. They were not just disappointed, they were mad. Mad enough to turn violent, run Him out of town, and try to throw Him off a cliff. Today we would call that unchecked entitlement. They knew they deserved the gifts Jesus had to give. Those gifts should be theirs. And if they couldn't have them, nobody was going to have them. They would rather kill Jesus than let someone else receive the gifts they knew should be for them. Can you hear how twisted that is? Jesus has gifts to give, but if I am not going to receive them, nobody is going to receive them. If I don't get the food, nobody is going to get it. If I don't get healed, nobody is going to be healed. Twisted entitlement.

But we still do it. It comes out in good church phrases like, "charity starts at home." It is not a bad thing, but we need to ask ourselves what makes immediate neighbors more worthy than others? God's grace is big enough to share. Stories like "the Good Samaritan", Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, and Paul going to the Gentiles teach us that God does not recognize the boundaries and divisions that we like to make. Whether those are social boundaries, economic boundaries, cultural boundaries or international boundaries; God refuses to be constrained by them.

And today I feel like a hypocrite. Today we begin our February emphasis on Week of Compassion and Church World Service Blanket Ministry and a huge part of those ministries is caring for refugees. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, as of last year, there are 122.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. These are people who have had to leave their homes due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order. And 47 million of them are children. To put this number into perspective, the current number of refugees is more than the number of the people in the United States that live west of the Mississippi River. That is a lot of people forced out of their homes. Week of Compassion and Church World Service are working tirelessly to supply food, shelter, even a blanket for these people who have had to run and leave everything. And now, the United States is adding up to a thousand people a day to their numbers.

I do not know the correct answer from the political point of view. What I mean by that is I am a white guy living in a state that's very name proclaims it used to be the land of native Americans, or Indians. Yet I am here. Me and mine are immigrants. That either means: this land was not mine to begin with, I am an immigrant and therefore have no right to keep other immigrants from coming into it; or it means learn the lesson. The people who have deeded to this land and rule its government look a whole lot more like me than they do Tecumseh. Both are valid political perspectives. Like I say, I do not know the correct answer from the political point of view. But what I do know is when I read this passage from Luke and I try to identify who I am in the story, it sure doesn't feel like I am on Jesus' side. I feel a whole lot more like the hometown folks who are getting mad because others are getting a blessing they thought should be reserved for them and theirs.

The Old Testament tells much of the story of the nation of Israel and their struggles with what it means to maintain their identity as God's people. And on this topic, the witness is pretty consistent. David Garland compiled a list of a dozen Old Testament directives regarding how God's people are to treat aliens and strangers living among them. Just a few highlights: It starts in Exodus 22, while Israel is still wandering through the wilderness, making their way to what would become their land. Verse 21, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Moving to Leviticus 23:22, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God." Why would I not get every piece of grain out of the field that I planted and tended? Why wouldn't I get every dime out of the company that I created? Why would I leave some for the poor and the alien? God says, "because I am the Lord your God", and I said so. Leviticus 24:22, "You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God" – aka, because I said so. Deuteronomy 27:19, "'Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'" Finally from Malachi 3:5, "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts." That one cuts to the heart. If you thrust aside the alien, it is because you no longer have any fear or respect for the Lord. Because you believe Jesus is just Joseph's son. Whether your Bible translation uses the word "resident alien" like the NRSV, "foreigner" like the NIV, "stranger" like the King James, or "sojourner" like English Standard Version; they are all talking about the same thing – immigrants living in your midst.

The people in Jesus' hometown couldn't receive the truth that God's grace was big enough to include people other than themselves. Their sense of entitlement for what they didn't receive as a gift caused them to become angry and violent when they thought another might get it. And what did Jesus do when they responded that way? Did He send fire and brimstone to destroy the people? Did He send a drought or a tornado or an epidemic? No. It simply says, "Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on His way." That terrifies me.

So what am I trying to say with all this? Am I saying open all the borders and let everyone in? No. Am I saying we should harbor violent criminals and sex traffickers? No. Am I ripping on a new administration because I think they are evil and doing everything wrong? No. What I am saying is our world is hurting. 122.6 million forcibly displaced people is a really large number of people. 47 million children who not only don't have a house to call home, don't have a place or even a country to call home. Is there a way we can help with this problem as opposed to contributing to it? That is my question and the question I think God is challenging us with. As a people and a nation that is so richly blessed, can we be a blessing, can we share the blessing, can we share the dream of freedom and opportunity with people who long for it more than we

could every know, because we have always had it? Can we find a way to share the blessing we are entitled to because we were born here?

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