

Luke 4:21-30 – Year C
January 31, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Last week's gospel reading gave us the beginning of this passage in which we learned of Jesus' return home to Nazareth where, as was His custom, he gathered in the synagogue to worship God and also to read from God's word. The passage he read from came from the prophet Isaiah which states, "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."

Picture the scene if you will. Stories have begun to surface of the carpenter Joseph's son doing miraculous things. You scratch your head and wonder but the stories continue to roll in. You hear he is coming home to tiny Nazareth situated roughly 80 miles north of Jerusalem. You're skeptical because of his background – he is just a carpenter from Nazareth. Nazarene's aren't exactly looked upon favorably even by their own Jewish brothers and sisters. Even John will come to write in his gospel, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Yet you are hopeful and long to see and hear him. The crowd listens attentively and then come those words from Isaiah - words of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and God's favor. He speaks with such passion, confidence, and knowledge. He concludes the reading with the words which opened our gospel passage, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What? Did he just say that? Just who exactly is this man? Are the reports about him true and not just rambling rumors? You still can't comprehend it. You have known him since he was just a young boy running through the village. This is the kid

you once walked home to his mother Mary after he fell and skinned his knee. This is the teenager who had come over with his father to help repair your leaking roof. This is Jesus from Nazareth. Yet, somehow you wonder, could he be the one who will heal our ills and release us from the tyranny of heavy taxes and the burden of Roman rule? Like you, the crowd seemingly hangs on the edge of their seats waiting for his next words. Finally, Nazareth will be more than just a blip on the radar of the Temple authorities. Finally, help has come and since we are his kinfolk certainly we have a claim to him and his miraculous powers. Thus, it's time to get onto the healings. Over here Jesus as you hold up your daughter who has had a severe limp since birth. But to your surprise and disgust he begins to seemingly steer off-course in talking not about God's grace to the locals but rather, out of all the stories of scripture, tells of two examples of the prophets Elijah and Elisha being sent to the aid of foreigners. Gentiles. Enemies. Why is he saying this? He is to be on our side yet he is in essence saying his message of healing, freedom, and redemption is inclusive of all peoples even those of whom despise us. Suddenly, shouts of anger ring out and people are forcing him out of the synagogue for the blasphemy this son of a carpenter was speaking. They rush him to the edge of town and appear to be set to cast him off a cliff but somehow he mysteriously manages to simply walk through the midst of the angry mob and be on his way.

Can we blame the crowd for being just a tad bit upset? Their expectations were high. Their hope for change, security, help, and freedom in the span of just minutes had all but reached the top of the peak only to come plummeting back down to dark recesses of earth's abyss. God is our God and we have a covenant with God. There is no way the scripture can be fulfilled through this man. Surely, he is an imposter; a blasphemer. Wouldn't we have been

met with the same disappointment and even anger? Would we have simply stopped listening or even walked out? Would we have taken him by the arm and rushed him out the doors? Would we have booed him? When we didn't hear what we wanted to hear, get what we thought we deserved, or failed to have had the expectations we had envisioned met would we simply have moved on to find someone who tells us what we want to hear and promises to make our lives easier? The crowd simply could not comprehend Jesus' words. They didn't make sense. They were hard and made them uneasy perhaps similar to Jesus' words from Matthew 5:44-45, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," which perhaps make us a squirm a bit and we find at times very difficult to carry out.

God's grace is hard to fathom and wrap our heads around. It's easy to get in the mindset as people of God we have some preferred status and hold on God's love and grace. It can be rather challenging to comprehend God's grace and love extends even to those who are quite different from us - even against our beliefs. Yet, that is exactly what Jesus is saying. God's scope of liberation ushered in through the incarnation of Christ, as with the prophets of old, will be far broader than simply the members of Jesus' own religion and nation.¹ And that holds true today. God's grace reaches far beyond anything we can begin to get our minds around. We can't fully grasp it and a passage such as this may even challenge our own beliefs about God and who God is; which, is exactly what the gospel often does. Force us to see beyond ourselves and push us into a better understanding of the true nature and heart of God.

How many people have found joy in the poetic words uttered by Paul from our reading in 1 Corinthians today? How many had this passage read at their own wedding or heard it read

¹ Brian McClaren, <http://girardianlectionary.net>

at the wedding of a loved one or friend? It's good stuff; after all, it's from the Apostle Paul. Yet, this is the same man who actively persecuted the early church. Clearly, if anyone ever stood outside of God's grace Paul was it. Yet, it was God's grace that led Paul to transformation and gave us some of the most beautiful and grace-filled passages found in all of scripture? Or how about Peter who becomes Jesus' enemy in denying him 3 times the night of his death? How about the disciples that abandon him in his darkest hour? How about those who curse him and nail him to a cross? How about us when we fail to follow the first commandment, "Thou shall have no other God's before me" by putting our trust in things of this world – material possessions, wealth, status, or even presidential candidates? What about the church commanded to "love our neighbor" but at times finds it much easier to "judge our neighbor" and seek first our own desires? What about us when we spread rumors, gossip, and go behind one another's backs in many cases stating things that simply are not true because we weren't there or don't have the whole story? Isn't this exactly what the 8th commandment forbids in stating, "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor?" What about when we fail to look out for the good of creation and clutter the land with trash, abuse the resources God gave us, and uphold systems that plunder the earth?

No matter how hard we try not to, don't we often find ourselves enemies of God's work and will in the world leaving us all as beggars in the need of God's ever-reaching arm of grace and forgiveness? Do we not come to the Lord's Table as sinners in need of redemption? Are we not desperately in need of a God who pushes the boundaries of God's love? Here in lies the beauty of this passage. God's grace and love does extend beyond where our human minds can push it. God's love includes those who thrust His Son to the edge of the cliff. It extends to

those who become His enemy. It extends to those who turn from His commandments. It extends to all in need of healing, redeeming, and grace because ultimately we all are in need of that divine love lavishly revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.