

Previously, in the Gospel of Luke... Like the “catching up” the networks do before showing a new episode of NCIS or White Collar, it’s necessary for us to look at what happened in the gospel a week ago, when we read the verses that directly precede today’s reading.

Jesus returns to his hometown and goes to the synagogue, perhaps with his family. He is handed the scroll and stands to read. Finding a passage in Isaiah, he 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.”

Then he says, as we have read this morning, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ‘The whole thing is about me.’ And the people are amazed at his gracious words.

But they hear one thing and Jesus intends another. They hear a guarantee of God’s blessing on them, the people of Nazareth, Because Jesus is one of their own. He’s from their community.

Jesus knows they are thinking, “So why have you been off in Capernaum healing people? You should be doing those miracles here for us, your own family and friends.” They expect to be treated specially, the way that knowing a rock star assures you of front row seats.

Jesus’ next words make them furious, mad enough to try to hurl him off a cliff. What does he say to bring them to the boiling point so quickly? He says his own will not get favored treatment, that God cares for all the poor and the oppressed and the blind and that in the days of the prophets God did not rescue his chosen people in a time of famine but his prophet Elijah rescued a foreign widow. And the prophet Elisha cleansed a foreign man of leprosy, not one of them.

They realize suddenly that preserving and protecting their way of living and worshiping and their way of thinking is not his mission. He will not bring his healing powers and all the benefits of knowing him to them exclusively. And they are furious. Jesus introduces the concept of inclusivity and they reject it.

Their anger may be hard for us to relate to because this community of St. Andrew’s is a very inclusive community. We are not offended when we hear Jesus say he comes to bring good news to the poor or to let the oppressed go free. We seek to help the poor and the oppressed ourselves. We want God’s word to reach everyone.

I have to say I wonder how this passage is read by some of the congregations and their leaders who have gone to great pains to remove themselves from the Episcopal Church because it is so inclusive. I’m glad I don’t have to interpret this passage in that context.

But before patting ourselves on the back any further, there is something for us to watch out for here. There is a theory that, practically speaking, prejudice and exclusivity is a natural phenomenon, that we humans are naturally tribal and we support and defend our own over everyone else.

It's true that we fiercely defend our families, our friends, our selves, our points of view, our towns, our faith communities, our sports teams, our nation.

It's when we defend things we know and love blindly, without examination, that we run counter to Jesus' teaching. And when we try to capture Jesus in a box, make the Gospel fit our own explanations of it, operate on assumptions instead of studying his word, when we fiercely defend the way we do things without being open to the working of the Holy Spirit, then we, like the people of Nazareth, violate the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' message.

The Apostle Paul, confronted with exclusion and a lack of generosity in the fledgling church at Corinth, wrote this most eloquent description of love in community, this most familiar of all Bible passages, 1 Corinthians 13, the passage we've read this morning. He had to write this because they needed to hear it!

He hoped the Corinthians would see the power of love in their life together. Love does not insist on its own way. It rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. There are no boundaries to the love of God, no exclusions, no privilege above others.

Henri Nouwen's wise and inspired words include this description of community:

"The word community has many connotations, some positive, some negative. Community can make us think of a safe togetherness, shared meals, common goals, and joyful celebrations. It also can call forth images of sectarian exclusivity, in-group language, self-satisfied isolation and romantic naiveté.

However, community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own."

We are alive, not for ourselves but for one another. Surely this is what Jesus was anointed by God to teach us. May God bless our continued discovery of this kind of community and our living it out.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria