

Sermon Preached on
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
(January 31, 2016)
"Walking Through The Crowd"

Today's gospel is a story of rejection and response. Jesus was rejected by his home town. But it's the why and his response to it that interest us today.

Now, you remember that today's gospel is a continuation of last week's passage, right?

Where Jesus goes to his hometown synagogue and opens up to the prophet Isaiah and reads that the spirit of the Lord is upon him and has called him to proclaim good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

Remember how he concludes, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"? As the story continues, everyone marvels at his eloquent reading. They speak well of him. But then things go south. As they're all speaking well of him Jesus keeps talking.

"Doubtless you have heard the phrase, Physician heal yourself, and you will say, do the things here that we heard you did in Capernaum."

To clarify, so far in Luke, we haven't heard about any miracle. Jesus' ministry up to this point is summed up in two verses: "And [after being tempted] Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all." That's it.

So, what have they heard that Jesus did? Healing? Maybe.

The point is, the crowd believes they can expect special favors from Jesus because he's the hometown boy. You know, charity begins at home, take care of your own first, and all that.

And THIS is why they reject Jesus. Not because he says something outrageous about the spirit of the Lord being upon him - they're okay with that - but because he rejects the notion that they deserve special treatment. Worse, he compares them to the people in Elijah's day and Elisha's day - people who had turned their backs on God. Who had worshipped God with their lips but not with their actions.

Instead of coming home and saying "Yeah! Israel is number 1!" Jesus says, "Are you any better, any more righteous than the foreigner? Do you deserve anything more than the refugee? Do you have a right to expect more from God than anyone else?"

That's not what any of us wants to hear, especially from our own. It's one thing to get criticism from "outsiders." You can ignore them. It's much more infuriating when it comes from within because that person hasn't bought into the whole "We're the greatest" line. Jesus essentially says, "You aren't the best because there is no best other than God. Until you can accept that, I will do not great work here."

So that's why they rejected him - he challenged their sense of privilege, their exceptionalism. Even though they're the chosen people! And while you might question their extreme reaction of wanting to kill him, you can get their shock, maybe even sense of betrayal, at being put in their place by one of their own.

What's interesting, however, isn't their instant rage, it's how Jesus reacts. He allows them to drive him out of the synagogue and all the way to the edge of a cliff where they want to hurl him off. And then, he just walks through the crowd and goes on his way.

That simple line, that simple action, is so instructive. He doesn't yell, he doesn't condemn, he doesn't tell them that karma is going to come back and bite them. He just walks through the crowd and goes his way. In that little act, he shows God's great power.

If they had been asking for a miracle, they got it because only a miracle could get him through a murderous crowd. It may not be the miracle they expected, but it might have been the miracle they needed.

I mean, what did they do after he left? We can only speculate. But it's highly likely that some of them took his words to heart. Eventually. That they prayed, studied more, listened to more reports about him. And changed their hearts and are amazed at the gracious words that come from his mouth.

If there's a lesson here, it is that, indeed, there is no "number 1," no "greatest" in God's eyes. But the lesson is also that God's power is not only seen in "WOW" miracles like raising the dead. Sometimes the power of God is in walking away, going one's own way. In our lives, we have many opportunities to point to the truth as Jesus did, even when it means being rejected. Just as often, we have the opportunity to walk through the crowd.

That is, when what we say for the sake of the gospel infuriates others, we can show God's power not by retaliating or condemning, but by walking through the crowd, leaving those who are angry to their own prayer. We may never know if our words and actions change others' hearts, but we can trust that, as we walk, God is walking with us. And that is miracle enough. Amen.