

THE OUTSIDERS ARE IN
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 21, 2018
based on Luke 4:16-30, Mark 1:40-42, Matthew 15:21-28

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, Journey to Jerusalem. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Sometimes it can happen that something very upsetting happens during a sermon. Last Sunday, at the 10:30 hour, I threw the congregation into a panic when I noted that I could not find the sermon. The worship leaders were thinking, “Now what?” and everyone in the congregation was thinking, “If he does not have the sermon text, he will not know when to stop.” But to everyone’s great relief, I quickly found the sermon notes and continued as planned.

Something very upsetting happened when Jesus was speaking in the synagogue in Nazareth, but it had much more serious dimensions. We heard the story in our reading from the gospel of Luke. This occurs shortly before his calling of the disciples, which we considered last Sunday. We are told that “Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.” (Luke 4:16) Jesus “went to church” on a weekly basis; and on this day in Nazareth, he read the Scripture. He read an extraordinary passage from the prophet Isaiah: “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.” (Luke 4:18); and he declared, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21) Jesus was saying that he was the fulfillment of this ancient prophecy, that God had anointed him to bring good news and deliverance to the lowly. Initially, the people in the synagogue responded well. “All spoke well of him” (Luke 4:22), Luke reports. But then Jesus suggested that they probably would not be too happy with him—as he said, “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town” (Luke 4:24)—and he went on to make a statement that absolutely threw the crowd into an uproar. He said,

“There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian.” (Luke 4:25-27) At that, Luke reports, “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 on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. (Luke 4:28-29) Why were the people so angry, to the point that they responded with such violence? What we see in this story is exactly what we are seeing across the world today in the religious hatred and prejudice and violence occurring in many parts of the globe.

The basic attitude of the people in the synagogue that day was that they, the Jewish people, were the chosen people of God. They were loved by God and favored by God. At the same time, they considered Gentiles—a Gentile being anyone who is not a Jew—to be outside the love and favor of God. Jews are in, they thought, and Gentiles are out. It is the same kind of thinking that we see today among radical Islamists in the Middle East or Hindu nationalists in India or extremist Buddhists in Myanmar—my religious group is in with God, and all others are out.

But Jesus began to talk about the prophet Elijah, considered by the Jews to be perhaps the greatest prophet in the history of Israel; and Jesus told a story which you will find in the Old Testament but which no one had thought of in quite this way. Jesus noted how during a drought, when many people in Israel were struggling, Elijah had gone to the home of a poor widow, where he did extraordinary miracles—Elijah brought about a miraculous provision of food for the widow and her son throughout the drought, and he saved the son from a deadly illness. That story was well known in Israel. But what Jesus observed was that although there were many needy Jewish widows during this time, the widow to whom Elijah went, where he did these great things, was in Zarephath in Sidon. That was Gentile territory, in present day Lebanon. Elijah, Jesus said, had shown the expansive love and favor of God to someone who was not a Jew. Then, to grind the point in further, Jesus went on to tell about Elisha, the next great prophet who was the successor to Elijah. He noted the story of Naaman, who was afflicted with leprosy, and who was healed by Elisha—another well known Old Testament story. But of course what Jesus observed was that there were many Jewish lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha; but the one that Elisha healed was Naaman the Syrian—a Gentile.

The people in the synagogue got the point; and they did not like it. How dare Jesus say that those other people, those Gentiles, are loved and favored and blessed by God just as much as we are! Jesus was saying that God's saving love is wide, that Gentiles are to be included in it; and the people in Nazareth could not stand the thought. They responded with anger and violence—the same sort of behavior that we are seeing today when Buddhists in Myanmar attack and expel Rohingya Muslims from their country, or when radical Sunni Muslims in Egypt attack Shiite Muslims and attack Coptic Christian churches. It is an age-old human attitude—that my group is good, and any acceptance or admission of others would diminish my elevated status; those others are to be rejected and condemned.

A few weeks ago, when my family was in Egypt, there was a terrorist attack on a Coptic Christian church on the south side of Cairo; it was about ten miles from where we were at the time. That may have seemed threatening to us; but actually we felt more danger, as I noted a couple weeks ago, from Egyptian highways. We had it easy; we were just tourists, in for a few days and then out, back to our comfortable and safe home. It is quite different for Christians who live in that sort of environment. Imagine being

somewhere where people think that you are unacceptable, that you, in fact, are despised by God. These are tough times for minorities everywhere.

What Jesus did in Nazareth was something extraordinary in the history of religion. He declared that the love of God knows no bounds, that even as God was working with the particular people of Israel, God's saving grace was reaching further, and now in Jesus God was acting to embrace the world. This message—that God's love extends to all—would then be lived out by Jesus in striking ways during his journey to Jerusalem.

It started with the calling of the disciples, as we noted last week. Within the Jewish people themselves, there were some who were more “in” than others. Those who had the wherewithal to scrupulously follow the Jewish laws, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, were considered truly “in” with God, while those on the bottom of the social scale, such as fishermen, were considered to be on the fringes of God's grace. Yet Jesus called fishermen to be his disciples, and carried his message especially to ordinary peasants. As Isaiah prophesied, he “brought good news to the poor.” (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18)

Of all the groups within Israel at the time, there was one group that was especially “out” on the edges of society—the lepers. Leprosy was a dreaded disease, considered highly contagious (more contagious than it really is), and it was incurable. There was an attitude in that day that anyone with a terrible disease must have done something to deserve it. Jesus rejected such thinking entirely as being utterly false, but nevertheless there was this stigma that if you had leprosy, you must be a sinner. In Jewish ritual law at the time, lepers were considered “unclean”—that is, impure and unsuited to be included in the faith community. Lepers were required by law to shout out “Unclean, unclean!” if anyone drew near to them, so that others would be warned to stay away. They lived segregated from the rest of society, literally on the far edge.

But one of the first things that happened in Jesus' public ministry was that he was approached by a leper. *[A leper came to him, and kneeling said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Mark 1:40]* This leper grievously broke social convention by approaching Jesus. The standard response of a religious leader of the day would have been to recoil, scold the leper, and send him away. But Jesus, we are told “stretched out his hand and touched him.” (Mark 1:41) There could not be a more striking demonstration of how Jesus would break through every barrier to touch people with God's grace. Jesus makes plain that no one is to be classified as “unclean.” He says to the man, “Be made clean.” (Mark 1:41) So he not only heals the man of his illness but restores him to the community so that he is to be accepted by others.

Thus at the outset of Jesus' journey in public ministry, in both his words in Nazareth and in his actions, we see a basic shape that would characterize his ministry—Jesus would be one through whom the outsiders enter in. This comes to particular focus in the last story we heard this morning from the gospel of Matthew.

Jesus, we are told, “went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” (Matthew 15:21). That was where Elijah went when Elijah stayed with the widow at Zarephath, a small town between Tyre and Sidon. That was still Gentile territory, only now there were also Jews there, as the Jews had dispersed throughout the Roman world and beyond. As Jesus journeyed, a woman described as a Canaanite woman, that is, a Gentile, approached him. [A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him . . . Matthew 15:22], seeking healing for her daughter. Jesus initially ignored her, commenting to his disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24) That is a very curious statement, since Jesus had just gone into a Gentile area, and this was not the first time that Jesus went into Gentile territory. Moreover, some time before this, Jesus had readily provided healing for a centurion, a Roman army officer. All that does not equate with the notion that Jesus’ mission was only to the house of Israel. One suspects that Jesus is up to something here. The Canaanite woman kept pleading and finally knelt before Jesus saying, “Lord, help me” [Matthew 15:25] Jesus responded to her with a statement so grating and so out of character that it can only be understood as something intentionally designed by Jesus to create an enormous teaching moment. Jesus said to her, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26)

This statement was exactly what many of Jesus’ compatriots were thinking. Gentiles were typically considered dogs, in the worse sense of the term—they were considered by many Jewish people to be ungodly and unworthy of the blessings that God had reserved for his chosen children of Israel. Keep in mind that when Jesus traveled, there was always a crowd that gathered around him, so Jesus’ statement to this Gentile woman was in front of a whole group, and so when Jesus said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” there were surely quite a number of Jewish folks in the crowd who were nodding their heads in agreement, and muttering, “Yeah, Jesus, put that Canaanite woman in her place.” The disciples themselves, minutes before, had urged Jesus to just tell her to get lost. [*The disciples urged him, Send her away . . .* Matthew 15:23]

Jesus in this moment has created a kind of live participatory street theatre—a dramatic moment into which everyone has been drawn and in which everyone’s heart is exposed. The woman responds in a way that I believe Jesus anticipated. With amazing humility and sincere trust she says, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” (Matthew 15:27) Jesus answers her with a statement that blasts like a thunderbolt through the crowd. “Woman,” he says, “you have great faith!” (Matthew 15:28a) The standard thinking at the time was that Gentiles were far from God, and even a *Jewish woman* would not be lifted up as a spiritual example; and yet Jesus lifts up and praises this Gentile woman for her great faith! And this is after some previous occasions when Jesus had criticized some Jewish communities and even his own disciples for their lack of faith. The ultimate outsider—a Gentile woman—is thus declared by Jesus

to be “in” with God, and her family experiences God’s healing touch. [*Her daughter was healed at that moment. Matthew 15:28b*] Through Jesus, the outsiders enter in. Small wonder that Jesus would later tell his disciples to take the gospel to every nation.

Last November, when Wilmot Collins was elected mayor of Helena, Montana, the congregation of Covenant United Methodist Church erupted in applause. That’s because Wilmot is a member of the church, where he is very well liked and respected, and the congregation knows and celebrates his story. Wilmot and his wife, Maddie, came to this country as refugees 23 years ago; they came from Liberia, where a civil war was raging at the time. They came to Helena because Maddie had once taken part in an exchange there. When they settled in to their new home, the first thing that happened was that someone vandalized their house, painting KKK on the walls and the words, “Go home to Africa.” Wilmot says, “I don’t dwell on that. What I dwell on is the reaction to what happened. My neighbors got together and washed the walls down.” Wilmot and Maddie ultimately became US citizens, Wilmot served in the US Navy Reserve, and now he is mayor. When people in a community live in the grace of Christ, the outsider is welcomed in.

The ministry of Jesus was ultimately to welcome the whole world to experience God’s redeeming love. We are the Gentiles, the one-time outsiders, who encounter in Christ the grace and promise of God. And now we are called to join with Christ to reach past every barrier of hatred and prejudice to show God’s love to all. Then we are on that journey with Christ to take God’s light and saving grace to the world.