

4 EPIPHANY – ‘Jesus’ Universal Mission

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close – February 1, 2004

God’s love and compassion cross all boundaries. That is one of the amazing things it is so hard for us to understand. God reaches out to all people, not just us only. Jesus’ ministry is caught up in the mission of making God’s love known to the world. What is so strange is the hostile reaction that Jesus encounters. When Jesus comes, people must make a choice. They must either accept or reject him. However, when we reject Jesus, God takes the divine offer elsewhere.

Today we hear again from the Gospel of Luke. It is the inaugural sermon, part 2. In it Jesus goes from heaven to hell, from praise to condemnation, from astonishment to anger with the people. Luke is presenting us with a picture of Jesus’ early ministry. Already he has been in Galilee healing, preaching and teaching. Now the local boy comes home. What kind of reception does Jesus receive?

What do we expect at a homecoming? Is it joy or despair? When Jesus goes back to Nazareth, we would expect a great welcome. After all, the people have heard about what Jesus had been doing. Now the kid was coming home. But what preconceived ideas would Jesus face when he got back to town. You can hear people saying, “Isn’t that Joe’s boy? The carpenter’s kid?” There was anticipation and skepticism.

Jesus outlines his ministry clearly. He read from the prophet Isaiah and said his ministry was one to the nations. Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, give sight to the blind, and free the oppressed and captive. This doesn’t sound like feel good religion. Jesus was talking about something radical! What was the reaction of the people in Nazareth?

To understand their reaction, we might want to know a little bit about Nazareth. It was a town of about 200 or a little more people out in the middle of nowhere. The main routes in Israel were to either the east or west. To the west, the trade route went from the coastal city of Caesar Philippi to Jerusalem. To the east, the route went from the Sea of Galilee, down to Jordan River, and then turned west into Jerusalem. Here in New Jersey, if we want to let someone know where we live, we either mention a Turnpike exit, number 4 for us, or a Garden State Parkway exit. In Nazareth, there was no exit. It was a town out of the way.

We can imagine the people of Nazareth excited at Jesus’ return. They would try to make the most of a famous person. “Jesus might help put us on the map! We can go from the unknown to the known and important!” What we can imagine is that the people want keep Jesus and get him to focus on the local. This might explain why Jesus responds to the astonishment and excitement in the way he does.

Jesus is quick to add to his announcement that the Scripture is fulfilled. He says a prophet is without honor, physician heal yourself, that miracles are expected. Jesus goes on to sight the examples of two great prophets in Israel, Elijah and Elisha. Both examples set out how they reached out and healed those who were not part of the faith community. They were “Gentiles”, people outside the community. What is becoming

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clear is that the people, those who knew Jesus best, his own people, couldn't accept that Jesus' ministry was universal.

It's not uncommon today with us as well. We think God affirms only our political party, our economic preference. The people of Nazareth want a Jesus that only thinks and acts like they do now. In reality, Jesus says God's love is for all, not just a select few. He has come to reach everyone, not just the folks at home.

The reaction is predictable. When things don't go our way, we get angry. It is the same in Nazareth. If we along can't have it, then no one will. They can't accept that the Gospel is universal. Many of us haven't change today in our thinking and acting. Jesus threatens those who want to make God's salvation a local and restricted matter. It's "Us versus them." Jesus goes from one of us to one of them.

The anti-universal attitude of the Nazarenes is often ours today. It is often depicted in church profiles. We can understand that a searching parish wants to put forward its best image. However, many clergy learn to read between the lines. Most Churches say that one of their priorities is "to grow." They want new people, children, young families and others to swell the ranks and bankroll of the parish. But this often is a code for something else. It means, we want to grow only if it means people just like us come. The translation goes that we want younger versions only of ourselves, who think and act like us, who'll do all the work and let us stay in charge. Most of all, WE DON'T WANT TO CHANGE!

Our Gospel is the gospel of here and now. It's ours and no one else's. We want to keep our preconceived ideas. We have a notion of how God acts. We believe the only genuine message is the one that confirms our beliefs. There is no room for revelation. We are living in a much gentler age. We wouldn't try to throw Jesus off the cliff. We just with hold our pledge. The people of Nazareth reject Jesus. They turn down both the message and the messenger. This will be the pattern of Jesus' ministry. The very people who should accept him, reject him ... and plot to kill him.

There's an old song from my childhood that helps me understand this. It goes like this, "Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard ... a discouraging word ... Ah! That's it! We don't want a discouraging word. The Word of God is not only comfort. It is often a challenge. It pushes us beyond the familiar. The Word of God demands us to change! If things were alright, there would have been no need for God to send Jesus into our world.

The reality for us is that we don't really want to hear from god. Revelation means that God has something else in mind for us. If that's the case, we don't want it! Another reality is that our knowledge is only partial. But you would think that we already have all the answers. Our problem is that of the Nazarenes. We are isolated, off the beaten track with God. We go from love and praise of Jesus to anger and rage.

Look at the issues in our own Church. "If you don't agree with me," people say, "then I reject you. I hate you. You are not of God." Anger gives way to resentment which gives

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way to hate which gives way to ... violence. We would rather embrace our partial truths and illusions than change.

Perhaps Jesus’ ministry is Mission Impossible. He comes to bring hope, freedom and new life to all. Jesus is for us, and for others too. God’s love and forgiveness is universal. Why do we try to keep it local? Jesus is not a local deity. If we turn against Jesus, he will leave us and seek others. Jesus will leave us to our home town images. He will not let us shape him into our shapes and molds.

We must understand God’s way. The Divine One is wider in mercy and grace than we can ever imagine. This is Good News! Even Peter comes to realize that his God was too small in his life. He had to make room for others. Jesus and the Gospel may start local, but then they move out into the world. God’s grace is ever widening.

There’s an illustration that I use to help me understand how God works. Have you ever dropped a stone in a pond or lake? What happens? It makes concentric circles. The circles keep moving out, growing wider and wider. You can’t stop them. The circles will eventually touch the entire pond or lake. God’s word is like that. It may splash down in one place, but it is meant to spread out.

What does this mean for us? The word of God works most powerfully in those people who are open and want new life. If we want to stay the same, God will let us. Sameness, however, often is movement towards death. The Gospel comes on God’s terms. It is God’s way, not ours. It is God’s love, and it is for all. What we must ask ourselves is do we accept or reject Jesus? Are we going to try to bottle up Jesus (who can’t be bottled) or are we going to be part of his mission to the world. What will we choose?