

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 28, 2007

Rev. Patricia L. Liberty

“Uncomfortable Insights”

Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30



In August of 1978, the interim minister of the congregational church where I grew up invited me to the pulpit. It was just weeks before I was to begin my studies at Andover Newton Theological School. Standing knock-kneed and trembling before a group of people who had known me all my life, and frankly knew way to much about me, I blundered my way into the preaching life.

If you've ever had the opportunity to go back to the place you called home, the place of your growing up and as an adult, and do what you do as a grown-up, perhaps you may have some inkling of what Jesus is going through in this text.

That Sunday after church, there was a lot of, “Hey, aren't you George and Judy's kid?” and then the inevitable “I remember when ...” For the most part, they could no more imagine me in the ministry than they could imagine themselves as astronauts.

So when you look at this text, part of what is going on is that going-back-home-as-an-adult thing. Jesus returns to his hometown and heads straight to the temple and begins to do what it is that he does best, teaching and preaching. (That's one place where we're very, very different because I wasn't any good at it back then.) A crowd gathers to hear him and begins to listen intently to this articulate, gentle man.

It's fairly easy to imagine the scene. Someone recognizes him, “Hey, isn't that Mary and Joseph's kid? Gee, he's pretty smart, nice-looking ... Guess he skipped out on his dad and the family business. Well, whatever makes him happy. Seems to be doing well enough for himself. He's got a nice voice, not bad to listen to. Whodathunkit?”

Jesus takes the scroll from the Prophet Isaiah in the verses that immediately precede where we picked up. 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.”

As a first sermon, it was a big hit. Two of the temple members who have been there for years start whispering, “Did you hear what he said? Isn’t that wonderful? We could use some good news around here. I think he might be a little full of himself, saying he is the one anointed by God, but let’s see what happens. Gee, he has a nice speaking voice, doesn’t he? I hope he can put some zip into this place, it’s been pretty dull around here, and we could use some new blood. It’s always the same people volunteering to do all the work. Imagine, that’s Mary and Joseph’s son.” So the conversation goes as Jesus returns to his hometown.

But just a few verses later where we pick up the story, the welcome mat is snatched up and all of those nice people are in a rage and ready to pitch him off a cliff. Popularity is such a fickle thing. The only thing the text tells us is that he read them a few Bible stories.

The first one was about a widow during a time of famine who was cared for by God. Another one was about a man named Naaman who was healed of leprosy. No sooner are the stories out of his mouth and the crowd is in a fit of rage, crying against him, and throwing him out of the temple.

Maybe it was the choice of stories. The widow, Zarephath, was, you see, from the wrong side of the tracks. Naaman was a soldier in Syria’s army, and Syria was an enemy of Israel. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “It was like telling them that God had become chaplain to the Ku Klux Klan, or that God had passed over a Sunday School Teacher who was sick in order to take care of an ailing Hindu.”

What it points out is that Jesus’ idea of community and their idea of community were two very different things. Here, in his first sermon, is what gets Jesus into so much trouble. The people gathered there to hear him wanted to be told that God was just like them and, since Jesus was one of them, that God’s special favor rested on them. “Hometown boy makes it big, blessings to all who ever knew him.” They are his own kinfolks, he belongs to them, and they believed they had some special claim on him which they expected him to honor by doing his best for them. Maybe it’s a little like knowing the chief of police and expecting your get your parking or speeding tickets fixed, but on a bigger scale.

Anyway, they were none too pleased to hear that the very Scriptures that they used to assure their sense of privilege in the world as God’s chosen people, Jesus used to throw open the doors to include everyone. The minute he denied their special status, he went from favorite son to degenerate stranger who offended them so deeply they decided to kill him.

I guess when we’re told that our enemies are God’s friends, we can get a little touchy. It’s not easy to hear that God loves the people that we don’t want to sit next to, the people who offend and disturb us. Who wants to be reminded that they belong to God as surely as we do? It seems that no matter how hard we try, we just can’t get God to think the way we do. God keeps plowing right through our sensibilities, loving people we can’t stand, and inviting us to either follow or get out of the way.

It’s not that we are loved any less by God; it’s just that the people we can’t stand are loved just as much. God has a rather disturbing notion of community. Jesus reminds his

sleepy little hometown that they didn't have the corner on the market where God was concerned, and that this notion they had of their ideas and God's ideas being the same needed a little adjustment.

Parker Palmer is a Quaker theologian and author of a wonderful book called *The Company of Strangers*. He believes that our survival as a people and as a planet is dependent on having a sense of community where widely divergent populations agree to share common resources. It doesn't mean we have to see eye to eye on everything. It doesn't mean we have to like other. But in order for public life to work, we do have to respect each other's dignity as human beings, which is after all, what we all have in common.

He goes on to saying that when this notion of shared resources and community begins to break down, we come to regard strangers as enemies. There are always "those people ..." and all we need to do is fill in the blank with those whom we fear the most. The face of that will change throughout our lives, though I don't believe we will ever fully out-grow it. There is always a person or a group who will challenge our notion of just about everything. There is always a tendency to sort ourselves into tribes, and then to be suspicious of other tribes.

The church is not immune to this sort of thing. But we know better, we believe better, we struggle to do better. We know about Naaman and the widow. We know that Jesus himself preferred the company of misfits to most religious people. We believe in a Savior who cares for the stranger and who comes to us as a stranger reminding us over and over again, that while he is with us he does not belong to us. In the church, we are always dared to believe that it is God who makes us a community and not we ourselves and that our differences are God's best tools for opening us up to truths that are bigger than we are.

This text is a wonderful reminder that God's invitation to community will always include those we would not if left to our own devices, and that whatever we do for the sake of the kingdom we do as a response to God's love, not to earn God's love. The Ku Klux Klan and all those? They'll have to figure that out on their own. It does not change the fact that God loves them. They just haven't figured out a very good way to respond. In the words of the old hymn, what we aspire to is "May all my works be praise."

The litmus test of authentic community is never popularity or even social acceptability or lots of other things that we tend to use to measure how well we're doing. It will always take a world full of strangers and some friends here and there to keep adjusting our perspective so we can see this life and this world as God intends.

Thanks be to God and amen.

