

February 3, 2018

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

What did Jesus do? What did Jesus do to provoke, incite, enrage this crowd of his neighbors who wanted to throw him off a cliff? They drove him out of town. Dragged him to the top of a craggy hill. And tried to throw him off. They tried to. Throw. Jesus. Off. A. Cliff. So, what did he do?

We're told Jesus had been preaching in the synagogue. Now, I've preached some bad sermons in my day. I may have even said some things that annoyed and irritated people. But I've never had people drive me out of town or try to throw me off a cliff. They may have thought about it. They might have wanted to. They probably have. But, so far, (and I realize the day isn't over yet) people have been able to restrain themselves and not restrain me. So what's happening here with Jesus? And what can we learn from it?

To understand we need to go back in time a bit. We need to explore the backstory, the scripture lessons we haven't heard in this sequence. The episode at the synagogue occurs during the early days of Jesus' ministry. He was baptized by John in the River Jordan. He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, alone with his thoughts, nothing to eat for 40 days. Tempted by the devil with food and possessions, kingly majesty and might, power on earth, and glory in heaven. But Jesus said "no," and returned to preach and teach, to do a little healing. The news spread fast. There was a "buzz" about this local guy: the amazing things he was doing; the startling things he was saying. Finally, the word got back to his hometown in Nazareth that Jesus was traveling around the countryside, from village to village, teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick, that he was attracting large crowds and had a group of followers, disciples, who traveled with him. His reputation had preceded him when he came home to Nazareth and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. It was the synagogue where he had grown up, the synagogue where he had prayed and studied, learning to read and write Hebrew, perhaps making life difficult for some patient, nameless rabbi trying to teach young boys the ways of faith. It was the synagogue where everybody knew him. So, when he finally came home to Nazareth, the people were waiting in anticipation. They expected something special to happen. But at the same time, they were a little skeptical. This was "Joe's boy," Mary's little son, the kid down the street. What could be so special about Jesus, the carpenter's son? Wasn't there something a little pretentious about him roaming the countryside preaching like some prophet of days gone by? His old neighbors in Nazareth wanted to see for themselves. And now, here he was, coming to the synagogue on the Sabbath just like always. He walked straight to the front, opened up the sacred scroll, and started reading the holy words of the Messiah of peace and justice: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he read. "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 and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He sat down. Everyone was watching him. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Then Jesus spoke again. He added his own words of conclusion to his sacred prophecy. "Today," he said, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (*"This is the day it begins, here, with you, in your presence: good news for the poor, release for the captives, vision for the those who cannot see, freedom for all who are oppressed, a new season of God's grace."*) This scripture was well known. It was a favorite of the people. They identified with it. They were poor. They lived in a captive nation. They felt oppressed by the wealthy and powerful. There were blind among them who longed to see. And the text tells us that when the people heard Jesus "all spoke well of him...(they) were *amazed* at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

But then, something happened. The mood shifted. Things took an ugly turn. Something derailed the conversation, taking it a dangerous direction. We don't know *exactly* what changed. We

don't know *just* what was said. The text isn't *completely clear* on it. It appears Jesus was offended by something in the crowd's response. Some comment, some demand, some expectation, some expression of entitlement. One might guess from his response that they were *insisting* he start rolling out his miracles *here* in his *hometown* as he had *elsewhere*. "Hey," you can imagine them saying. "We didn't come here just to listen to your fancy words. If you want to hint at being the Messiah, do something for us! Do some of that healing like you did in Capernaum. Multiply some fish and loaves. Turn some water into wine. Don't give us that Messiah routine if there's nothing in it for us." But God doesn't act on demand. And to illustrate this point, Jesus used two stories he knew would evoke a further reaction.

He told two odd little stories from the Jewish bible tradition. Both stories were about non-Israelites, outcasts receiving the grace of God. Jesus knew his neighbors well, and *instead* of telling them what *they wanted* to hear, he told them what *God needed them* to hear. If they were sure of anything, it was that they were God's chosen people, God's favorites. They were in, and everyone else was not. So he told them about a Syrian army officer with leprosy and a poor pagan woman from far away Sidon, unbelievers, not folks they'd have over for dinner. Not only is he hinting that he's the Messiah, Young Jesus from around the corner, just back from a tour of Galilee, is telling them that God's grace extends to all people. It was more than they could take. They found it offensive. So much of their identity and esteem was defined by their unique relationship with God. So much of the meaning of their lives, their purpose for living, was tied to their perception of themselves as special, of having a role like no other in God's plan for the world. At its best, this perception results in humble servanthood. At its worst, it slides into arrogance and exclusion. It's one thing to welcome a young man home and listen respectfully as he speaks. It's another thing altogether when he criticizes his old neighbors, challenges their assumptions, and blasts the comfortable conventions by which they assure themselves that *they are better* than others, when he tells them they are rigid and narrow and short-sighted, *even* that the *faith* they hold so dear, the faith that *defines who they are* is *too small* for God's love. It's enough to get one thrown off a cliff.

But it's a common theme of our own humanity, isn't it? That we can only feel good about ourselves, if we identify and define someone else as inferior. And we know it wasn't only the Jesus of Jesus' day. It's at the center of racism, sexism, cultural supremacism, economic inequality, all manner of prejudice and discrimination. "I'm better than you are. I'm God's favorite. I deserve more. I'm entitled." And if you try to catch me, if you are bold enough to consider yourself an equal, if you don't know your place and stay in it, there will be trouble for you. We all know the divisions and damages caused by this "I'm better than you" mentality. At its worst, the church, the Christian faith, falls into this error, but at its best, our faith offers a new model. "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Love never ends. The fundamental character of love is that it acknowledges the connection between people. It acknowledges that your needs are as important as mine. That you are as important as I am. Justice is the active expression of love in the face of inequality, prejudice, discrimination, hate. Jesus is speaking the language of God's love when he says he comes to "Bring the good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed." Jesus comes to set us free, to proclaim that God's grace is extended to all. That God loves us. That *we all* have worth and value in God's eyes.

Wishing you God's peace,
Pastor Terry Anderson