

Getting Out of Dodge

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Luke 4:21-30

21Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" 24And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They 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. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

A couple of weeks ago, we were talking about Jesus' inaugural speech which he gave as he began his public ministry. He delivered this speech in the synagogue where he grew up. He began his speech by saying these words:

"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, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And as the story goes, everyone was so impressed with the eloquence of Joseph's son. Everyone spoke well of Jesus and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Jesus was the home town boy who had done good!

But then it was quite amazing how the feeling in the room changed quite dramatically. Jesus made everyone really uptight when he said that some Jewish religious types, who only offered care for other Jews in their particular religious tradition, was inconsistent with what God intended. Jesus then told the story from another part of the Jewish tradition about how Gentiles and not Jews reached out to a widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. The widow in Zaraphath of Sidon was a gentile and Naaman the Syrian was a military man who was disliked by some in the Jewish community.. At this moment, the folks in the congregation realized that Jesus' ministry was not just reserved for them but for all people.

Jesus was not really saying something to his synagogue family which was that radical. He was just looking at the scripture which was taught to him growing up. He took that text to heart and tried to live his life accordingly. But so often religious communities get this strange idea that

Jesus, and the people who care for them, are more like their personal therapist where they are first in line. Once their needs are met everyone else gets what is left over.

In the 19th century, if you were to ask Methodists about the purpose of the church, they would say it was to spread the gospel and reform society. During this period, it is not an accident that Methodists saw great growth in their churches. Parishioners were robustly engaged in mission and ministry. This would also be true for Congregationalist churches and others with a mission minded focus.

But somewhere along the way, the Protestant church could at times be more obsessed with a better coffee hour and a massive therapy session where we take care of our own before helping anyone else. The decline in Protestant churches in part, I think is due to this self absorption.

For our 19th century forebears they would roll over in their graves. Like Jesus the saints of old, with an evangelical passion would say our needs are best met when we get out of ourselves and meet the needs of others. For them faith came alive when they founded new churches in western territory, spoke against the evils of slavery, set up hospitals and orphanages for the elderly and orphans, advocated for widows and children who lost husbands and fathers in the Civil War, or fought for Temperance in response to the destruction of families due to alcoholism.

In some circles these days, those old saints just would not get much of a hearing where Christianity so often can get sanitized and dumbed down. When you live out your faith, you can find yourself on a politically turbulent road. Many people, who think they know you, may now look at you with skepticism. I can remember a number of years ago when I first decided I would give my life to Christ and attend seminary, I went to this cocktail party with some people with whom I had lived and worked in college. They knew me as someone who had worked on various social causes. I was the pragmatic but idealistic student politician who was well steeped in lots of secular ideas which served as a basis for social change. As a matter of politics, I steered away from Christianity which was seen as too limiting. Jesus was a problem for us secularists. But after spending my college years resisting Christianity and ministry, I changed my mind and decided to go seminary. So as we were sipping our drinks, I let slip with someone with whom I had worked that I had decided to go into parish ministry, I can remember that individual practically choked on his whisky sour saying quite defensively, "I used to be a Unitarian". I wanted to say to my friend that Jesus for me was not this restrictive and authoritarian figure which he was imagining. Religion and the church was not necessarily an oppressive thing. Instead Jesus offered for me a spiritual life source I needed so I would not lose hope and work for improvement of the human condition. But in spite of my efforts I could not dislodge the strident secularism of the Pacific Northwest and the academy which shaped my friend's world view. I was not unfamiliar with my friend's issues with Jesus. The Northwest is full of people whose grandmas and grandpas who ran away from constricting Midwest Christianity. My own grandparents had their ambivalence about Christianity. The Congregational Church I attended in California as a boy was also frequented by my grandfather many years before. The church had some history of keeping Jesus at arms length. Sermons looked at times more like secular essays. It had a decidedly Unitarian strain. My grandfather was a seminarian in the 1930s with no inclination towards the ministry. Religion to him was a detached form of intellectual inquiry. His seminary days were spent studying tribal religions. Faith and piety was of little interest to him.

The story goes that my grandfather would go to church right before the sermon for the intellectual exercise and then quickly leave before he had to pray. Indeed, in many Congregational churches, more than a few pastors have discovered that too much Jesus talk will get them in trouble with their congregations with an excessively strict liberal orthodoxy with a small minded picture of Jesus based on a selective reading of the biblical text.

I am one who has a deep appreciation for more secular thought and political theory which was a part of my upbringing. I believe that the humanity of the Jesus brings us closer to the world and is not inconsistent with secularism. The incarnation brings us closer to the world and does not pull us away from it. I have discovered, however, at times that being passionate about Jesus from with my orthodox, liberal, progressive, and at times even conservative Christian perspective can be a lonely exercise. Not always but sometimes it feels that way. As I sort through my own Christian faith, I have discovered that people have such negative associations with Christianity that they can't see the life giving and inclusive nature of Jesus and his ministry.

If I could lift up one other point for our reflection this morning as I think about Jesus' poorly received address. Many of us in this room might have been Boy Scouts or have children who were Boy Scouts or are now Boy Scouts. My father was an Eagle Scout. He even was in a fraternity in college for former Boy Scouts. I never managed to get to Eagle Scout but did achieve the rank of Life Scout having spent many years camping in the Sierra Nevada. I would consider myself part of the scouting family. In my old church in Massachusetts, we had an active Boy Scout troop and many Cub Scout dens. Every week, our church was filled with an explosion of youthful energy. As the Senior Minister I had the proud duty of signing the authorization forms for all the scout leaders and praying at Eagle Scout ceremonies which happened at least twice a year. And yet every time I signed those forms and prayed at these ceremonies, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach knowing that if someone was openly gay, I technically could not sign the form given the Supreme Court ruling that the Boy Scouts could legally discriminate against gay boys and scout leaders. Nor could I pray at a ceremony for an openly gay Eagle Scout.

One of my very gifted parishioners, Dick, who was the troop leader and who gave his heart and soul to scouting, would always grimace a bit when he talked about this discriminatory policy. We had an understanding, however, that we would do our best to not exclude anybody even if it went against the national Boy Scout policy. Dick was more invested in the scouting family than anyone I had ever known. But because Dick cared so much about the boys he served, Dick made his protests frequently known to the Knox Trail Council that this discriminatory policy was so contrary to the spirit of scouting and his Christian faith.

I have wondered if voices like Dick's, after so many years of being greeted with deafening silence or vitriol from the national scouting office, have finally had an impact. After multiple corporate donors have withdrawn their support, the national scouting board appears poised to let each troop decide on its own criteria. If they make a change in this policy it won't be perfect but a good step in the right direction.

And yet, even this moderate and humane step is being met with a voracious lobbying effort from many churches and the Mormon Church this weekend to uphold the ban. As I look at the vitriol, I can't help wonder if the church forgot Jesus' speech to the people at the synagogue that God's care did not just extend to the gathered faithful but all people. I am quite confident

that many leaders of these congregations who raise their voice to remind the faithful of what Jesus taught about inclusion in the synagogue that afternoon might be running into some rough water this weekend if they speak up. Some could lose their membership, be asked to leave the scouts, or even be fired. When Jesus got a rocky reception at his synagogue, he reminded his congregation and the world that discipleship has a cost.

To follow the Jesus way is not about being popular but it is about being faithful. And sometime as Christians we are in the business of wading through the mud and clearing the brush to offer life in the face of death. Christians should be sticking up for these boys who chose to lead them instead of working against them. So if you are so inclined I invite you to write the Boy Scouts this weekend and make your feelings known.

To be a disciple is about having the courage to give life to every person out there. There are boys and girls, men and women in all sorts of situations who need the rest of us to speak up. In our life together, we want to encourage honest wrestling with the scripture, we wish to invite people to live their lives striving for truth and integrity, and to grow in faith so that we can act with courage. We don't want anyone to get run out of dodge but we want them to stick around and benefit our community in Jesus' name. Amen.

