

“The Day Jesus Got Kicked Out of Church”

Luke 4:21-30

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I’ve chosen to call this sermon “The Day Jesus Got Kicked Out of Church,” although technically it should be “The Day Jesus Got Kicked Out of *the Synagogue*.” In the world Jesus lived in, synagogues served the same function that churches do now. Faithful people would come to the synagogue on the Sabbath to pray, to praise God in song, to read the scriptures, and to hear a sermon. Synagogues were as prominent then as churches are in our country now. Stand in the center of town, and look – there’s the synagogue, occupying prime real estate. So I like to think of this story as “the day Jesus got kicked out of church.” But even that title doesn’t tell the whole story, for Jesus nearly winds up *dead*, thrown off a cliff by the people who had been sitting in the pews. Luke says: “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.” So maybe this sermon should be “The Day Jesus Got Kicked Out of Church and Almost Got Murdered by Its Members.” How’s *that* for a sermon title!?

So I want to focus on this question: what did Jesus *do* – what did Jesus *say* – that so *enraged* the members of that community of faith, as they sat in their usual pews, that made them try to *kill* him?

This story takes place very early in Jesus’ ministry. In Luke’s Gospel, this is the first real story after his baptism and temptation. “Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.” He comes to Nazareth, “where he had been brought up,” and he goes “to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.” Jesus is basically serving as the liturgist that day. So far, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has just been *teaching*. Luke has not told us yet of any healings or miracles. And, so far, people are *liking* his teaching; he “*was praised by everyone*.” Everyone, that is, *until* he comes to Nazareth.

Nazareth was his hometown. Jesus had grown up here. People *knew* him. They also knew his mother, Mary; and they remembered his father, Joseph. They would have remembered Jesus as a child or youth, how they nurtured him, the same way we try to nurture the children and youth in our own congregation. If you put this in *our* context, Jesus would have been one of those kids coming down for the children’s sermon, collecting the monthly two-cents-a-meal offering, tromping out of the sanctuary to go to Sunday School, playing an angel or a donkey or a shepherd in the Christmas pageant, going on a mission trip, getting confirmed, being recognized when they graduate from high school, *wrapped in love* by their community of faith. The Jews didn’t have all those practices back then, but you get the idea: *Jesus had been nurtured by this community of faith for years*. They *knew* him. They *loved* him.

Which makes their rejection of him – and their attempt to *murder* him – all the more striking.

Now he's a grown man, about 30 years old, returning – after a period of absence – to his home town. He's been making a name for himself; he has gained a reputation as a man of faith and wisdom. So when he enters the synagogue, he is invited to the lectern, and handed a copy of the great scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read from. Presumably the rabbi or someone else had read from the Torah, the Law of Moses, and now Jesus is being invited to give the second reading, the reading from the Prophets, and evidently he is allowed to choose which passage he wants to read. He chooses the beginning of chapter 61: "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 set free those who are oppressed, / to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." There are 66 chapters in Isaiah – it's quite a long book! – but *this* was the passage Jesus chose. Why? Well, because Jesus wanted to tell the congregation that this passage was talking about *himself*. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*," Jesus was saying; "the Lord has anointed *me*"; "he has sent *me*." Jesus is saying: *This passage is describing the work that God has given ME to do. I'm on a mission from God to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor – the year of jubilee, when servants were freed, debts forgiven, and property restored.*

Everyone in the congregation is staring at him: "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." To make his point very clear, Jesus says: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, *yes, I really am the person Isaiah was talking about; you are witnessing the fulfillment of scripture right here, right now.* No one is upset yet; at this point, people are quite impressed: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." He hasn't offended anybody yet. The people are simply in *awe*. This is not what they expected from a carpenter's son!

Jesus could have chosen at this point to just *stop*. But no; there's more he wants to say. First, he refers to what was then a well-known saying: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!'" He's essentially saying: "Some of you might think I've gone out of my mind. *I haven't.*" Then he says: "And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" He's saying: "Some of you might think I need to *prove* myself to you. *I don't.*" He follows that up with: "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown" – which is a way of saying: "A lot of you might think I'm not really a prophet. *I am.*" I suspect at this point some people in the congregation are getting uncomfortable, thinking that he has gone too far. *A prophet?* This guy's full of himself! He's gone mad! Somebody needs to *do* something, *say* something, get him to *shut up!*

But Jesus keeps going. He *knows* he's pushing it. He's *trying* to push it. He deliberately *keeps going*, pushing their buttons, turning the screw, twisting the knife. He has two more things he wants to say, two particular stories from the Hebrew scriptures, stories that these people would – or should – have *known*, but which apparently they have forgotten, or neglected. Both stories are about Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha, two of the most important prophets in the Bible. The first story is about Elijah, from 1 Kings 17; the second story is about Elisha, from 2 Kings 5. In the first story, there was a massive famine in the land, and God sent Elijah to a town called Zarephath, which belonged to the city-state of Sidon, on the Mediterranean coastline – north of Israel – to find a certain widow, who would give Elijah water and bread – and whom God would preserve from the ravages of the famine, and whose son Elijah would raise from the dead. In the second story, Elisha gets word that a man named Naaman, the commander of the army in the country of Aram – east of Israel – is suffering from a skin disease, traditionally called "leprosy." Elisha summons Naaman to his house and tells him to wash himself seven

times in the river Jordan; when Naaman does so, he is completely healed. These are the stories Jesus lifts up for the congregation in Nazareth, the two examples he offers of prophets doing what Isaiah described: bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. What's most striking about these two stories is that *neither of the people whom Elijah and Elisha helped were Israelites*. The widow was from Sidon; she was a Phoenician, one of the peoples that inhabited the land before the Israelites arrived. Naaman was from Aram; he was a Syrian, and he commanded an army that often fought *against Israel!* Neither of them were Israelite; neither worshiped the same God that the Israelites worshiped. But God had sent these faithful Israelite prophets to help and heal those *foreigners*.

Jesus puts it like this: "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, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Jesus was saying: *Look how God reaches out to the people you reject. Look how God loves the people you hate. Look how God cares about people who are suffering, regardless of what they look like, what country they come from, what God they worship. You Jews, you who think you're so special, you who think your needs and your people are the most important, you who think God ought to bless you and you alone – look at what God does. Look at how God cares for the rest of the world. If you think God just cares about you, about your people, about your nation, then you're wrong, and your own scriptures tell you so. So get off your high horse, stop thinking you're so important, and start thinking about the rest of the world. This, says Jesus, is my mission. To do what Isaiah said. To bring good news to the poor – and not just the poor people who look like you. To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to oppressed – and not just the captives and the blind and the oppressed who belong to your country. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor – not just to you, but also to people who aren't like you at all. Stop being so self-centered. Stop being so arrogant. Stop being so nationalistic, so ethnocentric, so "me first." All those barriers that you all put up – God wants to tear all of them down. Everybody, all people on this earth, have been made in the image of God, regardless of what they look like, where they come from, what language they speak, what God they worship. God cares about all of them.*

This is what did it. This is what set off a firestorm in that congregation. Jesus was calling these people out for their bigotry and self-centeredness. And they were *not* going to put up with it. Furious, enraged, "they got up, drove him out of the town," and tried to hurl him off a cliff. Obviously, Jesus got away; Luke says "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." And – as far as we know – Jesus never came to Nazareth again. He was not welcome. "No prophet is accepted in his hometown."

Would that message of Jesus be welcome *here*? Are we, members of the church of Jesus Christ, *really committed* to bringing good news to the poor – *all* of them, regardless of what they look like? Are we, members of the church of Jesus Christ, *really committed* to proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed – *all* of them, regardless of where they come from? Are we, members of the church of Jesus Christ, *really committed* to proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor to *all* people, regardless of what God they worship? Regardless of *anything*? I hope so. I *pray* so. For if we're not *really committed* to the values of Jesus – how can we call ourselves "Christian"?

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