



Don't Kill the Messenger
Luke 4:14-31
February 3, 2019
A Sermon Preached by: E. Scott Winnette

“Toss him. Toss, toss, toss, toss. The son of Mary, the son of Joseph is a traitor. Toss him over the cliff.” Why did the sibling neighbors turn on him? Surely, his hometown had heard of his success; had heard of his wisdom, heard of his graceful oratory. With pride, they invited him into the pulpit. He stood. They handed him Isaiah. He read, “*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 Adonai's favor.*” They were thrilled. Their hometown boy shared one of their favorite portions of Isaiah, poetry about how God was present for them, was good news for them, was a liberator and a healer, and a freedom giver for them.

He read. After he read, he sat down. They were ready for a Midrash. The infant they wiped, toddler they carried, child they cautioned, youth they taught, friend they loved, the once Jesu of Nazareth was now a celebrated Rabbi. He started, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” Luke's story declares, “*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.*” So far, so good. But he wasn't done. “*And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for 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.'*”

Jesus recalled 1 Kings 17:7-16. The land was in famine and God sent Elijah to be fed by a non-Jewish widow. The widow's son became ill and died. Elijah performed a miracle, a resurrection. God's Elijah ate with and even healed the child of an enemy.

Jesus continued, *“There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the (Gentile) Syrian.’ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.”* Again, God’s power demonstrated not for them but for the other. Jesus points out that God’s grace and power cannot be corralled focusing on a few. The aunts, uncles, peers, and parents of pals of Jesus’ youth were outraged. They wanted Jesus’s prophecy and power and wisdom for themselves.

This evening words will go up, hands will be raised, voices trembling with emotion as millions pray for the Patriots to win. And this evening words will go up, hands will be raised, voices trembling with emotion as millions pray for the Rams to win. Have fun with it; go ahead and pray, be fervent, enjoy the game. God doesn’t care that you shout and moan and celebrate and plead for your team. Nor does God move towards Nationalism’s believers when they pray for America’s special privilege. Hearing today’s story, I believe God isn’t close, isn’t being heard by those who pray for white supremacy and God’s will isn’t being considered by people who build walls to protect privilege. God’s concern is not provincial.

“The Spirit of Adonai is upon us, because God has anointed us to bring good news, good news to the poor. God sends us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of Adonai’s favor.” Black Christians in South Africa interpreted this saying for them that Apartheid was not God’s will. And poor Christians in South America hear Jesus’ words and rebel saying God has a preference for the marginalized. It is the Body of Christ’s job to proclaim and enact good news for the poor.

The histories of world religions reveal an undying struggle between limiting God’s grace to a few select peoples on one side versus proclaiming and expanding God’s amazing grace with oceans of abundance. Since the Christian Church was adopted by the Roman Empire, leaders fought against any pro-poor mandates of God. They perpetuated ideas that there are classes of faithful people blessed by God and castes of others cursed to serve and suffer. I remember a Sunday school class where the teacher taught how God blesses America with prosperity because of our faith and other countries with poverty because of their lack of faith.

Due to the Protestant Reformation’s Guttenberg Bible the peasant devotees of Martin Luther finally had access to God’s Word in their own language. They read today’s passage hearing Jesus share God’s good news to the poor. The church had been teaching them that God intended for them to be servants, to be meek, to respectfully stay in their lane. In the Peasant’s War of 1523, they rebelled against the oppression of the Aristocracy. But the wealthy massacred them in the name of God.

Jesus fought against the principalities urging us to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. He fought against prosperity thinking and prejudice thinking and privilege thinking; against human polarities, good/bad, rich/poor, powerful/weak, clean/unclean.

Our country learns again why it’s inflammatory for white people to wear blackface. In the mid to late nineteenth century, white actors used black grease paint on their faces mocking plantation slaves and free blacks on stage. They dehumanized those with darker skin; casting them down as inferior in every way. And every Halloween some still choose to blacken their faces claiming it not racist but good fun. God is not on their trivializing side. If Jesus came to America, instead of recalling Elijah and Elisha as

vehicles of God's grace for non-Jews, Jesus would speak to our country's history telling us how God shook with the slaves as they sang their freedom songs, down by the riverside.

When Anthony was studying at Loyola in Baltimore, he was in a Student Life training. He shared that they played a special game of Monopoly. Two players were designated wealthy, two upper middle class, two lower middle class, and two poor. There was a rotating opportunity for a group to change the game's rules that all other players had to abide by. When it was the wealthy players' turn, they made rules to acquire more wealth at the expense of the other classes, having a disproportionate effect on the poor. The middle classes did the same. But when the opportunity came to the poor, Anthony and his team member leveled the playing field. They declared that all the traditional rules of Monopoly apply, and no longer could the rules be changed. The administrator of the game was amazed. She said that in seven years of teaching with this game, the poor players always made rules to get even with the wealthy and middle classes, never did they try to level the playing field.

Today we enjoy the nourishing bread and rebel rousing cup of Christ. May they fill us with God's cosmic grace and compassion and courage. Walter Brueggemann wrote, "In feeding the hungry crowd, Jesus reminds us that the wounds of scarcity can be healed only by faith in God's promise of abundance."

I close with a section of Wendell Berry's poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.*