

*Jesus loves you ... but I'm his favorite*

Luke 4.16-30

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### **Luke 4.16-22**

<sup>16</sup> When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup> “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,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

<sup>20</sup> And 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. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

Anthem: “Who is This?” by John Ferguson

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“Who is this?” the people in Jesus’ hometown want to know. “Isn’t this Joseph and Mary’s son?”

“Yes. You know him. He’s that nice boy from down the street. The one that got left behind in Jerusalem when he was a kid and his parents finally found him taking on all those highfalutin teachers in the Temple.”

“I hear he’s been hanging out with that John character in the wilderness.”

“Yes, but it’s probably a phase. He’ll grow out of it. Besides he’s here with us now.”

“And he is so articulate. I always knew he had some promise. He always did so well in Hebrew School.”

“He always seemed to identify with the prophet Isaiah as I remember – just like this morning reading that passage about the Spirit being upon him to bring good news to the poor and that this is the year of God’s favor.”

“Well it’s about time we had some good news.”

“You know, come to think of it, Jesus always was one of my favorites.”

Luke 4.23-30

<sup>23</sup> Jesus 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.’” <sup>24</sup> And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. <sup>25</sup> But 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; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers<sup>[a]</sup> in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

So what just happened? Things were going so well in his hometown. What pushed these good people over the edge – and Jesus just about off the cliff?

I think it's all part of this identity question: Who is this Jesus? And, in particular, who does he belong to?

Perhaps, like me, you grew up singing: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so; little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong: Yes, Jesus loves me; Yes, Jesus loves me; Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.”

There have been many times in my life when this children's song has come back to me – times when I didn't feel a lot of love from anywhere and most of all from myself. It has been powerful for me.

But I am also aware that there could be some danger here too – some assumptions about who it is that Jesus does and does not belong to.

I remember reading that theologian Rebecca Ann Parker, when she was a child, came home from vacation Bible School singing this song and her mother told her to stop. Her mother was a faithful Methodist and a preacher's wife so Rebecca didn't understand what the problem was. But, as an adult, Rebecca's mother explained that she didn't want her daughter growing up thinking of herself as weak and helpless.

Yes, Jesus loves you, but ...

Several years ago, someone gave me a shirt that says: “Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite.” Actually, there is another member of the pastoral team who has these words posted on his door.

“Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite.” This is meant to be a joke, of course, but it is also the subtext for this story in Luke 4. And, sadly, with the political campaign in full swing, this question about who Jesus belongs to is flying all around us.

Jesus loves you, but his favorites happen to be members of my political party.

In the church we might say: Jesus loves you, but his favorites are introverts with our quiet, introspective, thoughtful contemplation. And the extraverted faithful say: Wait a minute; yes, Jesus loves you but his favorites are those of us who actually do something, who are engaged in prophetic action to change the world.

Jesus loves you ... but we know who his favorites are.

The folks in his hometown are fine with Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah about good news for the poor and the year of God's favor. What they don't like is the idea that the "year of God's favor" might actually favor somebody else – that the promise might be extended to widows in enemy territory or to commanders of foreign armies – that the promise might, in fact, belong to the "other," the different, the strange, the unfamiliar, the 'not-us.'

And this issue seems to come up a lot in the gospel of Luke.

When his mother and bothers come to visit on one of his preaching tours and the disciples tell Jesus that his family is at the door waiting for him, he says, "my mother and brothers are those who heard God's word and do it." I belong to "others," Jesus says. [8.21]

So does that mean Jesus belongs to his disciples? There is this story in Luke 9 about the disciples seeing someone casting out demons in Jesus' name but that person isn't one of their group. When the disciples try to stop him, Jesus say no because "whoever is not against you is for you." This power to heal isn't just about me or us. It's about the healing that "others" can – and will – do.

The liberation theology folks read the gospel of Luke and they tell us that Jesus is the expression of God's "preferential option for the poor." And that's true. It's also true in Luke that Levi, one of the 12, was a wealthy tax collector, as was the famous Zacchaeus. And there were wealthy women, including Joanna and Susanna, who supported the disciples out of their own resources. [8.2-3]

Jesus stood with those who were oppressed. And, like Elisha, he healed the beloved servant of a Roman centurion – a commander in the occupying imperial army. [7.1-10]

Jesus tells stories where Samaritans are heroes.

He touches people who are ritually unclean -- those unholy "others" -- and allows himself to be touched by them.

Just when you are ready to give up on those nasty, self-righteous Pharisees, he has dinner with one of them who repents and takes on a whole new way of life.

Jesus loves you but every time you think you have figured out the ones who are his favorites, some “other” comes along.

Now the implications of this are pretty obvious. We talk a lot about being inclusive and recognizing the movement of the Spirit and the good news in those who are different from us – those who have different life circumstances and cultures and faith journeys.

But that’s not what got the hometown folks upset with Jesus. It wasn’t just that he was recognizing there were “others.” He was going to them. He was seeking them out. He was having dinner with them. He was being identified with them.

At our Leadership Retreat yesterday we were talking about our internal implicit biases that can get in the way of the work we need to do. One of the suggestions to mitigate that bias was to “seek out diversity” because “increased exposure to stereotyped individuals, in a positive context, can reduce” that bias.

In other words, we don’t just acknowledge that there are people who are different from us. We go looking for them.

As we begin thinking about our spiritual practice heading into Lent, it seems like one of the practices this story might suggest to us is to intentionally seek out those who are “other” to us.

At Wednesday Night dinner, not to just “play favorites” but sit down with someone with whom you suspect you have little in common.

Take advantage of those opportunities – we have them all the time -- that put you in a position to experience people who are different from you.

Make a point of listening to someone you are pretty sure doesn’t have anything to say.

One of the things I have discovered when I have sought out those who are different from me, is that I become a little more at home with my own “otherness.”

For me, that is a big deal because I spent a lot of years hating – that’s not too strong a word – hating what was “other” about me. I still have those moments when I have to fill out a form that asks, “single, married, divorced, other,” and I cringe a little when I have to – legally at least – declare my “otherness.”

I would like to say that growing up feeling different made me even more aware of other people's "otherness" and more willing to reach out to them. But that's not always true. I still have my favorites. Just because someone is different like me, doesn't mean that she or he is any less racist or classist or sexist or even less homophobic.

When the lectionary for today connects that famous love chapter in I Corinthians 13 with this story in Luke 4, I think someone is trying to tell us that love isn't just acknowledging our differences. It's seeking them; engaging them; honoring them; and, in the end, learning to love them.

What made the difference in my life was not sitting alone in a room trying to love myself. It was in reaching out to others and having them teach me what it meant to stop hating my own "otherness" and, through that, to try to embrace, to claim, to love that "otherness" in me and in them.

That's why I think the final word in that love chapter is: "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I am fully known." Love is about knowing and allowing ourselves to be known. No matter how threatening or vulnerable it may feel, it is to seek the "other."

We are about to sing one of our Heritage Hymns that, it seems to me, wraps all this up in a beautiful musical tune.

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
But other hearts in other lands are beating  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

If you read the note about the author of these words, you will discover they are written by someone in 1934 who went off to join the circus and ended up in Hawaii just as the winds of WWII were beginning to blow. It seems like an odd life and an unusual circumstance to produce these words.

But it is a celebration of "otherness" and Jesus, after all, loves you and has a preferential option for the "other."

So, today, if you hear these words – if you hear love seeking you in the voice of another and love seeking others in your own – today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

## NOTES

The story about “Jesus Loves Me” is included in Rebecca Ann Parker’s *Blessing the World* as part of her reflections on “family values.” (Skinner House Books, 2006), p.113. The Leadership Retreat was led by Sue Ross, Brian Ross, and Kurt O’Brian with resources from Kurt and Brian’s organizational leadership trainings.