

“Tough Love”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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4th Sun. after Epiphany/
Annual Meeting

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 4:21-30

*And they rose up and put [Jesus] out of the city,
and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built,
that they might throw him down headlong.
But passing through the midst of them [Jesus] went away.*

Luke 4:29-30

Let us pray... O God,
Be patient with us when we are blinded by our convictions of what is right
at the expense of what is good.
Help us to see ourselves in the dignity and plight of others; Help us to see you in them;
and together, may we overcome the prejudices that keep us from living fulfilled lives.

Amen

Our Gospel lesson is a continuation from last week’s narrative,
in which we get to see how the people of the synagogue reacted
to Jesus’ impassioned reading of Isaiah 61:1-2.

Remember that Jesus was laying the groundwork
for his ministry and that this text served as a proclamation of his mission.
This wasn’t his first sermon, but it was his first time back to his hometown Nazareth
after his baptism and the ordeal of temptation in the desert.

People were responding to his message and he was growing in reputation
as a charismatic speaker.

That was evident in this synagogue’s focused and silent attention to Jesus
as he was reading a text they all would certainly have been familiar with.
Then as Jesus begins to preach – by telling them Isaiah’s words were coming true,
the people regain their composure, and they are gushing with compliments.

But then, someone says,
“Hey! Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”
We can only imagine from the words of the text,
but it seems like Jesus got angry and deliberately insulted these people.
Yet why?

Perhaps he took that comment as an insinuation about his birth –
The Gospels suggest he may have been born early,
even before his parents were legally married.
What if Jesus grew up with the stigma of being illegitimate?
That would certainly place him among those who are usually
the most powerless and disrespected in human society.

Willard, p.2

“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” So, where’s Joseph?

Joseph is often portrayed in classic paintings and stained glass windows as an older man, older than Mary, which suggests he passed on by the time Jesus was a young adult.

However, what if Joseph couldn’t handle the social rejection of small town gossip and died after years of stress?

Or what if he just abandoned his family for the same reason?

Isn’t that what often happens in life, even now?

What if Jesus simply resented being labeled as ‘Joseph’s son’ or the ‘carpenter’s son’ – as if to say,

“So, who do you think you are, sounding so smart?

You are nothing but a carpenter’s son.”

An UCC pastor from India once told me the expectations of a traditional society with strongly defined social classes or ‘castes’,

puts a lot of pressure on young people to follow their parents’ role.

So, a carpenter would be expected to follow in the family business.

How would you feel and how have any of us felt when other people tried to limit us to their expectations?

What follows is a systematic accusation of his community, confronting them with their parochial prejudices.

Jesus even demonstrates inclusive language or ‘political correctness’ in the process as an indictment of their narrow-mindedness.

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb: ‘Physician, heal thyself...’

Don’t you suppose that Jesus was referring to his own woundedness?

“And you will say, what we heard you did in Capernaum, do here for your own people.”

That’s a familiar attitude these days when we hear someone say,

“Shouldn’t we be helping our own poor people before we help ‘illegal aliens’.

“There were many widows in Israel...

but [Elijah] was sent to none of them – except a woman who was widowed.

Instead of saying ‘widow’ again, Jesus says ‘a woman who was widowed’, reminding everyone of her personhood –

which is the goal of ‘politically correct’ inclusive language

“There were many lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha the prophet, but none of them were healed except Naaman of Syria.”

Those were fighting words right there...

Willard, p.3

The Syro-Phoenicians were the heirs of the Greek conquerors who implemented ethnic cleansing against the Jews and desecrated Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem before they were defeated by the Maccabees.

Confronted with their principal prejudices, the Nazarenes were furious and they tried to kill Jesus by tossing him off a cliff. This challenge to *prejudice* is not an isolated incident in Jesus' ministry – but a recurring theme.

His initial ministry is in the region of northern Israel of Galilee and Samaria where he demonstrates his tolerance while maintaining his position as an observant, believing Jew.

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, as well as his kindness to a Roman officer desperate to get help for his servant, and his healing mercy for the 10 lepers, are examples of his willingness and commitment to cross different kinds of cultural chasms between people.

Jesus himself may not have been immune to prejudice.

One interpretation of his encounter with a Syro-Phoenician woman who came to him to help her daughter, is that he despised her just like his fellow Galilean Jews for the bitter history between Jew and Greek. But when this woman holds up a mirror to his prejudice – taking him to task for his condescending language of giving 'the children's bread' to 'the dogs'; Jesus acknowledges her righteous indignation and he does the right thing by healing her child. If Jesus himself could have been prejudiced, he also showed how to overcome such prejudice.

Aren't we all susceptible?

I know I personally have been poisoned by the lies and imagery of prejudice, and I have to see beyond what I look at, and listen past the things that I hear – for what God would have me learn about being human.

Here is a model portraying the mechanism of prejudice – and its dynamic alternative as an antidote...

Willard, p.4

[First slide]

I'll begin with a mathematical concept – a *parabola*.

A parabola has a common origin with two trajectories – or paths,
extending into infinity.

At every point along one path, there is an equal and opposite point on the other.

So the word “parabola” means “comparable paths”.

[Next slide]

The word “parable” is derived from “parabola” and means basically the same thing –
except in terms of stories.

As the events of a story unfold, we relate them to events in our lives
creating empathy for the characters.

In this way we can hear about a rickshaw driver in Calcutta and relate
even though the specific details were previously unknown to us.

So, parables are “parabol-ical”. The opposite of this is what is “diabolical”.

[Next slide]

“Diabolical” literally means “cutting through the paths” or “dividing the paths”.

Nothing can happen in between. Nothing can grow there.

[Next slide]

The result is a model for “prejudice” – and “extremism”,
where neither one approach or another approach is accepted,
but rather ‘It's my way or the highway’...

Let's go back to the “parabola” and consider what can be done.

[Next slide]

The trick is to see you [“U”] in someone else – to see yourself in someone else's
predicament, their joys as well as their concerns.

[Next slide]

Then we can see that something can happen between us – like a cup to be filled,
because when you get to know someone, it makes a difference.

[Next slide]

A cup that can be filled can also be shared like a cup of cool water on a thirsty day.

[Next slide]

Together, we create community which is like turning water into wine.

Willard, p.5

An example of this is on our bulletin cover featuring a policeman who responded to a call about noisy youth playing in the street of a Gainesville neighborhood. Now, I don't fault the fearful neighbors any more than the boisterous youth, but I praise Officer Bobby White – who is white, for stepping across the abyss to play basketball with those young people – who are black and white, and help calm the fears between white and black people everywhere. I also praise Shaquille O'Neal – a retired African -American basketball player, for showing up to back up Officer White and play ball with those kids, too. Together, may what they did help speed the day in this society when we see beyond our prejudices to see ourselves in each other as un-hyphenated "Americans".

Let us also pray that examples like this shine forth to be followed by people who struggle throughout our world against prejudice. May the vision of God's Kingdom prevail that ultimately we are neither Jew nor Greek, Christian nor Muslim, young nor old, black nor white, ex-felon nor free, gay nor straight, male nor female, but just human. For God came to us through Christ the Liberator as a dark-skinned, Middle Eastern Jew to free us from the terrible mechanisms of stereotype, scapegoat, and sacrifice and lead us into the abundant life everlasting of Beloved Community on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Amen

*Our scripture lesson today from Jeremiah 1:4-10 reminds us
of how God doesn't always call the qualified,
but does qualify the called...*

[4] The Lord's word came to me:

[5] "Before I created you in the womb I knew you;
before you were born I set you apart;
I made you a prophet to the nations."

[6] "Ah, Lord God," I said,

"I don't know how to speak because I'm only a child."

[7] The Lord responded,

"Don't say, 'I'm only a child.' Where I send you, you must go;
what I tell you, you must say.

[8] Don't be afraid of them, because I'm with you to rescue you,"
declares the Lord.

[9] Then the Lord stretched out his hand, touched my mouth, and said to me,
"I'm putting my words in your mouth.

[10] This very day I appoint you over nations and empires,
to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant."

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ And [Jesus] began to say to them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

²² And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said,

“Is not this Joseph’s son?”

²³ And he said to them,

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb,

‘Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Caper’na-um, do here also in your own country.’”

²⁴ And he said,

“Truly, I say to you,

no prophet is acceptable in his own country.

²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Eli’jah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months,

when there came a great famine over all the land;

²⁶ and Eli’jah was sent to none of them

but only to Zar’ephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.

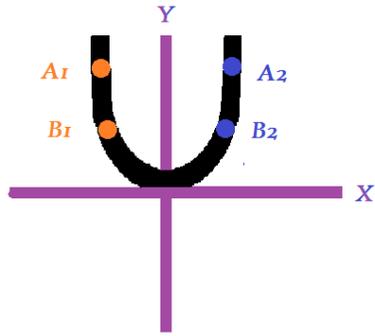
²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Eli’sha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Na’aman the Syrian.”

²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

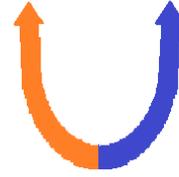
²⁹ And they rose up and put him out of the city,

and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong.

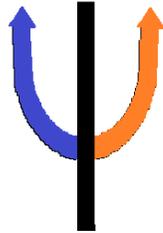
³⁰ But passing through the midst of them he went away.



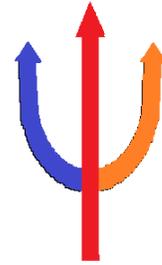
PARABOLA - "Comparable Paths"



PARABLE - "Comparable Paths"
or "Para-bolical"



DIABOLICAL - "Dividing The Paths"



PREJUDICE - "My Way
or The Highway"



Back to the parabola
and "comparable paths"...



A Cup that can be filled...



A Cup that can be shared...



COMMUNION - "Beloved Community"