

You Don't Have to Be That Way

January 30, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Luke 4: 21-30

Today, we continue our journey through Luke's gospel, picking it up in chapter 4. Still filled with the power of Spirit from his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus is here just beginning his public ministry and has returned to Nazareth where he was raised. The setting is his hometown synagogue. In the verses just prior, he's shared a reading from the Isaiah scroll about how the Messiah would be anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to prisoners, sight to the blind, and liberation to all. Now starting at vs 21:

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 4:22 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?" 4:23 He 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.'" 4:24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 4:25 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; 4:26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 4:27 "There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 4:28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 4:29 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. 4:30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Will you pray with me, please? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be always acceptable in your sight O God our strength and our redeemer.

With the winter wonderland outside this morning and that bright, blessed quiet that has descended across the region, one might have hoped for a different scripture this morning. Maybe a psalm about creation's majesty to match the mood or a message of peace and calm after the storm. Instead, we have this passage that starts out all nice, pretty, and proud, and then one thing is said after another. The tension rises. There's a snowball effect of reactions, call it a bomb cyclone of stress and systems colliding! The next thing you know, the crowds are in a fury and Jesus is moving on. As 10-year-old Danyson, who is here today would say, repeatedly, when he was very small, and before he even knew what it meant: "What the heck?" What the heck is going on here?!

Part of it depends on the tone of how we read Luke's account. You see, I'd love to hear this one told by those who were there as if over a few drinks at a local bar in Nazareth. One lifelong Nazarene says to another: "Do you remember when Joseph's kid preached his first sermon at the shul up the street? A few of us were there. Let me tell ya... it got a little ugly!" Or so we gather from Luke, even though it's not entirely clear why.

Again, the tone is key here, especially verse 22 which I intentionally asked Beth to offer before in a so-called "plain reading" of the text. Is this not Joseph's son? [said flatly]. But are they really beaming

brightly and joyfully: “*Is not this Joseph’s son?*” Maybe they were genuinely proud or at least enjoying the pride of association. I imagine his uncles and aunties gathered around, elbowing each other: “Told ya it takes a village!...*our* village!” The text itself says: ‘All spoke well of him and they were amazed at his gracious words’ so it’s a fair take despite what follows! *But...* heard a different way, we can easily imagine a far more cynical and condescending response. As in: “Hey, wait a minute: ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’ Gracious words, sure, but, who does he think he is coming in here, to our house of worship, reading from Isaiah, acting like he’s the Messiah!” Jesus of Nazareth? Ok! Jesus the Christ? No way?

Either way, Jesus isn’t having it! In fact, in response, he goes on the offensive. He starts putting words in their mouth! “Doubtless...” Doubtless? Really, Jesus? ‘Doubtless,’ he says, ‘you’ll say doctor cure thyself, and then you’ll start asking me to do things for you!’ Even his tone here seems questionable, doesn’t it? It’s certainly direct if not downright confrontational. Whatever the background or surrounding circumstances, Jesus appears to be provoking them! He seems to have an intuitive sense, like it or not, that he can’t use his prophetic or healing powers with those to whom he was closest, not his family, not his pals from way back, at least not directly or not at first! He quotes examples from scriptures of other prophets who did not heal or serve their own! Maybe he was just telling him that the transformation and liberation God was bringing through him was *not* going to start with them, or maybe that he need to go and serve the least of these in order to fulfill his purpose. Well, whatever the tone, whatever the reason for all the snowballing tension, his response infuriates the local crowd. Clearly, he hit a nerve! There’s much more we could say about this passage but that’s enough unpacking for today.

The takeaway, if you ask me, is an image of Jesus, prodding and provoking them until they understand something new about who he was, or who they were or how it all fit in God’s redemptive plan. It’s like a holy nudge, a prophetic poke, a divine kick in the pants, where the initial reaction is shock and anger! I’ve been sitting with this for a bit wondering about how it applies to me and us. It’s relatively easy to imagine Jesus being provocative with others, poking and pressing them to reveal some deeper truths that they may be in denial about! What we wouldn’t give him to watch him spar and jab with those on the other side of whatever contemporary debates! It’s harder, way harder, to imagine being on the receiving end ourselves. I mean imagine him saying something to us strong enough to get our blood boiling whether out of our own knee-jerk defensiveness or because deep down we know he’s right!

Bear with me. This won’t hurt too much, I promise. Close your eyes and imagine him sitting next to you! When we’ve done this kind of thing before, the invitation is usually to take comfort from this contemplative proximity, to lean into his loving presence, his solace, his mercy, companionship, or peace. It’s a “peace the world cannot give.” Or maybe you’ve been invited before to imagine him surprising you and rather than asking you to step up and do something, he says, simply, thank you! Or he reminds you that you’re beloved, no matter what! The good news is that you can access that Jesus anytime and every time you reach out and connect with him in meditation, in your heart. But today, given our scripture, let’s imagine we’re meeting him when he’s in a particularly honest and challenging mood. Maybe he’s had a tough day already, but now he’s looking at you, seeing you, loving you, and from that love, he says...

You know, you don’t really have to be that way that you sometimes are!

Oof! Can you feel yourself constrict a bit? What do you mean, Jesus? What way?! Imagine again him saying to you:

You don't have to be that way.

Still asking: "what way?" Here's a starter list for where he might go next. See if any of these land!

You don't have to be so opinionated...

You don't have to be so worried about appearances...

You don't have to show everyone how smart you are...

You don't have to be such a martyr, or a pushover, or a perfectionist...

You don't have to be so complacent or careful or cool...

Or maybe he's saying you don't have to be so curmudgeonly, or so domineering, so sensitive, or so reactive...

Maybe it's you don't have to be so loud, or so quiet...

or so needy of love, or solicitous of recognition...

You don't have to be so exacting, or demanding or doubtful...

You don't have to be so emotional or so intellectual...

Are any of these hitting home? How about this one:

You don't have to be so much like your mother, or your father!

Maybe he tells you don't have to be so caring or so justice-oriented all the time...

Maybe it's you don't have to be such an arm-chair liberal...

Or such a knee-jerk conservative...

You don't have to be so privileged or entitled...

Maybe he just confronts you and says, 'you know it's not all about you or your ideas, no matter how good they are!'

See, this isn't your family member or spouse telling you. If it was, some of these lines would drive us through the roof! And please don't try this exercise out on others. The idea is to try to hear one or two of these lines coming from Jesus, to you! What might he say to you right now that could poke or provoke you in a way that might be very hard to hear at first but that could if we let it lead us to a new place, or to a wider perspective, to a deeper sense of our place in God's world!

Two years into the pandemic, I wonder too if there's a similar challenge that we all need to hear, as a church and as a people. Yes, chicken soup, comfort, and rest for our weary souls, by all means, especially now. We know. We get it. But maybe we could also use something a little stronger, a little divine roughage if you will, a collective and radical stimulus reminder that you don't have to be so fearful! You don't have to be so anxious! You don't have to be so despairing! For Jesus says, 'I am here with you through the end of the age! You don't have to be so cynical or disbelieving!' Jesus says: 'God and I are always, always doing new things! Be trusting! Be believing! Be hopeful! Be joyful! Be brave! Be kind!'

Depending on the source, these lines may seem like platitudes that could drive us crazy. Maybe they'd make us want to shake Jesus and show him how bad it really is! Don't you see how our democracy is burning, man, how our planet is groaning! Now I can't say for sure, I have no idea really, but my guess

is he'd circle back to the top of our passage: "What did I just say: 'Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!' As in...

Today, somewhere, good news and food and shelter is reaching the poor! Even in this very building!

Today, somewhere, a prisoner is being released and reunited with his family!

Today, someone who could not see before has been granted new vision!

Today, God's beauty abounds in *2 feet* of fluffy white snowy delight right outside your window!

Today, God's grace is unfolding around us!

Today, and every day, God is good!

So today, while you are digging out if you haven't already, please take a moment and try to dig into this question: How is Jesus poking or prodding you? Dig in until he hits a nerve and that, that just may be what clears the path to deeper vision, deeper hope, deeper joy, and ever wider liberation!

Even before we head outside which I hope you all will do, we are about to have our Annual meeting, right after the service. We are about to manifest the commitments of this 386 covenantal community, which by God's grace has stayed together through any number of tensions, stresses, snowball effects! Like the cockerel on our steeple, we are well-weathered, and yet I'm excited to dig into our full agenda with all of you. If you feel poked or prodded at any point, notice your reactions and response. Notice your fears or frustrations, your gratitude or your joy coming through! And together, with Christ, may we yet clear a path and let God's holy and prophetic word of love, healing, and justice be fulfilled in our hearing, today! Amen!