

THE FOURTH  
SUNDAY  
AFTER THE  
EPIPHANY

The Rev.  
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Luke 4:21-30 4 Epiphany C 2013  
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

### Cliff Diving

How mad do you have to be to want to throw Jesus off a cliff? Why is it so hard to hear that God's love is more expansive than our own and extends to those that we often disregard or dismiss? One of the hardest truths that confront us is that in God's world everybody counts or nobody counts.

This is a bitter pill to swallow in a world that loves stratification and categorization. How often over time have we chased Jesus out of Church because of our need to claim God's promises only for a chosen few?

Today we follow on last week and hear the rest of Jesus' experience as he makes his preaching debut in his hometown synagogue. He is a faithful Jew and he is at worship. As is the tradition, any male in the gathering can read and comment on the Scriptures. He reads this exceptional passage from Isaiah,

*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 the Lord's favor."*

Jesus' initial comment that, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" did not immediately provoke rejection and wrath. In fact we hear the hometown crowd remark that they are amazed at Jesus' gracious words and initially they are actually proud of his homegrown status. So how did things turn so ugly so quickly?

Initially the crowd was quite impressed with Jesus—even pleased, but things went wrong very quickly. People who moments before gazed at him raptly were now consumed with rage.

Suddenly 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. What had Jesus proclaimed that had challenged them to such an extent that they were willing to kill him?

Was it that Joseph's son was committing blasphemy by claiming to be the one anointed by the Spirit of God [that he was claiming to be the Messiah]? That gets him in trouble in many places, but today that wasn't quite it. It appears to be the stories he told--the story of the widow in Sidon and the story of the leper in Syria."<sup>1</sup>

In both of these stories we Jesus reminds them that God's mercy and salvation is not limited to a chosen few. These stories from the Hebrew Scriptures are about God's mercy to Gentiles even while the people of Israel struggled—one was an outcast of society and the other an enemy soldier who fought against the people of Israel.

That the people of Israel are particularly beloved of God is not in question. What seems hard for those gathered in Nazareth to grasp is the notion that God's love encompasses even those considered unclean or our enemy. They do not want to hear this from anyone—especially Joseph's boy.

What happens to Jesus in his hometown happens in many, many churches today. The Word of God is constantly calling us into transformation; transformation that demands that we change our own perceptions of who is in and who is out.

When we allow the word of God to deeply penetrate our hearts and minds we cannot help but to find our worldview under stress and so we find ourselves in conflict.

Allowing God to heal us personally or corporately from long held prejudices or enmities is never easy and in fact it can actually be quite costly—so we resist it with all of our might.<sup>2</sup>

If we have found some sort of twisted comfort in vilifying someone who has hurt us, it can actually feel intensely painful to let go of old feelings of resentment.

Our transformation from being someone who is armored in indignation and wrath to being someone who is pierced with the beauty of God's forgiveness can leave us feeling very naked and vulnerable in a world that is not always kind. This kind of transformation is scary and by and large we seem to try to avoid it!

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<sup>1</sup> *Sermon Mall*, Barbara K. Lundblad ([www.sermonmall.com](http://www.sermonmall.com)), January 2007).

<sup>2</sup> From Personal Notes, Fred Craddock at Cathedral College, (Washington, D.C., February 2006)

If we are a community or a nation that is stressed by a poor economy, or a shortage of resources, it is far easier to create an enemy within or without who is responsible for all of our troubles than to recognize our own contribution to the problems at hand.

When we hear Jesus tell us to pray for our enemies, and suddenly the light of God's truth shatters our certainty that we are the only ones at the center of God's universe, we are momentarily stunned and want to run for cover.

It is far easier to think that our enemies are God's enemies than to contemplate that God loves terrorists' say, as much as God loves us.

God is as equally dismayed by terrorist's violence as God is by our blindness, but we are stunned to realize God's capacity for love is far greater than our own and greater than we can sometime accept.

If we open ourselves up to experience the pain that God feels for a world at war or in famine or locked in some other form of oppression and violence, we are compelled to let go of long held assumptions and feel the pain of those we deem "other". This kind of conversion takes courage and is not for the squeamish.

God's love for all, even for those we do not understand or comprehend, does challenge us. Generation after generation God challenges us as individuals, as communities and as nations and most certainly the Word of God challenges us as a Church.

Jesus stands in the midst of our modern holy places be they Christian, Jewish or Muslim and challenges us to let go of old assumptions and at long last accept the exquisite wideness of God's mercy. He challenges us to learn to see one another as equally beloved of God and to respond to one another with the merciful heart of God.

God creates with such a richness of diversity and today we are reminded that God intends this as a blessing not a threat. As the world and the Church continue to change we must resist with all our might looking back to the "good old days" when we weren't so confused by the threat of openness, radical welcome, and transformation.

This kind of thinking only creates enemies out of newfound brothers and sisters and often finds us chasing Jesus to the edge of town to throw him off a cliff because we just can't stand to hear the hard truth he tells us...

Whenever we perceive that God's love calls us to expand we seem to want to contract. When former slaves were coming to the table as equals many fought to keep them in the balcony. When women wanted to come to the table as equals many wanted to keep us in the kitchen. In recent years as the LGBT community has fought to be fully included many have tried to keep them locked in the closet in fear of being who they truly are.

The good old days are a myth; a figment of our imagination; God has *always* called God's people to expand to include others from Syrian women to eunuchs, to enemy soldiers, tax collectors and prostitutes. To join those who throughout time cling to a narrative that we were better off way back then is just another way to avoid the hard work of transformation.

Our call is to embrace the present with all our might and join with Jesus in his crazy quest to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of God's love and favor for all.

We will know when we are getting this right because there will be many who want to throw us off a cliff too. The only question for us is do we dare to follow Jesus so closely...? Do—we—dare? Amen

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