

“God’s Blessing Is for All”

Luke 4: 21-30

Sunday, January 31, 2016

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Last week we talked about short sermons. My sermon title for this week really is the heart of my sermon. So keep it in mind as I explore the gospel reading and my understanding of it. You are welcome to draw your own conclusions.

For the past two months our Needham Clergy Association has engaged in a rather emotional discussion. At our December meeting one of our newer members of the group suggested that we do something about rising Islamophobia which has gained great ground ever since 9/11 but has found its true support lately due to the rise of ISIS and its pursuit of terror, the Paris attacks, and a political rhetoric that wants us to believe that every Muslim living is out there to kill any non-Muslim.

So, this NCA member suggested that we, as a group, write a statement in support, respect and love of our Muslim neighbors, and place it in the newspaper. We know all too well how damaging silence in the face of a crisis can be, and so we all felt strongly that we should say something. A short statement was written up and sent around mid-December for approval. Most members agreed sending this statement to the Needham Times except for another member of our group saying, that “he cannot support a statement like this because we did not really had a good conversation about the issue.” He was right. So we put the brakes on the publication, and dedicated our January meeting for discussion of the issue. You will be able to read the result in this week’s edition of the Needham Times. My name is among the signers. I want you to know that I signed my name as a member of the Needham Clergy Association. My signature does not speak for each of you and this church but I hope and trust that you find yourself in support of this statement.

Islamophobia is not new to the world but right now it is being used to fear/frighten us to favor one candidate over others in the race for the White House because we are being told that all Muslims

should be feared. All of them are potential terrorists, and that all the problems in this country are to blame on Muslims. (I am paraphrasing here one particular candidate.) This is dangerous rhetoric, and if we - those with a mind to think and a heart to act - remain silent, we are basically supporting and sanctifying these hateful attacks.

Any kind of hateful rhetoric wherever it is shared has the purpose of building up walls to separate us from others; us being good, them being bad. The Needham Clergy Association's statement is meant to oppose this wall that is going up steadily.

The great walls in history were meant to serve one purpose only: to keep hostile people out. Hadrian's Wall or the Great Wall of China were built to keep out and control hostile tribes and people. The Berlin Wall, in addition to keeping the bad guys out, was built to keep the people in so they would not flee. Physical walls are meant to keep us safe, but they also have the ability to create not just a physical separation but a mental or spiritual separation as well.

This should not surprise you when I tell you that Jesus was someone who was totally against putting up walls - physical and spiritual ones alike. As a good Jew he was surrounded by cultural and religious walls - what to eat, when to work, when not to work, who to honor, who he could talk to and associate with, who was acceptable and who was not. It was his opposition to his cultural and religious 'walls' that got him almost thrown off the cliff.

Today's scripture is part two of his visit to and preaching in Nazareth. The scene goes from wonderful to as bad as it gets.

Jesus had just read the scripture from Isaiah, news of good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed. And then he says that, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" The hometown audience finds itself highly pleased: at the bottom of a long social ladder that works its way up from landlords to the local king to the emperor himself, they long for Israel's liberation. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

It looks like things are going well, but Jesus can't help being Jesus. He picks a fight. He, not they, brings up the tendency for hometowns to reject their prophets. And to get them really going, Jesus reminds his hometown audience of God's tendency to transgress boundaries. They might think that this good news is just for them, that God's blessings are just for them, but Jesus says, "Not so fast!" He reminds them of stories of the past, stories that say God's blessing goes beyond our own created boundaries.

He reminds them that in Elijah's day, even though Israel had lots of widows that needed help, God sent the prophet to a Sidonian woman instead. Likewise, there was no shortage of lepers when Elisha was alive, but God cleansed only Na'aman the Syrian.

What is so radical about these people? They were foreigners, and in case of the leper, unclean at that. The hometown crowd of Nazareth could not even imagine a God so generous. And because of their own spiritual walls, they rose up in anger, and intended to throw Jesus off a cliff. Luke's explanation for Jesus' escape comes up short in details. But he gets away before they could harm him.

Jesus' message is shocking not just because he extends the boundaries to include outsiders. His message shocks because it doesn't recognize boundaries at all. Jesus says that when you live into your identity as one of God's beloved children there's no more need for walls to keep the enemies out because *there are no more enemies*. Walls – and with them all of the ways we define, describe, and bracket out the "other" – are oppositional to God's kingdom purposes.

This is a message that is hard to hear, and even harder to live. It might even feel impossible to do. After all, we live in a fearful and dangerous world where walls and locks and laws seem absolutely necessary to keep us safe and bring a smidgeon of peace and order to the world. Maybe these are indeed times when "good walls make good neighbors."

Perhaps. But perhaps we also fall prey too easily to a deep-seated insecurity that marks the human race and prompts us to overestimate risk, to fear those we don't know instead of welcoming them, and to resort to violence far too quickly when we feel at risk.

And even if there are times or circumstances when we'd agree that good walls serve the purpose of making and keeping good neighbors, at least we should test that proposition before enforcing it.

But here's the thing: the hard thing about the God we know in Jesus is that whenever you and I draw a line between who's in and who's out, we will find Jesus on the other side.

If there is one lesson that sums up the Jesus we discover in Luke's account, it's this: *God came to redeem everyone*. When we just simply focus on that, it is good news all around. It gets harder when we focus on "everyone," and call to mind those we believe have done us wrong...or who frighten us...or who are different...or who seem unnatural... that same line is terrifying.

In being drawn back into God's love we lose all claims, you see, to why we deserve something (and presumably others do not), as we recognize that deserving - like walls - simply has no place in the kingdom of God.

We live in a walls-obsessed age, yet our call as Christians is to put a notion into the hearts and imaginations of our people, to question whether we need them, whether God wants them, whether we will find our ultimate security in building higher walls or by falling freely into the hands of a merciful and loving God who, time and time again, showed that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

I am glad we are not living close to any cliffs. It is not an easy message to bring, and I assume not an easy message to hear, nor to live by. But the faithful path to walk is to remind ourselves that God's blessing, God's love and grace is meant for everyone.

Amen.

Sources:

Robert Frost, *Mending Walls*

www.textweek.com, commentary on Luke, in particular from *Working Preacher*

