



“A Word to the Morally Entitled”

Luke 4:21-30

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January 31, 2010

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The September 8, 1975, issue of *Time* magazine praised Louisville, Kentucky’s careful plan to obey the court order to desegregate Jefferson County schools. The progressive Mayor of Louisville, Harvey Sloane, along with the Jefferson County School Board, were congratulated on what appeared to be an excellent plan.

One week later, that plan and the peace were shattered by riots in blue collar southwestern Jefferson County. On Friday night a mob of some 10,000 people blocked traffic, vandalized cars and frightened the entire region. Monday morning, school buses with children were pelted with rocks as they passed. Signs with liberal use of the N word accompanied the rocks, spit and epithets hurled at the black children inside. Other signs called the police “pigs” and local government “communists.”

A city proud of its moderation as a border city between the north and the south was deeply embarrassed. A decade earlier, the leading white Baptist minister, John Claypool, joined his old friend Martin Luther King Jr. to desegregate a lunch counter downtown. Most people seemed grateful. The faculty of influential Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville was deeply committed to desegregation and racial justice locally and in the region.

The riots were a stunning and surprising reversal of momentum. Even worse riots marked court-ordered desegregation up north in proudly liberal Boston, Massachusetts. It was a sobering national spectacle.

That Sunday in September, thirty-five miles north of Louisville, in Crothersville, Indiana, a small, rural church met for worship. I was the pastor. Our media, television and newspaper came from Louisville, and the tragic news of the riots was fresh in all our minds.

It seemed I needed to speak a word. I choose a text that seemed pertinent -- Jesus’ famous beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” It was no easy text or sermon. Racial animosity ran deep in the community, and the N word was applied to any dark skinned person, including the Korean children adopted by our neighbors. I had to walk on the edge of a deep and dangerous chasm. I had to speak the truth, and I had to live in the neighborhood.

The point of the sermon was, I thought, obvious and relevant. **IF** Jesus is right and we are called to make peace, not just keep the peace, and **IF** we lived in Louisville among people who hated their neighbors, threw stones at them, and called them names, **THEN** how would we make peace? How would we love our neighbors, black and white?

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As I paused to let the question take root, I noticed that Harold Bolton's face was red with anger. Harold was a deacon in the church well known for his Irish temper. He could not hold back his anger. He shouted out, "What I want to know is why you are talking this here."

I answered calmly – by an extraordinary grace of God given at the moment – calm prevailed and no one got up and walked out in protest.

I recalled advice my seminary's teacher of preaching gave us. "Don't worry," he said, "if people get up and walk out of your sermons. Do worry, however, if large groups get up and walk out."

Looking back, I suspect that sermon hindered my ability to influence that congregation and the community. I'd been there less than a year and was only beginning to learn what my friend, the local Superintendent of Schools, was teaching me. I was an outsider and in Southern Indiana, outsiders are tolerated at best. It is a closed and rather negative culture that stands in judgment of all other groups. School superintendents, teachers, and pastors are outsiders and usually don't last long. I was learning that if public figures challenge the prevailing culture's point of view, there's a price to pay.

That sermon received mixed reviews, as did my five years in that congregation. Some folks loved me; other resented me. All of them knew they were permanent, and I was temporary. They didn't need to change!

The Gospel Lesson is a story of mixed reviews and a closed culture. It is a story repeated in every time and place and, therefore, has transforming potential for us here and now.

Jesus was preaching his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. His eloquent words stunned his neighbors and friends. With passion to match his eloquence, he declared that God's plan for shalom to cover the earth was underway. That requires, he said, an urgency to act for God's mission on earth. Now, today, he said, do something for God. "He's good," they thought.

Then comes a sudden turn in the mood of the story. Suspicion and accusation replace adulation. On second thought, some thought, "Who does he think he is to speak for God? It's Joseph, the carpenter's son, for goodness' sake. We remember him. We know his family." Memories, old stereotypes, and past categories rose up to challenge Jesus and his message.

It happens all the time. Years ago, I preached in the church in which I grew up. My father served that congregation for 35 years and as long as I live, I will be his son in that church. My brothers and I have been "the boys" for fifty years. And I'm the son who followed in dad's footsteps. But they measure me by memories and categories decades old.

I did my best and after the sermon I received good reports. They were and are proud of me. It's not difficult to be "Nile's boy" when I'm home.

The last person to speak to me was a man I knew in college. He said some nice things and concluded by saying, "I sure hope you were sincere."

I was shocked by that accusation clothed in a declarative sentence. And I was offended. I wanted to retaliate, but held my tongue. He didn't really know me back in school, and he certainly didn't know me fifteen years later. His image was way out of date.

On the other hand, he had a point. He did know me in college, and while I don't know what he remembered, I left plenty of material for suspicion.

But then, I remembered him too. He was an obnoxious, judgmental know-it-all! And, apparently, he hadn't changed!!

Neither of us could see each other through the haze of memories, pigeonholes, and judgments already made. And each of us was sure we occupied the moral high ground. And we were sure we had the right to judge the other – a form of spiritual entitlement.

Back in Nazareth, old perceptions distorted present experiences. Jesus responded. He quoted an old proverb, “Physician, heal yourself” and a new one, “A prophet has no honor in his own home town.”

His suspicious neighbors were saying, “Show us your stuff, young man. We heard you were a big shot over in Capernaum. Let’s see how it works here!”

Another gospel writer adds that Jesus’ ministry was ineffective in Nazareth. They were unable to get past old stereotypes and prejudices to see the new thing breaking into human history all around them.

Jesus then challenged their provincial vision of the world – and the grace of God. He reminded them that in their own Bibles, the prophet Elijah made sure a gentile woman had food to eat during a famine. Jews went hungry, and a pagan gentile ate. And he reminded them that God healed one of their sworn enemies, Naaman, of leprosy, while many Jews were not healed. Who were they to judge another on the basis of limited information and a biased point of view?

God’s ways are much larger than any village, nation, culture, or faith system. And none of the former manage or limit God’s way with the world. Those who exclude others from God’s kingdom, in fact, exclude themselves. God’s kingdom has no boundaries.

By now the anger in the synagogue created a near riot. They promptly booted Jesus out of the synagogue and ran him out of town. He moved his mission to Capernaum where fewer boundaries distorted a hearing of the good news.

Exclusivism, the human tendency to form in groups and exclude others, works its mischief in a myriad of ways. Racism, nationalism, sexism, ethnic pride, partisan politics, academic pride – all divide, promote judgment, even make war.

Religious exclusivism is lethal to spiritual formation and becomes a counterproductive force in the Christian church. Ultimately, exclusive religion denies the character of God and makes God’s good news into bad news.

Exclusive tendencies in religion are easy to find. The most obvious are all the forms of fundamentalism. Fundamentalist religion by its very nature is exclusive. It divides the world and its own faith into good guys and bad guys, ins and outs. Exclusive forms of faith are judgmental, condemning and often cruel.

Fundamentalism is found in the right wing of the church and in the left wing too. Each creates an orthodoxy of doctrine, ethics, or ideology and excludes all who fail to pass the religious litmus test. “In groups” tend to disrespect anyone on the outside, dismiss any ideas other than their own without a hearing, and develop a condescending arrogance that stifles the grace of God. Exclusive religion includes a very real moral sense of entitlement. We have a right to our pride and are obliged to judge others.

What is easy to see in others is very difficult to see on ourselves or our group. All of us – and our groups, political, social, economic, etc. – tend to self-congratulation and an incapacity for self-criticism. We easily condemn a nationalism or ethnic pride that criticizes us, but have a hard time seeing how our nationalism can be destructive.

Harvey Cox, now retired from Harvard Divinity School, was a leading liberal theologian for decades. He and I became friends when I lived in Boston. He even had me lecture in several of his classes. He told me once that one of the debilitating problems of mainline, liberal Christianity in America is its incapacity for self-criticism. Denominational officials

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and church officers seem so committed to their “brand” of faith, they cannot see denominations and congregations dying in front of their eyes. Loyalty to the denomination easily becomes the gospel to which we are loyal, and our energy and efforts are so devoted to promoting the brand name that we become incapable of healthy change. Congregational Christians are no exception. Our own association continues to promote an old brand in public and in our literature, while half or more of our churches are dying.

I confess I too am guilty of spiritual pride. Back in Jackson County, Indiana, while I did adapt myself to the local culture and did my best to love the people, I also developed a sense of moral superiority. I still think my moral vision was less shaped by culture than theirs, but over time I came to despise the culture which I served. They knew it. I gave up on them, and it showed.

But God didn’t give up on them. The moral failure of that culture and mine broke God’s heart. Christ died for people I could barely stand to serve. I did not figure out how to love the kingdom of God and the people of God’s world creatively, authentically, and faithfully. And I knew better.

I suppose one of the profound questions raised by this story is how to find the capacity for healthy self-criticism. I also suppose that’s why God gave us each other. If we gather in Christ’s name and seek to know God’s will for our community and ourselves, the good news will finally win.

Amen

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