

Texts: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:14-30

I've read part of last week's Gospel lesson again today because our lectionary cuts it in two, and it is important to hear this entire story from beginning to end. We can relate, can't we, to the pride of someone from our own town who has made good, become successful. The young man or woman who grew up here, the kid you know who mowed the lawn, who baby sat for you – and then who went away to school and on to a successful career. Aren't you thinking of Danny Woodhead? Aren't you thinking of some other young person you know, maybe even your own son or daughter? Aren't you proud to think that they are successful and doing well?

Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling around Galilee and that word spread about his preaching. By all accounts he was good at it: "He was praised by everyone," says Luke. Maybe Jesus came back to town for his high school reunion and got invited back to the synagogue to preach. I imagine that expectations were high. I imagine that there was a crowd gathered that day in the synagogue. All of Jesus' childhood friends and neighbors had come to hear the kid they remembered from youth group, the kid they knew from the carpentry shop and the neighborhood well. They all came to hear what he had to say.

Well, what he had to say is not at all what they expected to hear. It wasn't about them. Jesus' reading from the prophet Isaiah is about consolation for the poor. It's about release for the captive, sight for the blind and liberation for those under the boot of oppression. It's about the year of the Lord's favor. That's a reference to the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 – a year when all debts are forgiven, when all land and property is returned to those from whom it was purchased. A year when land lies fallow and God provides the harvest.

But it is also important to consider what Jesus doesn't read from the scroll of Isaiah. Because Isaiah goes on to tell about the day when God will crush Israel's enemies and trample them underfoot. Jesus doesn't read that part. And when he says "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he is not talking about the expectation that the folks from Nazareth had for a new king to sit on the throne of David and overthrow the Romans. No, Jesus is not talking about God's special regard for the people of Israel, or for any particular people, past or present. Jesus is talking about God's love for *everyone*, and especially God's love for the poor and the oppressed and the captive and the blind, wherever they are found. That's not a message that always sits well with the hometown crowd. We tend to want to know about God's love for *us*. We want to claim God's special concern and blessing for *us*, good people that we are.

Jesus' message is not about Jews or Romans. It's not about whether you live in Nazareth or Jerusalem or Chadron or Cleveland. God loves every race, every nationality, every skin color and language. God's concern is not only for those who are comfortable and successful, for those whose kids have done well. God cares for those who struggle to feed their families. God cares for the cousin who got sent to jail and who can't quite seem to figure out how to get straight. God cares for political prisoners. God cares for those who suffer from disease and blindness. God cares for those on the outside.

No wonder the good people of Nazareth got upset. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they ask. Wait a minute, this kid grew up here. He should know better than to talk that way in this town. We are good people here.

Let's not forget that one big detail. Jesus is not the son of Joseph. Jesus is the son of God. And he does talk that way. He even gets a bit strident, a bit argumentative. What

has gotten into Jesus? He challenges the crowd with a couple of stories from Israel's past, stories of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. He reminds them of how Elijah stayed for several years with the widow of Zarephath – a widow living, not in Israel, but in the land of the Philistines, Israel's enemy. He reminds them of how Elisha ordered the leper Naaman to wash in the Jordan River in order to be cleansed of his leprosy. Naaman was not just any leper. He was the commander of the Syrian army. Syria, Israel's enemy, then and now. These stories were meant to remind Jesus' audience that God cares not just for the insiders, but also for the outsiders. Gentiles. People outside the borders of the land of Israel. People outside of the covenant. Enemies.

We're going to be reading from the Gospel of Luke for much of this year. Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, makes this his theme. God loves and is concerned for the outsiders, the downtrodden, the ones on the bottom of the heap, the poor, the diseased.

Has anything changed all that much? Jesus' message still riles people up. Because we, too, would like to draw a circle around ourselves and claim that whoever is inside the line is one of us and whoever is outside the line is one of "them." We, too, would like to close our eyes to the needs of those who are different from us. We, too, would like to build a really nice wall, toughen up security, do background checks and turn away whoever doesn't pass.

But when Jesus tells us the truth about God, Jesus is also telling us the truth about ourselves.

Because it's possible to own everything you can dream of, and still be poor. To try to fill your yearning with more and more possessions.

It's possible to have the means and the ability to do anything and go anywhere, to have social and economic power and still be captive. Captive to insecurity, to shame, to fear, to addiction.

It's possible to have to have 20-20 vision and still be blind to the needs of your neighbors.

It's possible to live as free people in the wealthiest nation in the world and still be oppressed. Oppressed by bigotry, by the need for control, by thinking that you have all the answers.

There is one last important detail from today's Gospel lesson and that is this: The enraged crowd drives their hometown boy Jesus out of town and up to the top of a hill so that they can throw him off a cliff. This time he gets away. But in just a few more weeks, we will hear the story of Jesus riding into another town to the shouts of praise and the waving of palm branches. That story also ends with Jesus being driven out of town to the top of a hill. That time he won't get away. He'll be nailed to a cross and left to die.

But that won't be the end of the story. The bonds of death can't hold him either. It is in Jesus' death and his resurrection that you are freed, released, healed. It is in your baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection that you are raised to new life in him.

The good news of Jesus Christ, the good news of today's Gospel story, is that we are all included. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus pushes through our walls of resistance and denial with the good news that in his death and resurrection, we, too, have been freed. You, too, have been reconciled. You, too, have been healed. God knows everything about you, all the ways that you resist his love, all the ways that you are captive and blind. And God loves you anyway. God loves you no matter what. God loves

you so much that God will go to any length to redeem you from all the pettiness and shame and fear that get in the way of a full and open relationship with Him.

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. We live in the never-ending reality that Jesus is for everyone. It is the promise of Epiphany – that our God is near. Our God is here. Wherever two or three are gathered, Christ is among us, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, jubilee to those who are crushed.

God's circle is always expanding to include whoever we would exclude. God's embrace is for everyone. And we are called to take that good news outside the walls of this church, outside the walls we build around ourselves. We are called to share that good news with everyone we meet – the poor and the well-off, the captive and the free, the blind and the sighted. God's grace and love and reconciliation and hope and peace are right here. Right now. For you. And for everyone.