

Sermon on Luke 4:21-30, 1 Corinthians 13:4-14:a, Jeremiah 1:4-10
Susan Verbrugge
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
January 31, 2010

Apparently, there was a weekend retreat somewhere in which the opening exercise called for each participant to tell a story about someone who had been Christ in that person's life. I'm sure you have probably had this question asked of you at sometime so I think you can imagine the stories that emerged. One woman talked of a friend who had remained with her through a terrible illness while others had faded into the woodwork. Another person talked about a neighbor who had become a father-figure for him as a young boy. Everyone settled in and felt good. They were all getting the warm fuzzies. It felt kind of like a congregation at a wedding when the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians is read. "Oh, isn't this so lovely. Love and Jesus are wonderful. Life is so good."

Then, a woman at the retreat stood up and said, "Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, 'Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, "The Company of Strangers", Cowley Publications, 1999, 42.)

So much for that warm, fuzzy feeling.

But doesn't this woman remind us of something really important? Jesus isn't just this innocuous, meek, young fellow who goes around patting us on the back and rescuing us from whatever we manage to get ourselves into. He is also the one who challenges us at our most veiled places and forces us to look in the mirror and acknowledge what we really see there.

That's the Jesus that the folks in his home town encounter on that particular day. He has come home after being baptized, spending forty days in the desert

being tempted, and working his way through Galilee and Capernaum, teaching, preaching, and healing. His relatives and friends receive him with open arms as he proclaims that he is there to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to recover the sight of the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. The crowd responds positively. “Sure, that’s great. Don’t we know this guy? Isn’t he the kid, Joseph’s son, the one who grew up just down the road?”

They were beginning to get the warm fuzzies. “Well, if he’s Joseph’s son, the one that we all helped raise, just think what he could do around here. All those things in Capernaum? He will do even more here because we know him. This is going to be quite a windfall for old Nazareth.”

But, instead of letting the nicey-nice go on, Jesus holds up a mirror for them. He reminds them of what their very own scriptures say about God. “Remember that famine in Israel a long time ago?” Jesus reminds them. “God didn’t send Elijah to all the Israelites then; instead God sent him to the one widow at Zaraphath, that woman you thought was on the wrong side of the tracks. And, remember when Elisha cleansed Naaman, that Syrian? He didn’t cleanse the other lepers who were from Israel. Remember, it’s not just about you and your community.”

And in having the mirror held up to their honest to God selves, they were enraged. How dare he show them who they really were? How dare he show how enclosed, selfish, and narrow-minded they were? How dare he show them that they had put God in a box, thinking they had it all figured out and could live their lives however they wanted to live?

I think we might be just like the folks in Nazareth, wanting to turn God into something meek and mild, something that fits right into our plans. After all, we do this with the passage from Jeremiah. We turn it into warm fuzzies. There was

Jeremiah, minding his own business, when God came to him and called him. God reached down and touched Jeremiah's mouth so that God could speak God's word through him. What a wonderful experience for the new prophet. God reached down and touched him, filling him with God's love and God's vision. We use it to inspire ourselves to speak God's word.

But, guess what? The word in Hebrew that describes God's touching Jeremiah's mouth is used other places in scripture to mean strike or harm. There is nothing gentle and nice about this. And this word from God that comes to Jeremiah puts his life in danger over and over again, until he is finally killed for it. There's nothing smooth and easy about this calling. Nor is there anything smooth and easy about our own calling in Jesus Christ if we are truly living it out.

I wonder just what Jesus might say if he wandered into our church this morning. We might think he would speak gentle words of love and belonging; after all, we, the church are his body here on earth. We are his community.

But, would he speak those words? Or would he use words of scripture to wrestle us out of our familiarity with who we think he is and force us to look at the life he really calls us to lead? Would he come up with scripture to remind us that his love is for all people, even our enemies or those who are strangers to us?

Our complacent familiarity with Jesus just will not do. This is not Jesus, meek and mild, we are talking about here. This is Jesus, bold and confrontational. This is Jesus, willing to confront us because he knows our very lives depend on hearing the truth, ugly as it may be. This is Jesus, the one who tells us the bitter truth even though it will eventually lead to his own horrific death. The Rev. Roy Harrisville, a pastor of a Lutheran church in Wisconsin, says, "The Good News [of Jesus Christ] can as easily become an indictment as it is a promise. It is an indictment against

those who presume to control it apart from its ultimate purpose and the witness of scripture” (www.workingpreacher.org, Lectionary Commentary for January 31, 2010).

This isn't a new word that Jesus speaks to the Israelites. And it isn't a new word spoken to us. But, it's one we often don't want to hear. God's love is for all of us, not just for those of us who we think are "in". In fact, many times, God's love is for the very one's that we try hard to keep out. Who might that be for us? Could it be the Republican or the Democrat? The homosexual or the transgender? The African American or the Asian? The poor or the homeless? The crabby next door neighbor or the man who walks into our sanctuary and doesn't seem to quite fit in? Who might it be that we think doesn't merit God's love or ours? And what might we see if Jesus wiped the warm fuzzy off the mirror he holds up for us to look into?

The truth of God's love that we hear in 1st Corinthians and the truth of the God's call that we hear in Jeremiah comes to us in Jesus Christ. And the truth of it is that it takes all of us, friend and stranger, ally and enemy, to try to grasp the truth. It takes all of us to point out the truth in Jesus Christ. And sometimes, the truth hurts, and we might even want to kill because of what we hear said to us in truth. But, we might want to be careful. Jesus' own people tried to kill him, more than one time, and in this case, he just walked right through them. If we won't listen, he just might walk right through our community and go on his way.