

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 27, 2019

Divine Grace and Human Boundaries

Luke 4:14-30

So far Jesus' preaching and teaching tour had been getting rave reviews. People in villages throughout Galilee were praising his ministry. And now, the sign at the synagogue in Nazareth proudly announced: THIS WEEK'S GUEST SPEAKER: JESUS. The congregation's Facebook page was been buzzing with anticipation. Here were some of the postings: "Can't wait to hear what Jesus has to say at our service." "Remember, he's one of our own, a real hometown boy." "I was one of his teachers in the youth group." "I'm sure Joseph and Mary are proud of him." "Don't forget the potluck after worship."

Unfortunately, the congregation never made it to the lunch portion of the gathering. During the sermon, things got a little messy, to put it mildly. Up until then, things looked promising. Jesus did well with his Scripture reading, an amalgam of passages from the prophet Isaiah. Then he transitioned effectively into the interpretation of the day's texts, using an opening line that was absolutely electric. "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). Clearly, Jesus wasn't there just to give some helpful advice or a bit of encouragement for facing life's hard times. He was there to make an announcement that what God's people had been longing for had finally arrived. The time had come for them to be delivered from their oppressors.

At this point, Jesus had them on the edge of their pews. According to Luke, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (v. 22a). Words of liberation. Words of freedom. Words of rescue. Words of restoration. Words of justice. Words of peace. Words of hope. Words that made the worshipers sit up and take notice when they realized that something was now here that hadn't been here before, namely, the reign of God. No wonder that all over the sanctuary you could hear people shouting "Amen!" and "Praise the Lord!"

But then the atmosphere started to change. Just when the people were ready for Jesus to start doing the works of God's grace among them, Jesus starts talking about how God's grace isn't just for them. Bear in mind that some in the congregation were already a little miffed by the fact that Jesus had been doing some of his wonders in Capernaum, with its fairly large non-Jewish population, rather than starting out with his own townfolk. That didn't sit well with them. But now Jesus makes matters worse by launching into some old biblical stories about how God has a history of reaching out and showing mercy to others beyond his own chosen people. Remember, says Jesus, how our own great prophets, Elisha and Elijah, took God's mercy to Gentile territory and Gentile lives. The implication is clear. Beware of placing boundaries on God's grace. His redeeming, restoring mercy often operates in places you may not suspect, among people you may not approve.

By now, the congregation has had enough. Their rage toward Jesus and their resistance to his message boil over. What started out as a homecoming service turns into a riot. The ushers lose control of the whole situation. All they can do is watch as the worshipers chase Jesus up the aisle and out the door. They surround him in the parking lot, and make plans to eliminate him. But Luke says they couldn't stop Jesus. Somehow, he escapes, and goes

on. But this won't be the last time that God's expansive, inclusive grace, in the form of Jesus, meets opposition.

Near the end of his life, poet and historian Carl Sandburg was asked by a reporter, "What in your opinion is the ugliest word in the English language?" Now that's a great question for a poet, a person who has lived his whole life with words. According to the reporter, "Mr. Sandburg drew his brow thoughtfully over his face and repeated the phrase, 'The ugliest word in the English language.'" As the reporter and television audience waited, Sandburg gathered his face into a circle of concentration and said slowly, "The ugliest word?" Everyone waited. Sandburg looked away as if searching the room for a word written somewhere on a wall, pursed his lips and almost mumbled, "Ugliest? The ugliest word?" Meanwhile the reporter and millions continued to lean forward. Finally, Sandburg turned back to the reporter. "The ugliest word," he said, "the ugliest word is (pause) *exclusive*."¹

I realize that the language of inclusivity and exclusivity is potent terminology in contemporary culture. Issues of inclusion and exclusion are right there at the heart of many of our society's most contested social issues. Racial tensions, ethnic divisions, gender conflicts, debates about human sexuality, economic inequality, and immigration battles. Everywhere we turn, there are discussions, debates, and disagreements going on about insiders and outsiders, about who's welcome and who's not, about who's being brought in and who's being left out, about boundaries and borders and walls.

Wherever you come down on the particulars of these social issues, there's no disagreement about our call, as Christians, to attitudes and actions that are shaped by the mission and message of Jesus. In today's text, Jesus encountered, in his own hometown, a congregation that had become very exclusive in its vision of God's grace. So exclusive that even Jesus himself needed to be excluded, and expelled from their midst. The religious folks were more committed to preserving their boundaries than they were to heeding the word of God.

Not that boundaries don't matter. Just because Jesus proclaims and practices an inclusive vision of God's kingdom doesn't mean that the door into the life of God's people is wide open and anything goes. Entering the kingdom requires repentance and faith, an openness to being forgiven, and a willingness to being remade into the kind of person who embodies the good news of God's grace in the world. But rest assured that where this kind of transformation is happening, the good news of God's grace will always be pushing us who are in the church to cross boundaries and overcome barriers that keep us from welcoming others to share in the abundance of God's salvation.

In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. responded to some white clergymen's public misgivings about outsiders protesting in Alabama. Though he had a particular audience in mind, King was also trying to address the church as a whole. At one point, as King laments the inaction of many who claimed the name of Christ, he writes, "So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a tail-light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice."

After reading the Scripture and handing the scroll back to the attendant, Jesus looked out at a congregation that had become adjusted to the status quo. He saw a fellowship whose witness had dimmed, because they had lost sight of the scope of God's love and mercy. In fact, they had come to see themselves as arbiters of God's grace rather than instruments of God's grace. So on that Sabbath day, there was definitely a spirit in the place, but it was the spirit of complacency and self-satisfaction.

But Jesus had a different kind of Spirit on him. He had the Spirit of the Lord, a God whose promise of liberation was for all the poor and oppressed, regardless of nationality, gender, or race. The same Spirit is upon us as we follow Jesus and participate in his mission in the world. Sometimes what we need is the power of the Spirit to help us proclaim the good news. And sometimes what we need is the disruption of the Spirit to help us practice the good news, especially in our life together as a congregation.

The truth is, we're still growing into the breadth of God's love for the world. Over time, we start to settle into our cushioned pews and grow content behind our sanctuary walls. We celebrate God's grace through song, prayer, Scripture, and preaching. We rejoice in his covenant with us through Christ. We give thanks for what he has done so that we can be his people. But in the process we can lose sight of the fact that God is working beyond us, in ways that we often don't notice and can't control, in order to bring others into the life of his people.

Remember that God's grace isn't subject to any boundaries or limitations that we may put in place, either intentionally or unintentionally. This helps give us clarity about our own assignment. Our call is to be instruments of, not obstacles to, God's far-reaching mercy. Our job is to be open to God's freedom and obedient to his word, so that he can create this congregation to be a more full and faithful reflection of the diversity of our community, to be inclusive in the best and most biblical sense of the word.

The story is told about a minister named Al who was pursuing a doctoral degree in theology. He worked long hours on his dissertation. So many hours, in fact, that his children often entered the study to interrupt. "Daddy, can you come out and play?" "Sorry, kids," he replied, "I have too much work to do."

"What are you working on, Daddy?" He couldn't really give the title of his dissertation, which was something like "the experiential dimension of the divine pneumatological reality." So he said, "I'm writing about experiences of the Holy Spirit." They looked at him with blank faces and said, "What's that?"

One day Al and his family were sitting in church. They weren't expecting much that morning. The pastor was soft-spoken and meek. He never said anything very clearly, but everybody liked him. But this particular Sunday was different. The pastor stood up and preached a powerful sermon on racial equality. This was during the sixties, in the South, in a white, middle and upper class congregation. People sat transfixed as the preacher laid his career on the line, perhaps even laid his life on the line. "The day is coming," he said, "when all God's children, white and black, will join hands in worship and service. And that day is upon us."

The congregation left in shock. People couldn't understand how their mild, housebroken preacher could suddenly have been filled with such fire. On the way home, it occurred to Al what had happened. "Kids," he said, "remember how sometimes I go up to my study to write about the Holy Spirit?" One of the children said, "Yeah, but Daddy, what's the Holy Spirit all about?" Al said, "We got a good picture today, in church."²

Grace Baptist Church exists in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. In a day and time when boundaries abound, the Spirit of the Lord is still on us, and we're still in the business of divine grace that overcomes the things that separate us from God and from each other.

¹ Ray D. Hatton, "Divine Prayer," Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Sermon of the Week, June 6, 2005. April 4, 2007 <<http://www.thefellowship.info/News/050606Hatton.icm>>.

² William G. Carter, *Praying for a Whole New World* (Lima: CSS, 2000).