



Sermon for January 19 –

Why were the hometown folks so angry with Jesus? By the end of the passage, the people that have known Jesus since he was a toddler and trying to throw him off a cliff. They are furious. Why? Often, it is highlighted that it is difficult to bring change in your hometown. You need an outside agent, if you will, to bring new ideas. For someone who grew up in the town, you will often be seen as a child by those who knew you as a child.

I think there is something much deeper happening here. Word is getting out that Jesus is bringing change. People are healed. Lives are changed. As he approaches the places he knew as a child, the buzz grows. Now, Jesus arrives at his hometown, and it reaches a fever pitch. There is excitement. There is hope. There is also entitlement. If Jesus has done these amazing works of healing and reconciliation with strangers, how much more will happen here. Life is about to get really good.

Jesus then reads from Isaiah, announcing good news to the poor, along with freeing the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom from oppression. You can imagine the excitement growing. No longer will they be under the thumb of Rome. Life will be forever changed. Look out world! Nazareth is on its way.

Just as quickly, Jesus changes direction and states that this good news is not for them. Jesus will tend to those in greatest need. Just like Elisha was called to the aide of people on the outside looking in, so is Jesus. This ministry will not be for those who feel entitled, or feel they have a special connection with Jesus. The good news is for those on the outside looking in.

I cannot help but think about the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In an interview, he was asked if he had made any mistakes along the way. His response was open and honest, taking accountability for his missteps along the way. And then, he stated that one of his biggest mistakes was believing that the white church in the South would be allies. It was clear by the example of Christ that all are welcome, all are loved, all are within the scope of God's grace and mercy. He could not imagine that anyone reading the same Bible would land somewhere other than standing up for the rights of all people. He learned that, for many, comfort was more important. "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Others would even invoke the name of Christ is rising against the Civil Rights Movement.

Where do we stand? Are we like the crowd that was gathered at the synagogue in Nazareth? In some ways, yes. It is easy to get drawn into a "me first" mentality, or into self-preservation. As we gather for the budget forum in a little while, we will spend a lot of the time looking at the short- and long-term sustainability of God's ministry in this place. The truth is that every congregation in North America deals with these pressures. Every congregation faces stress about sustainability. The danger is in getting stuck there. When we look solely within that we cross the line and stand in opposition of the example of Christ. It is then that we cross the line and mirror the findings of the church during the Civil Rights Movement.

I do believe that Christ is challenging the Nazareth community of faith as well as our own. Are we going to worry about ourselves, or are we going to seek the good that we can do in the world. Martin Luther King Jr. once stated that the church was meant to be a thermostat for the culture. He argued that the church, when following Christ, is a guide of culture. It sets the tone for what the world should look like and then guides that change. He then said that the church has become a thermometer. Instead of guiding change, it simply reads what is happening in the world.

I feel convicted by this encounter with Jesus in Nazareth. Would we stand up, ready to follow in service of those in need? Do we stand with those around us struggling for justice, yearning to be seen and to live free. Amen.

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