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February 3, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 4:21-30
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
I Corinthians 13:1-13

Sometimes, sermon writing feels like a classic who-done-it. When we sit down to read the text, we are given a little bit of information, a piece of the story, a few details on who was there and what transpired but we often aren't given a clear picture of the motive in any given situation. We have a cast of players, a few interpretations of the scene, and our best guess at intent. But like in any encounter where multiple players are involved, a lot can differ depending on who is telling the story and what they hope to accomplish by convincing you of their series of events.

This is the fun part of preparing for Sunday morning. Each week I get to be part investigative journalist, part forensic scientist, and part arm chair psychologist with a side of theology, of course.

And so, this week we take a look at a rather curious scene in Luke. Let's break it down together as we do our own investigation this morning. Here are the pieces of the story that we know. The background is something like this...

Jesus has just preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue (that was our text from last week). The boy from Nazareth returns home and preaches to his friends and family that he is there to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. They were big claims for a small town guy.

As you would expect, folks are curious at what they are hearing. After all, they knew Jesus when he was a kid. They helped raise him. They knew his dad...Is not this Joseph's son, they ask. You can almost see their eyes start to sparkle at the acknowledgement that he has come back and not only has he come back but he brings with him these amazing claims of what he is going to do. And their minds start to click away at the possibilities.

But then, the events begin to unfold a little more dramatically.

The people start thinking...If he is preaching good news to the poor, if he is preaching to release captives and heal the sick, what could he do for us? And you can even hear their words...hey Jesus...do here in your hometown the things that you did in Capernaum. Take care of us. Heal us. Set us free. We are your family, your friends after all. They are ready to get their due and they don't mind telling Jesus what they want from him.

But Jesus doesn't respond in the way that they anticipated. In fact, his response is quite the opposite. I actually love his opening. He tells them from the start that they are not going to like what he has to say – no prophet is accepted in his hometown – those are Jesus' words. That

seems to be a rather odd way to begin your conversation with your friends and family – as though you are getting them prepared for bad news. You can sense the tension building.

And then as though you are watching a slow train wreck, Jesus begins his refusal to give the people what they want. You may want me to help your widows but even Elijah helped only one widow – even in the midst of severe famine Elijah only helped only one and a gentile at that. Not even someone from his own community. So don't expect me to do for you anything more.

You may want me to heal your sick but even Elisha helped only one...a Syrian army officer who no one liked. So don't expect me to come here and heal all of you.

How would you feel if you heard these words from one of your own? That's when the rage sets in. Jesus' community is so infuriated at this response that they literally plan to throw him off a cliff.

So, those are the facts. We began this story with curiosity, pride, excitement for the homegrown hero and then it all suddenly turned to envy, anger and hate followed by a plot to kill the one who they once loved. So what really transpired that day in this family feud?

We could come up with a couple of valid explanations.

The first, is that the community of Nazareth was simply infuriated that Jesus would show preference to folks outside of their community. If we took this view, we might conclude that the community of Nazareth felt they had more privilege over those outside of their community, that Jesus should have given them an appropriate amount of help because he was after all one of them. Their motive to kill Jesus was a simple rejection of the man who could not do what they wanted him to do. A passionate rage fueled by greed.

The other possible explanation is that the people of Nazareth simply felt abandoned. They had been waiting on God to fulfill God's promises of salvation and yet that salvation was going to other folks. They felt as though Jesus had rejected them, that they weren't good enough. Their response to kill Jesus in this scenario would have been based upon their feelings of loss and hopelessness that their needs were not going to be met. A crime of desperation.

Yet, in both of these scenarios the people are doing one thing that we should notice. Whichever way we break it down from their perspective they are in essence saying, God should love us more than anyone else. God should give us preferential treatment. We deserve it. Hey Jesus – do for us what you did for the people of Capernaum. And yet, things just didn't work out the way they had hoped. And they are angry and hurt.

But that's not the whole story. As any good investigator might do, you should take note of a critical point... so far we have only considered the people's side of the story. There is another perspective to consider...and that is – what was Jesus trying to accomplish?

It reminds me of any typical family dispute. You know the ones where somebody says something and it hurts someone else. Then those hurt feelings turn to anger. Harsh words are said. Individuals are blamed. Accusations are made. And a family divide grows. Often, if you ask what started it all, everyone will have a different answer...they may not even remember why they started arguing in the first place. And, if you peel back the layers you realize that the first words that were spoken, the words that started the entire divide had a totally different context than how they were taken. A simple misunderstanding – turning into a painful fight dividing loved ones. I am sure you have been there.

So, let's go to the source. What was Jesus really trying to do that day? Certainly he wasn't trying to divide his community and get himself killed in the process. Yes, Jesus may have said some things they didn't want to hear but Jesus tends to work from a place of love, not hate. And, if we know anything about Jesus, we know he is always teaching...teaching others about the expansiveness of God's love and calling others forth to get involved. Jesus is all about showing others what a responsible, compassionate, committed follower of Christ is all about.

What might his motive be in this scene? I would argue that it's a larger lesson of call. A call to each member of the community that they have a role to play in this greater mission of healing and redemption. That Jesus himself can only do so much but that each and every person can participate alongside him in the remaking of this world.

It's a lesson in responsibility and community action. It's a lesson in empowerment and faithful service. It's a lesson that was difficult for people to hear. They wanted easy answers and quick fixes and Jesus gave them instead the challenging work of getting involved. He wanted them to not just seek out love for themselves but to give love abundantly to others, not just within their community but to all whom they encountered.

To be fair...Jesus was a little abrupt in his response. He didn't give them much explanation. Just a harsh jolt of reality. So how might they have heard his words if they had a little more context? Context that these words weren't a rejection but an invitation. Would their response have been different? Would they have understood how hopeful and inclusive the love of Christ can be?

We are fortunate that we have deeper context, more information in front of us to understand what Jesus was trying to teach. To understand our own call to follow Christ in our own lives. It is summed up simply by Paul's words to the church in Corinth. This morning, I want you to imagine Jesus saying these words to the people in Nazareth and then imagine he is saying these words to you...

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Thanks be to God. Amen.