

“Redirecting Rejection”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Second Sunday after Epiphany
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 15, 2017

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Last Thursday morning, I gathered with about twenty other faith leaders at House of Hope Lutheran Church north of here. We came together out of a shared concern for God and neighbor, learning how recent national and statewide developments will affect our communities this year. Health care changes on the horizon will affect the funding of nursing homes where our members and their parents live, and poor people’s access to preventative or mental health services. The legislative policy of “preemption” seeks to remove the right of cities to make their own employment, minimum wage, and human rights laws, just as it was used to deny bathroom access for transgender people in Charlotte, North Carolina. Immigrants who work in farms, factories, and other low-wage jobs fear mass deportation, which would sever families and increase the cost of goods or services that rely on their labor. On this last point, Mark Vinge (senior pastor at House of Hope) described how his congregation has taken matters into their own hands. A team of members came together in his church, arguing that their congregation should offer sanctuary if undocumented immigrants were going to be targeted for deportation. Pastor Vinge encouraged them because, as he said to us, “I want my people to be as concerned about those *outside* these walls as those *inside* the walls.”

Jesus gives the same message to his home congregation in Nazareth. He chooses one of the favorite texts—Isaiah!—and reads a whole list of great prophecies: good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed, proclaiming jubilee. This is welcome news to the Israelites—most of whom are impoverished, wage-slaves to their landowners, and oppressed by Roman soldiers. Isaiah sounds like good news to Nazareth, especially when Jesus tells the gathered throng: “Today *this* scripture has been fulfilled.” The tables are turned—BOOM! Jesus could just drop the mic and walk out at this point.

But he doesn't—he keeps talking. And suddenly he's putting words to what are their deepest, prideful desires. "You want me to do miracles here too, don't you? The doctor who's gone around curing other sick people—you want me to do so in my own home, right?" Nazareth wants to see Jesus do his most spectacular miracles here, so they will have lasting proof that the Messiah has come from them. But God's grace does not follow conventional expectations, as Jesus points out with several examples from Scripture. Even though there were countless famished Israelites, God's prophet Elijah appeared with miraculous food to a widow from far-away Sidon. There were plenty of lepers in Israel waiting for cures, but the God of Israel cured the Syrian general Naaman first. Jesus tells the Nazirites that their God cares as much about the people *outside* as *inside* the community. Of course Jesus knows the needs of his own people, yet he refuses to only focus there. Instead he demonstrates, in the words of one writer, that "God's love is never insular but is expandable in unpredictable and potent ways; always with a bias towards those in greatest need, and never first-and-foremost dictated by conventions."¹ In other words and in the language of contemporary protest, "Syrian Lives Matter", "Sidonian Lives Matter", and "Widow Lives Matter".

The Nazarites presume that *they* are the apple of God's eye, or the child whom God loves the most. So they object to Jesus' sermon, as though declaring God's love for the other means less of God's love for them. In fact, Jesus is saying that his own people should not presume that their priorities are God's priorities as well. God's preferences should be the preferences of the people, not the other way around.

The crowd turns on Jesus with the quickness of a rattlesnake. They want to throw him off a cliff for the offensive suggestion that God loves the whole world, no exceptions! But what if that was only the majority reaction? Can you imagine a different response, where some *do* ask first about God's priorities, and then go seek to serve them? A *few* people of Galilee do that. Women and men start believing Jesus and following him, adding their voices to his proclamation of God's good news. We're going to hear their story next Sunday—they are the first disciples.

Take offense at Jesus, or follow him beyond the conventional pathways? That is the choice before the people of Nazareth, and for Christians this day. Do we object that Jesus' actions overlook the needs close at hand? Do we ask who most needs to hear God's good news today and lend our voices to that proclamation, caring as much about those outside our walls as those inside? Rather than trying to move Jesus to focus more on us, will we be moved by the possibility of God's wider work in the world? The call today is to recognize God on the move in another neighborhood, then join ourselves to the Good News happening there, beyond what may feel familiar, comfortable or home. Because with God there are no boundaries or borders, only people who are hurting, and people equipped with abilities to help.

This call to join God at work wherever people suffer is what led Dr. King in later years to expand the movement for civil rights to also include the Poor People's Campaign. He was looking for meaningful jobs that paid a living wage, for a guaranteed annual income for those unable to find jobs, and for more affordable housing. He declared, in words we have already heard, that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." That is the spirit of Christ's call, and why we join God's healing beyond our walls.

It is with such a spirit that I close with an invitation this morning. In less than two weeks, on the afternoon of January 28th, more than 1500 people of faith from across Minnesota are gathering at Shiloh Temple in Minneapolis. We'll gather under the umbrella of a group called [ISAIAH](#), the statewide, multiracial, ecumenical organization dedicated to the vision of Isaiah which Jesus read from in Nazareth. The governor will be there, Senator Franken will be there, and dozens of mayors will be there, all to hear

¹ *spill the beans: worship and learning resources for all ages*, vol. 21 (spillbeans.org.uk: Spill the Beans Resource Team, 2016), pg. 68.

from people of faith who are active in democracy and concerned about our public life. I will be there to share God's care in Jesus Christ for outsiders, those who are poor, sick, children, elderly, immigrant or non-white in Minnesota. I invite you to be there too. We will address matters of public concern like health care and immigration not as partisans but as people of faith guided by what Jesus had to say about healing the sick, showing mercy to the foreigner, and caring for the outsider. If you're curious to learn more, check the box at the bottom of the Time and Talent slip and put it in the offering plate, or speak to me after worship. I believe we can have at least a dozen people there that afternoon, and if you want, let's do lunch beforehand! If the timing or the situation doesn't work for you, what are the other ways you will show the love of God that knows no barriers, and proclaim the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven?

Let us pray: *God of light and limitless love, you have embraced us in Jesus Christ. Now give us courage to walk in his ways and show the same to others, in Jesus' name. Amen.*