

## **Epiphany 02 – Christian Unity**

### **Luke 4:21-31 January 19, 2025**

Most pastors find it challenging to preach in the congregation where they grew up. It's not easy to go back to where people might remember you for making paper airplanes and dropping them from the balcony. Even people who may have joined the congregation after that pastor left would probably know the pastor's family and friends – and that would become the filter through which they would hear the content of the sermon. Before the congregation hears the pastor – they already know them.

So, we can understand something of what is going on as Jesus returns to Nazareth – his hometown. He barely finishes reading the Scriptures before the murmurs are buzzing. “Isn't that Joseph's son? We know him. We like him. We expect him to be gracious and well-spoken.”

It's not easy for a preacher to go back home. Everybody knows him. That's the trouble. Of all the sayings of Jesus, one of the few things he said that appears in all four gospels – is that a prophet gets no respect in a prophet's hometown. Or to put it another way, “You become an expert only after you move more than ten miles from home.”

It's very easy to get far too comfortable, particularly with the things that matter the most. That's especially true for anybody who reads and studies the Bible. In one of his books, Tom Long, an author of books on sermons, once made an astute observation about what often happens in the minister's study. He writes:

*It is amazing how many of us, if someone were to ask us our view of biblical authority and inspiration, would articulate a dynamic view of the living and active biblical word. We could be full of ideas about how texts are always creatively engaging us with truths ever new. That is our official position, but in practice we look at a familiar text, like the “Prodigal Son,” and we treat it as if it were a slightly senile dinner companion who tells the same story over and over again and never says anything new. We give the text a quick glance, maybe sneak a peek at a commentary or two just to make sure that what we have always thought that text was about is what it really is about – and then stew about how to say the same old thing in some sparkling new way.*

The assumption, of course, is that this or any other Bible passage is the “same old thing,” and that there is no power in the same old thing. And so, the pastor decides to find something new in order to be heard.

One pastor, tells of his first experience as a preacher. Not tied to any lectionary, he was free to spend his time poking around the pages of Scripture looking for – something different – something unusual. His only objective was to find something that would prompt him to say, “Now this will surely get their attention!” He would then proceed to find something in a book like Obadiah or Judith – and preach on it, murmuring to himself, “I’ll bet they’ve never heard this before.” And he was right. The congregation had never heard it before. As a result, though, the Bible passage had no power. No authority. No sense of importance or urgency.

But occasionally, he would give in and turn to a text that everybody has

heard before. And at coffee hour, people would say, “Wow! You really gave it to us today!” Little by little, it began to dawn on him: The power of the prophetic word does not come from roaming a far country where no one has gone before. The real power of the gospel comes from reminding the people of God – of what they already know.

And that’s what happened in Nazareth that day. Jesus strolls into his hometown. And yes, everybody knew him. He takes the dusty scroll of Isaiah, finds his place, and reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has ‘christened’ me to bring the good news.” And everybody nods and says, “That’s right! Preach the word!” So Jesus tells them two more stories out of their own Bible, a story about Elijah and a story about Elisha. Suddenly the crowd growls, curses him, and tries to hurl him over a cliff.

All Jesus did was to repeat a couple of Bible stories that his listeners already knew. As a result, they wanted to murder him. Those who were most familiar with him turned against him, and wanted to put him to death.

No doubt, when the writer of the Gospel of Luke thinks about Jesus, he has the ancient prophets in mind, those unmanageable people who got up and spoke a Word from God. Luke is well aware that Jesus stands at the end of a long line of prophetic succession. And for him, that’s the root of all trouble.

According to the story, some of his friends feared for his safety. They warn Jesus, “Stay away from the Holy City. Your life is in danger.” But Jesus replies to them: “I must go to Jerusalem, I absolutely must; because that’s the city that always kills the prophets.”

Not long after that, Jesus comes around the bend on Palm Sunday. He sees the city, stops dead in his tracks, and begins to weep. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem! If only you knew the things that make for peace. Instead you are too busy murdering the prophets.”

Even on Easter; the news came out that Jesus had risen; but his own disciples didn’t believe it. Jesus joins two of them on the road to Emmaus, but they do not recognize him. So as they walk, Jesus interprets the Bible. He reminds them of what the Good Book says. And it fills his disciples with heartburn.

Luke wants us to know that the most scandalous things we can ever do is to hear the Bible. The most outrageous thing we can do is to take the Bible seriously, not only as a comforting word, but also as a deeply disturbing word. The main reason why it is so disturbing is that it reminds us that God does not play by our rules or stick to our boundaries.

Clarence Jordan, was the founder of Koinonia Farm in Georgia. He started a peanut farm and tried to run it the same way he thought Jesus would run it. He believed in a good wage for an honest day’s work. He believed in taking care of the land and those who work it. And he believed that all people – black and white – could work together and stand together. It was the early 1950s, and his local Baptist church did not agree with his thoughts on racial equality.

One time, an agricultural student from Florida State University visited

Koinonia Farm for the weekend. The student was from India, and said, “I’ve never gone to a Christian worship service. I would like to go.” Clarence took him to Rehoboth Baptist Church. And it is reported that “the presence of his dark skin miraculously chilled the hot, humid southern Georgia atmosphere.” It didn’t matter that he was from India. He had dark skin, not a red neck – and so he did not fit in.

After worship, the pastor drove out to Jordan’s farm and said, “You can’t come with somebody like that. It causes disunity in our church.” Jordan tried to explain, but the pastor wasn’t listening.

Sometime later, a group of church leaders went out to the farm to plead with Clarence to keep undesirable people out of their church. As the story goes, Clarence promised to apologize before the congregation if somebody could prove he had done something wrong. Then he handed a Bible to a man in the group and said, “Can you tell me what sin I have committed by bringing a stranger to church?”

The man slammed down the book and said, “Don’t you give me any of this Bible stuff!” Clarence retorted, “I’m not giving you any Bible stuff. I’m asking you to give it to me.”

The man and the others did not know what to say; so they slipped out. When they got back to the church, they wrote a letter and said, “Mr. Jordan, you are no longer welcome in our church, because you keep bringing in the wrong kind of people.”

As one commentator notes, “Jesus is not acceptable in his own country because his mission extends beyond his own country.” Israel was called to be a light to the nations, a beacon of God’s mercy for all people everywhere. When God’s light began to shine in Jesus of Nazareth, it exposed dark crevasses everywhere, even in Israel. Some of the people slithered out of the dark and tried to snuff out the light.

It is much more comforting to believe that you have learned all you need to learn, to affirm that the way you have always done it before is a good way to keep on doing it. That is a satisfying way to ride through the whitewater of change. Just hang on and coast for a while. It works fairly well, until you realize that the way you always did it before may not have been the way it was always done.

A few years ago, there was an article in a national magazine about a scholar in a major university. After years of careful historical research, this shy professor discovered there was a period in the Middle Ages when the Roman Catholic Church approved of, and actually conducted, marriages between gay couples. He had the facts to prove it. And, not surprisingly, the Vatican did not hesitate to try to quickly squelch his research.

In Nazareth, a sermon turned sour. It started out sounding so familiar – so comforting. And then Jesus raised a question: “How far is God’s reach?” It was, and still is, a troubling issue – To think that the reach of God might far extend our own! – To consider that the kind of people with whom God might choose to associate is different from our list. That is terribly disturbing!

One pastor tells of worshipping one Sunday at a church in a seaside city. The 11:00 o'clock service was jammed for something they called "Scottish Heritage Sunday." All the men were wearing plaid kilts. Some of the women, were too. He looked around the sun-tanned congregation while the bagpipes were playing. It was obvious from their appearance that most of the people in that congregation had gotten off their yachts, walked up the boulevard past all the specialty shops and entered the church. They seemed so comfortable and settled. The visiting pastor, on the other hand, didn't feel – not for a moment – like he fit in. And he sat there thinking, "Good thing there isn't a ghetto around here – or a gay community – or visitors from India – because people like that wouldn't be welcome."

Yet – every church likes to paint a big sign that is placed above the door, "We are a friendly church. Everybody is welcome." But, when one enters some of these churches, one realizes that it is reserved seating only.

Jesus looked at his Jewish congregation and said, "Let me tell you a Bible story. Remember Elijah? He was the greatest of all our prophets. And there was a famine in the land of Israel for three years and six months. Crops withered. The soil cracked. Not a drop of rain for years. And there were a lot of widows in the land of Israel in the time of Elijah. But remember where he went? God sent Elijah to a *Gentile* woman in Sidon."

"Let me tell you another story," Jesus said. "Remember Elisha? He followed Elijah, and whatever spirit Elijah had, well, Elisha was given a double share of it. He was a powerful man. And in his time, there were many people with leprosy in the land of Israel. They were sick and covered with sores. But

Elisha didn't heal any of them. Instead he was sent to Na'aman, a *Gentile* army commander in Syria. And he healed the Gentile; he didn't heal any of the Jews."

When the Jewish people heard this, they were absolutely furious. They suddenly realized what Jesus was actually saying. He was declaring the disturbing news that God loves everybody, particularly those beyond their tight, exclusive circle. It was, and is, a rather scandalous thing to say. None of us has any great desire to hear the truth, especially when it exposes unpleasant things about ourselves. We too reject the messengers God sends to us. Yet, each of us, as well as the world as a whole, needs the voice of a true prophet for there are so many things that we are blind to, so many things about which we delude ourselves. At times it is very painful to hear the truth about ourselves. But, unless we hear it, we are condemning ourselves to remain in the dark forever.

However, by virtue of our Baptism, we are commissioned to be prophets ourselves. We are sent into the world to be witnesses to God's love – to the good news – not only in word, but especially in deed. When Gandhi was asked why he wasn't a Christian, he replied, "I shall become a Christian when I see Christians living their Master's teachings."

**Amen.**