



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 3, 2019
JEREMIAH 1:4-10; PSALM 71: 1-6; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13; LUKE 4: 21-30

TOUGH LOVE

Luke 4:21-30 *[In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "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.]*

"May I give you some feedback?" It's a question that gets asked a lot at the College for Congregational Development. During the week, people practice giving and receiving feedback over and over... and they discover it's much harder to practice than it might look.

Over the years, I've learned a few lessons about the hard way about that skill. First, never sugar-coat bad news. Sugar-coating

always makes the news more bitter, and while it might seem nice, it's not really kind. Second, get to the point, and resist the urge to practice the "sandwich" method of delivery. You know the one. It happens when critical feedback is buried in the middle of niceties as a way to disguise hard news. ...and finally, whatever else you do, don't put off the hard conversations until another day. Doing so

only makes the truth harder to give and to receive.

You may be familiar these pearls of wisdom, too. ...and I bet everyone here has been on the receiving end of at least one hard conversation. It's hard to bear difficult news. The gospels make one thing clear: Jesus was a master at it, and today's gospel is a model example.

The story picks up where we left off last week. Jesus has returned home, ready to make an important announcement. The long-awaited Jubilee has finally arrived. The era of God's favor has begun, and amazingly, Jesus proclaims its arrival in his own hometown. When his buddies hear the news, they marvel and wonder about their good fortune. They are the first to know. Surely this means something really special for the people of Nazareth.

But then Jesus realizes something: his short sermon needs further explanation.

His grace filled words for the people of Nazareth are not theirs alone to savor. There will be no special access for the hometown crowd. If anything, *more* will be expected of them. Their privileged status will mean a special kind of responsibility. Jesus tells them something else. As insiders, they will be the ones called to minister to the widow and to

affirm the outsider. While the locals may be special, so, too, is everyone else. Everyone, both insiders and outsiders alike, find favor in God's sight.

...and wow, that's not the message they want to hear. The good news of God is not good news to the hometown crowd. The dose of tough love Jesus offers is more than they can bear. Jesus pushes them to edge, and almost push him over the edge.

We are left to wonder, what just happened?! How did the story shift so quickly and dramatically? It also begs a bigger question: given the outcome, is there any good news in what we've just heard? After all, Jesus provokes the crowd and oh my, do they react. When paired alongside Paul's epistle, it can be hard finding anything patient or kind, let alone good, about what Jesus has just done.

So, what is the Good News? Anyone who reads scripture likely asks this question. It's a question preachers do, too. Sometimes it can really be challenging to find even a sliver of nice news in the rough parts of scripture. But maybe that's the problem. *Good* news is not the same thing as *nice* news. ...and while it might be hard to hear, it's not really kind to water down the hard parts of the truth.

Karoline Lewis, a professor at Luther Seminary, puts it this way, "When we make

the Gospel easier to swallow, we make the cross just death alone. When we make the Gospel a more pleasing option for life, we have then said that the empty tomb isn't really true. When we make the Gospel simply an option for living, we have forgotten that it's also a choice about dying."¹

That dying is what Jesus is trying to get at. It includes dying to the illusions we hold about ourselves and about each other. It includes dying to the illusions we have about the hard realities of this world and greater realities of God. Without that dying, there is no possibility for new life. As Paul points out, until any of us is on the other side of this life, we can never fully know what awaits. Until then, all human knowledge is incomplete. For now, all we can hope for is a fuzzy understanding of what already is here and what is to come. For many, that is a frustrating reality.

In his commentary on the epistle, Richard Hayes says, "Love that rejoices in the truth may require us to speak hard truth at times to those we love."² Sometimes, kind and patient love disguises itself as tough love, too. That's the kind of love Jesus was practicing with his fellow neighbors in Nazareth.

The tough love of the Gospel cannot be ignored. It reveals an uncomfortable truth about each of us. It whispers to us that until we change, nothing else will. That may be, but it's still difficult to accept.

So, what happens when the Good News is hard news to take?

We can refuse to accept it, like locals in Nazareth. We can ignore it by telling ourselves all kinds of stories to justify what we're already doing. Or we can engage with it and participate in the creation of something new and unexpected.

That third choice, the choice to engage, is the path we are called to take on our own and with each other. For decades, this Cathedral Community has made that choice. This month alone, Saint Mark's has or will engage in conversations about race, homelessness, and immigration. If you have not already done so, plan to be a part of at least one of those conversations. Will the conversations make some of us uncomfortable? Probably. Is there more we could do? Yes. Will those attempts be successful? I don't know. But until we try, nothing new is possible. As Mother Theresa said long ago, we are called

¹Karoline Lewis, "Good News?", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5282> (accessed January 28, 2019).

²Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), p. 232.

to be faithful, not successful. Being faithful also means being engaged.

Jesus reveals a Good News that is grounded in the unfailing justice, mercy, and love of God. That same Good News also finds its meaning through our doubt and in the little deaths we experience. Those disappointments and death become the raw material for something new to emerge. They hold the possibility of transformation, for that new thing. They also reveal that nothing is lost in God's economy. Not even our rejection of one other, of ourselves, or of God is lost. Surely, that is Good News.

Jesus practiced tough love not to be mean or dismissive. Instead, it was an act of kindness.

His tough words were another way he expressed his care for everyone he encountered. The good people of Nazareth were the first ones to bear the tough news of the Gospel. The young rich ruler, Martha, and the disciples also experienced it. So, too, do we. Even when it is hard to bear, tough love is a part of eternal love. It is the kind of love that helps us name and hold the hard realities of this world and invites us into the greater reality God envisions for us.

What's tough for you right now? What might a faithful response look like in the face of that tough and tender news?

AMEN.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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