

Luke 4:21-30  
THE GOD OF ALL  
(and not just some)

One of my heroes of the faith, Dr. Will Campbell, tells about the time he addressed a group of college students in the 1960s. They were representatives of the New Left radicals, Students for a Democratic Society. Will Campbell was there to make a speech and lead a discussion. He said to them, "My name is Will Campbell. I'm a Baptist minister. I'm a native of Mississippi. And I'm pro-Klansman because I'm pro-human being. Now that's my speech. If anyone has any questions I will be glad to try to answer them." About half of the audience quickly left the auditorium.

Of the hundred or so students who remained, most were speaking at once. "Pro-human. You think they're human!" "Fascist pig." "Insulting to our intelligence." "No. Don't tell him he's not a Christian. That's what Christians are!" "Mississippi redneck!" "I guess you would have helped Hitler. Guess you thought he was human."

Will Campbell made the comment, "As a matter of fact, I did think Hitler was human. Only a human could have been responsible for killing seven million other humans. That was what I wanted to talk about. What does it mean to be human and how do we humans get to be the sort of humans we are. But it took time to get my little band of radicals settled down enough to point out to them that just four words uttered - "pro-Klansman Mississippi Baptist preacher," coupled with one visual image, white, had turned them into everything they thought the Ku Klux Klan to be - hostile, frustrated, angry, violent, and irrational. And I was never able to explain to them that pro-Klansman is not the same as pro-Klan. That the former has to do with person, the other with an ideology. I tried to stand patiently, even in the face of fear and danger, because I had so recently learned that lesson myself." (Brother to a Dragonfly, Pp. 243-244)

That opening illustration helps us to hear the Gospel message this morning. Jesus also was pro-human but that wasn't the message the people from Nazareth wanted to hear from this hometown boy of theirs. We pick up where we left off two weeks ago (before the snow). Jesus found and read aloud his mission statement from Isaiah 62, then sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The people, who had watched Jesus grow up, were proud of him and amazed at what he had said. Their pride was apparent as they said to one another, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" But all that was about to change! Whereas Jesus literally overturned the tables of the merchants and moneychangers in the temple early on in John's Gospel, here in Luke's Gospel, Jesus figuratively overturned the tables in the synagogue that day. Jesus saw where this conversation was headed and he didn't like it at all. He refused to be a "yes-man" to his own people, and he certainly needed to expand their provincial outlook.

Jesus sensed that his homefolks were about to tell him, "Jesus, you're an amazing healer in those other towns, but how about bringing it home to Nazareth where it belongs, where you belong. You've healed others; now heal your very own. Do for us what you did in Capernaum. After all, charity begins at home and it should stay here as well!"

Behind their words, there was an ethnic bigotry, a derogatory attitude toward Capernaum, which was noted for its large population of Gentile inhabitants. Jesus reminded the good folks of Nazareth that while there were many widows in Israel, who were hungry due to a famine in the land, the prophet

Elijah was sent to help a widow in Sidon, which was a Gentile city. By the same token, despite the fact that there were many lepers in Israel, none of them were cleansed whereas the prophet Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian. In other words, there were others outside of Israel who had shared and who would share in God's blessings. In doing so, Jesus rebuked the general expectation of those in the Nazareth synagogue (and elsewhere) that the Jews alone would receive the blessings of God's favor. Jesus wanted his own people to understand that Yahweh, the Holy One, is the God of all, and not just some!

The hometown crowd was incensed with Jesus. They were filled with rage; they drove Jesus out of town to the edge of a cliff where they intended to hurl him off and send him to his death for being a heretic! But Jesus somehow passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Translated, that means it wasn't time for Jesus to die yet.

By the way, the text points to the future when other men would take Jesus out of town, to the top of a hill, there to crucify him. And, the text also hints at Jesus passing through the midst of death's grip and (after three days) rising triumphantly from the grave.

Both Jesus and Luke, who was writing to the early church, want Jews and Gentiles to know that God is the God of all peoples, and not just some. God loves the Gentiles and all other manner of sinners just as much as he loves the fine upstanding folks of Nazareth. God's love is reckless in its sweep. Everyone is included, no one is left out. Someone has said, "God's grace keeps widening the circle, putting more and more leaves in the kingdom banquet table, reaching more and more people."

What does this text mean for our lives? I can think of two quick answers. First of all, thank God that God is for us all, and not just a certain nation. After all, we are the outsiders Jesus wanted to include. By the grace of God, we are invited to participate in the kingdom of God.

Secondly, as we have seen time and time again, privilege goes hand in hand with responsibility; to be blessed by God carries with it the calling to be a blessing to others. The good news we have received is supposed to be shared and not hoarded. Otherwise, we will become just like the folks in Nazareth, who wanted to keep Jesus to themselves. Furthermore, while it's okay to share the good news of Jesus Christ with our own circle of friends, we are also called and sent to tell others, who are different from us that the good news is meant for them as well - why? - because God is God of all.

As Jesus' disciples, we are called to love and embrace the oppressed, the outcast, and the stranger. For too long, we have resided in our own comfort zone here at 1901 Patrick Henry Avenue; if someone wanted to find us and come to us, we gladly welcomed them; and, most of those good folks looked like us and acted like us.

But here lately, I believe that the Holy Spirit has been moving in our midst and stirring us up. Plans are underway to move beyond these comfortable walls and go into the neighborhoods that surround our church. We plan to invite our neighbors to come to First Presbyterian on the four Sundays of March for a continental breakfast from 8:00-8:30 a.m., and then worship with us at the early service. Why are we inviting all of our neighbors? Why, it's because the Lord is God of all people and not just some, and Jesus' ministry is now our ministry!

We hope to reach out to those who are not affiliated with a church as well as our friends and many of our own members, who have drifted away or have gotten out of the habit of coming to church. If all goes according to plan, there will be folks, who will come here, who are different from the way we look or act or

talk - as different as the Gentiles were from the Jews. However, the same Spirit that dwells within us dwells within our neighbors and, as we draw closer to Christ, we will inevitably draw closer to one another. Please be in prayer about this new venture. And, as you learn more about what we hope to do, I hope you will resolve to do your part to open the doors of the church (and your hearts) to reach out to our neighbors and welcome them with godly love. We not only want to make them feel at home, we hope they will make this place their church home as well!

Let me close with this story. A number of years ago, a reporter was covering the war in Sarajevo. Right in front of where he stood, a little girl walking on the street was severely wounded by sniper fire. A man scooped up the little girl and pleaded with the reporter to drive them to the hospital. "You have a car," the man begged. "Please won't you take us to the hospital?" Without hesitating, the reporter loaded them into the back seat of his care and began to drive. After a minute or two, the man said urgently, "Please hurry; she is still living!" The reporter drove on. A few minutes later, the man in the back seat said, "Hurry, please, my little girl is still breathing!" The reporter sped on. Yet a few minutes later, the man said, "Hurry, please, my little girl is still warm." Soon, they pulled up to the hospital, but the girl was pronounced dead.

The man and the reporter went into the restroom together to wash the child's blood from their hands. "Now comes the hardest part," said the man. "What is that?" asked the reporter. "Now I have to go and find that little girl's father and tell him she is gone." The reporter was stunned. "But, but, I thought you were the father! I thought she was your child!" "Aren't they all our children?" the man replied. (Thomas G. Long) Aren't they all our children? At the very least, each and every one is our brother and our sister for we share the same heavenly Father, who is God of all, and not just some. By grace, Jesus invites us to sup with him at table this morning. By that same grace, Jesus invites others (through us) to join him at table as well. As we embrace others in the same manner by which Christ has embraced us, then we surely give honor to God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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