

## No Home-field Advantage

[Text - Luke 4:14-44]

Pastor Dave Shackle  
February 3, 2019

This morning we hear Luke's account of Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth, which takes place soon after his baptism. Initially there's a highly favorable response to Jesus' return, as he announces a new era of Divine Compassion and Grace. Reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Holy One is upon me, and has anointed me 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, and to proclaim the Season of Divine favor!"

These *are* the signs of the Holy One's saving action which are to be revealed through the Messiah - God's Anointed One. And how fortunate for the people of Nazareth, that Jesus - their hometown boy - *is* that Anointed One! Luke records that, "All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But suddenly, everything drastically changes. Jesus goes from being *commended* by all to being *condemned* by all, run out of town and nearly thrown off a cliff! The crucial question for you and me today is "What happened?" And the reason this question is so crucial, is that the answer can help you and me understand what *we* may encounter, when we faithfully follow the Way of Jesus Christ.

In his first public proclamation in his hometown Synagogue, Jesus reads a passage from the Prophet Isaiah - a passage which offers a concise summary of the Messiah's mission and purpose. As the Messiah, Jesus will give his all to bring Divine compassion and grace to those who need it most: the poor, the captive, the infirmed, and the oppressed. Now, the citizens of Nazareth, like many people in Israel, initially buy into this Messianic Mission-statement. It really does sound like Good news! The problem, however, is when Jesus goes on to explain that this mission of Good News isn't only for a particular group of privileged people. In fact, he makes it clear that those who think they have a "home field advantage" when it comes to receiving Divine blessings, are actually wrong!

He reminds them that there were many widows in Israel who suffered from famine in Elijah's day; yet Elijah brought relief to a widow in the *outside* region of Sidon. And though there were many lepers in Israel in need of compassion and healing, Elisha was sent to heal Naaman the Syrian. So, what angers the people of Nazareth is Jesus reminding them that - throughout the history of Israel - Divine goodness and mercy comes not only to the "insiders," but also to the so-called "outsiders"! Jesus tells them, and us, that Divine Compassion and Grace is available to all people - and that it must be extended specifically to the poor and the oppressed, the outcast and the "outsider". Of course, in First Century Judea - as in Twenty-first Century America - there's a tendency to resist and resent that kind of inclusive thinking and extravagant welcome.

Jesus is often challenged and attacked because he passionately proclaims that showing compassion for all, is closer to the Divine Desire, than excluding people through picky religious rules or unjust governmental regulations. He is vilified, because he maintains that *every* person is precious in the eyes of the Holy One - not just those from a particular region or religion. Many religious and political leaders of Jesus' day fear and despise his graciously inclusive message; so they attack that message and seek to destroy the messenger. Yet even when that Divine Truth is denounced and the Divine Truth-bearer is crucified, the Divine Reality of Extravagant Love and Grace cannot be stopped.

The glorious proclamation of our Faith is that Jesus Christ lived for the sake of all people, died for the sake of all people, and continues to live for the sake of all people! His death isn't caused because God needs or desires some kind of barbaric, blood sacrifice of atonement. It's because the Divine Source of Life and Love deeply desires that compassion and unity, peace and justice reign throughout the world. And those who try to help create this Divine Realm of peace and unity often pay a tremendously high cost. Yet as the Message of Christ's Resurrection reveals, the Divine Source of Life and Love will always have the final word!

So...here are some things this might mean for you and me today: If you and I truly want to serve and grow as children of the Holy One, then we must allow the Holy Spirit to increase our faith, expand our vision, and embolden our hearts. If this congregation wants to continue to evolve as the living, loving Body of Christ, then we must be willing to broaden and deepen our ministries of outreach and compassion. If people in this country want to claim that this is a "*Christian Nation*" [which, Constitutionally, it is not], then they must at least try to emulate Jesus Christ: by bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, healing to the afflicted, and welcome the so-called "outsiders"! Or, to put it in practical terms, they should be advocating for economic, prison, health care and immigration reform that favors the downtrodden and oppressed.

In the Divine Realm, there *are* no "outsiders"! This is why the Heart of the Holy One beats more passionately for the poor and frightened Central American refugee, than for the rich and fear-mongering American politician who wants to keep them out of our country. And the argument that we must first "protect and take-care of our own" just doesn't cut it; especially when those same politicians also argue that we must cut funding to programs that help heal, protect, and take-care of our own poorest and most vulnerable citizens!

When Jesus enters the synagogue of his hometown, he comes "to proclaim the Season of Divine favor" - not just for the people of Nazareth or Israel, but for all people. That's because Divine "favor" doesn't play "favorites!" It is lavishly bestowed upon us *all*, so that we in turn, can graciously and gladly share it with others. This is the Way of Jesus Christ; this is the Way you and I are called to faithfully follow.