



Strangers, Foreigners, Jesus

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany. ~ February 3, 2019

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Psalms 71:1-6

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| 1 In you, O God, have I taken refuge; *
let me never be ashamed. | 5 from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor. |
| 2 In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; *
incline your ear to me and save me. | 6 For you are my hope, O God, *
my confidence since I was young. |
| 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; *
you are my crag and my stronghold. | 6 I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my strength; *
my praise shall be always of you. |
| 4 Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, * | |

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus began to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth: "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.

One of the things that happens often on religious retreats is that participants are asked to talk about their own faith, their experience of God, of Jesus. At one particular retreat that Barbara Brown Taylor, whose words and thoughts inspired this sermon, writes of, participants were asked to spend some time thinking about, identifying, who had been Christ to and for them at some point in their life. As people told their stories, they spoke of someone who had been extraordinarily kind to them, who had helped them. Stories of rescue, compassion, and comfort. The whole room was feeling particularly warm and fuzzy, with everyone's buddy, Jesus, at the center of the glow. And then one woman, who had looked sort of pained during the conversation, stood up and squashed the mood. She said the first thing she thought of when trying to think of who had been Christ to her was, "Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it? Now this is not exactly what we most want to contemplate about Christ or about our relationship with him, but it is the God's honest truth. Christ is not just the one who comforts, heals, and rescues us. Christ is also the one who challenges us and who upsets us by telling us the truth about ourselves, our relationships, our lives, so clearly that we will do all sorts of awful things to get him to shut up and go away. Recognizing the Christ in others is not simply an exercise in getting misty eyed at those who have unexpectedly helped us, it is recognizing the Christ in those offensive people God has a knack for sending our way. Not every offensive person is carrying a word from God, but some of them are most definitely people sent to upset our worldview enough that we don't confuse our own ideas of God with God.

One of the issues we have been wrestling with in the last few weeks as we have read through Paul's letter to the Corinthians, is what it means to be in community. Paul told us we are the body of Christ, and individually members of it—that we need all the different parts. And this morning we have Paul's great ode to love in community—how love behaves in community made up of many different parts. But the truth is, many of us come to church looking for sameness, for a group of like-minded people who affirm us, and we are often disappointed when we don't find that. And the truth is that each of us has a secret list of people we think of as "out", people would rather not sit next to, in church or anywhere else for that matter. These people may be specific or may be part of a group. You and I know who they are for each of us. Some of them are on the list because, well, we are all snobs, and some are on because we believe they are bad people—people who offend us because we think they offend God. And we are sure God would not want to sit next to them either. We are sure Paul didn't mean we are to love THAT person. We are sure that the boundaries we set up in our community are OK.

One of the problems that has become screamingly obvious in the last few years in this country is how divided we are—how our sense of common life has eroded. Parker Palmer, in [The Company of Strangers](#), writes that the word "public" contains a vision of our interdependence on one another. In public parks, public libraries, public schools, we come together as strangers who agree to share common resources. We do not have to agree on everything, we don't even have to like each other, but in order for public life to work, we have to respect each other's dignity as human beings, which is in fact what we have in common, and we have to act with honor among strangers as well as friends. In this sense, community does not depend on our being in agreement with each other about anything except that we will share common spaces, where we all belong. It seems we have forgotten that. We have begun to regard strangers as enemies. Those who think and live differently from us as enemies. In a world that is growing increasingly scary, many of us have hunkered down in well-defended lives. We have sorted ourselves into tribes who are suspicious of other tribes and who often, overtly and covertly, go to war with each other. If we meet a stranger we must either keep that person at bay, or make him or her like us. In other words, the endless variety of human life has become a threat, not a blessing, and the whole body has suffered.

This whole thorny issue of community is what gets people so upset with Jesus after his first sermon in Nazareth—the one we just heard—the one that almost gets him killed. Initially everyone is thrilled with him, their hometown son made good. Then he begins to attack their sense of community. They want him to heal *them* just like he healed people in Capernaum, a gentile city. They are his own people, his community, he belongs to them, not to some group of strangers, and they expect the dividends to start rolling in.

According to the text, all Jesus does is remind them that God's love, God's community, is much bigger than their idea of it. He angers them by telling them two stories about how God had passed over them and their kind in order to care for strangers. First the widow of Zarephath, a woman from the wrong side of the tracks, then Naaman the Syrian, who was not just a foreigner, but an officer in the army of one of Israel's enemies. It was like telling them that God had taken on the role of chaplain to Al Qaeda, or that God ignored a sick priest to care for a Scientology leader. Of course, Jesus was not telling them anything they had not read a thousand times in their own scripture. Story after story tells of God caring for and telling God's people to care for the stranger, the foreigner. But that's not how they had been using their sacred texts. They used them instead to draw a line in the sand, to close ranks on outsiders. And as soon as Jesus crossed that line he went from favored hometown boy to

outsider and enemy. Someone who was so offensive to them, and therefore clearly to God, that they decided to kill him.

That, of course, is how sensitive *we* are to being told that our enemies are God's friends. That is how we react, how riled up we get, when told that God would just LOVE to sit next to the person we wouldn't dream of sitting next to. It turns out that the people who disturb and offend us, belong to God just as surely as we do. Despite all our efforts to build and maintain walls, God seems to have no affection for our boundaries. God acts as if they aren't even there, asking us to step aside so the Holy One can pass through. Despite our fears to the contrary, the bottom line is not that we are loved any less in all of this, but that people we cannot stand are loved by God as much as we are, loved by a God with an upsetting sense of community.

This is true for the world, and sadly, for the church. But the difference is we in the church should... **do**, know better. We believe better. We know about Naaman and the Widow of Zarephath. We know about Jesus who hung out with misfits and outsiders, not the religious people. We believe in the Christ who cares for the stranger and who comes to us as a stranger, reminding us over and over again the while he is with us he does not belong to us. Here in church, we are dared to believe that it is God who makes us a community and not we ourselves, and that our differences are God's best tools for opening us up to the truth that is much bigger than we are, to a love that is much bigger than we are.

The truth is always more than any one group of us can grasp all by ourselves. It takes a world full of strangers and outsiders, friends and neighbors, to tell us the parts we cannot see. And sometimes we will want to kill them for it. Jesus own people tried to kill him several times. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way, looking for others to whom he could tell and show the story of God's boundary breaking love. I have no idea how he did that—how he simply walked through a crowd that was intent on killing him. But I do know that is what he still does. If we do not listen, he won't try to change our minds. He will simply pass through the midst of us and go on his way.