

2-2-25 Sermon: “Just Us” – Luke 4:21-30

When we left off with Jesus last week in the Nazarene synagogue, things were going relatively well.

He stood up and read from the Prophet Isaiah, proclaimed that the Gospel was good news for the poor, and then he sat back down and told the community who raised him, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The shift in this Gospel lesson from last week’s story to this week’s story is very abrupt; it almost feels like Jesus is engaging in a little self-sabotage. Because he could have quit while he was ahead! The crowd is impressed, and they get the point: the Gospel is here, and it is good news for the poor.

But for some reason, Jesus goes on the defensive; he starts quoting proverbs about how prophets are never accepted in their hometowns. And then he reminds them of two stories from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The first story is about a famine that struck Israel during the time of the prophet Elijah. And how, instead providing relief to the Hebrew people, God sent Elijah to a widow living in the Gentile land of Sidon. Elijah worked a miracle to save, not the people of Israel, but this *foreigner* – this alien – and her son.

Next is a story about Elisha, Elijah’s successor. And how, while Israel was at war with the neighboring nation of Syria, God gave Elisha the power to cure a man named Naaman – a Syrian army commander – of his leprosy. How God’s healing power extended not to his own people, but to his people’s literal *enemy*, in a time of war.

By the time Jesus finishes “story time,” the crowd has gone from impressed...to enraged. The congregation becomes a violent mob that runs Jesus out of town, and even tries to hurl him off a cliff.

What *happened*?

Well, you could say, xenophobia happened, tribalism, the fear of the “other.” God’s salvation and healing is supposed to be for the Jews, and yet Jesus uses his inaugural address to highlight two stories where God healed *Gentiles*. The Hebrew Scriptures, after all, are the story of *Israel’s* God, and that God has no business healing *foreigners* and *enemies* of the Hebrew people. (And even if that did happen, Jesus has no business bringing it up.)

That could be it. Simple tribalism. Jesus’ message is, “God’s salvation extends to all, even people you don’t like,” and the crowd’s response is “How about we throw you off a cliff?”

That actually sounds a lot like public discourse these days, doesn’t it? Xenophobia, tribalism, and murderous mobs? Death threats to people who disagree with us? Truly, this story from two thousand years ago sounds like it just as easily be a dispatch from our 2025 culture of contempt. Of “us” versus “them,” where we say “*We* are right, and *them*? They are not just wrong; they are evil, bad, worthless....”

But then, in the name of not “othering” people, I try to put myself in the shoes of that synagogue crowd.

And I find myself wondering: Would they have been as outraged if Jesus had said something like, “There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, and during the famine, Elijah was sent to many of them, *and also* to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon.”

Or if he’d said, “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, and God cleansed them all, *and then* went on to cleanse Naaman the Syrian!”

I wonder if the crowd would have been as enraged if the healings were a “both-and,” rather than an “instead-of.” If Jesus had said, “God has been healing your people all along. And because God’s love is too big for just one people, God goes out and heals other people, too.

And you know...there is one surefire way to lean into this second option. To ensure that it’s not “them” receiving grace instead of “us.” We eliminate the “them.” And no, I do not mean we take them out; I mean that we acknowledge that these divisions between “us” and “them” are our own constructions. We recognize our shared humanity, and we accept the *difficult* truth that we are all “just us.”

There is a name for this process of going from “us versus them” to “just us.” It’s called empathy. The practice of taking our neighbors’ joy and sorrow into our own selves, experiencing them as if they were our joys and our sorrows.

Jesus gives us a model for this practice of empathy in Matthew’s Gospel, in that story about sheep and goats. He tells the sheep, “I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison, and you visited me.”

Jesus identifies himself so strongly with “the least of these” that they and he are one. Their joy is his joy; their suffering is his suffering. And then he calls us, his followers, to go and do likewise. To cultivate the virtue of empathy.

I watch this particular community of Jesus’ followers practice empathy every time we share prayer requests in worship. One person shares a prayer – a concern for a loved one’s health – and as they speak, you can watch that concern ripple over everyone else’s faces. The joy or suffering is no longer just mine or yours; now it belongs to all of us.

Of course, empathy is easier to practice here, because like that synagogue in Nazareth, we are each other’s people. But what if that’s exactly what Jesus is trying to say? That the Gospel has come, therefore we are *all* each other’s people; that there is no longer “us” and “them,” – just “us.” Any healing is *our* healing. Any salvation is *our* salvation.

Easier said than done, of course. Cultivating empathy is for the entire human community is no small task. Author Anne Lamotte describes this struggle perfectly, with her characteristic blend of profundity and snark.

She says, “Jealousy has always been my cross, the weakness and woundedness in me...I know that when someone gets a big slice of pie, it doesn’t mean there’s less for me. In fact, I know that there isn’t even a pie, that there’s plenty to go around, enough food, and love, and air. But [here’s the thing]: I don’t believe it for a second. I secretly believe there *is* a pie. And I will go to my grave brandishing my fork.”¹

Perhaps you can identify with Anne and her pie. I can. But friends, the good news that we don’t actually have to *feel* empathy in order to practice it. We can stand there, teeth gritted, fork in hand – it doesn’t matter! As long as we pass that piece of pie to the person over there. *[Smile]*

But I *dare* you to practice empathy and not begin to feel it.

I dare you to sit down and eat that pie with your neighbor – your enemy, even – and not start to care about that person. I dare you to look into the eyes of someone praying to God for healing and not whisper an “amen” in response.

It turns out that empathy a virtue that we learn by doing. All we have to do is show up and try, and the Spirit fills in the rest.

By the way, those stories Jesus tells, about Elijah and Elisha and miraculous healings – the Hebrew people get healed, too. The Scriptures are full of their miracle stories.

But you knew that already, didn't you? Because there isn't an us and a them in the story of salvation. There's just us.
Just us. Amen.

¹ Ann Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts On Faith*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).