

The Gospel Story that Ends with a Cliff-Hanger

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Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#), [Luke 4:21-30](#)

Do you remember the good old days? You know, those days that were almost two years ago? I'm talking about the very early days of the pandemic and the crisis. Ah, those were the days, weren't they? I remember walking around back then. Everything was all shut down. No one was going anywhere. And, yes, I know that people were worried, and they were scared but there was still something uplifting about the moment. You would see the messages everywhere you went. "We're all in this together," they would proclaim. "Let's all do everything that we can to help each other."

And I know that sometimes you still do see messages like that. But I'm not so sure when I see them today that people still believe them. Back then they really seemed to. There was this strong sense that we would be there for each other and that everyone would pitch in. People were forgiving of errors and lapses among others. They even pulled together behind political leaders if you could imagine that!

A Change in Attitude

And the reason that feels so nostalgic is because I don't often get that sense these days. Today, it often feels as if we have never been so divided. We are seeing sharper and sharper partisan political divides as right wingers identify left wingers as examples of pure evil and the rhetoric on the other side is pretty much the same. We see the enmity between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated and a general breakdown of civility. And I cannot help but wonder how we went so quickly from "We're all in this together," to "Hey, get them. It's all their fault."

Why this Change?

And, yes, I do understand that a big part of this is just pure exhaustion. We are so tired of this whole thing and so it is not really surprising that people have gotten cranky. But I am not sure that that is the whole story. So, I would like to explore the bigger question of how that kind of thing can happen. How, all of a sudden and seemingly out of nowhere, can you get people to turn on each other? And it seems to me that we have a terrific opportunity to study that phenomenon in our gospel reading this morning.

We actually started reading this story last week from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus returned to his hometown at the beginning of his ministry.

There, in the meeting of the synagogue, he read some scripture from the prophet Isaiah and declared that it had been fulfilled. That's where the reading ended last week, but we pick it up this week in order to focus on the reaction to what Jesus had done. And the reaction, I've got to say, is kind of bananas. It ends in a cliff-hanger.



Initial Positive Reaction turns Negative

Now, first of all, what Jesus has just said is the kind of statement that you might expect to inspire an extreme reaction. He has said that the ancient scripture had been fulfilled. He has strongly implied that it is his own presence at this moment that has brought about such fulfillment. And we have long been told that this is the very kind of thing that people got upset with Jesus about, for claiming too much about himself. So, you might well expect people to get upset at him for saying that this scripture is actually about him. But we are told quite the opposite. We are assured that **“all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”**

And yet we are also told that, minutes later, they were ready to throw Jesus off of a cliff. So, if it wasn't the fulfillment of scripture, what was it that got them to turn so very quickly. Well, let's take a look at what Jesus says next. **“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’”** he says. **“And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”** And then, **“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.”** And you can sort of understand why *this* might have riled them up. Here he is the famous boy from Nazareth and yet he is performing all of his wonders someplace else. That is a blow to hometown pride and might have even stirred up some jealousy in them. But it is hard to see why him saying this could have gotten them into a homicidal rage.

No, it seems pretty clear that what he said next was what pushed them over the edge – which is to say that it made them want to push *him* over the edge. But all he did was give them two examples from their own history. He told them about how the Prophet Elijah was sent to help a widow at Zarephath and about how the prophet Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian. It is only when they hear him say that that they are suddenly ready to kill him.

A Key Story for the Gospel

I think it is probably important for me to point out that this is not just an ordinary story in the Gospel of Luke. This is a very important story. The story of Jesus' return to his hometown of Nazareth and the poor reception he received there is told in the other gospels. But Luke tells it very differently. He moves it, for one thing, to the very beginning of his story of Jesus' ministry while the others tell it much later. And it is actually quite clear that the story is out of sequence inside Luke's Gospel because Jesus refers to his having performed wonders in Capernaum already. But Luke has reported no such wonders yet. Luke is also the only one who adds this fuller story of what it was that Jesus did to make the people in Nazareth get upset with him.

So, it seems pretty clear here that Luke is doing more than just telling a straightforward story of what happened when Jesus went to Nazareth. This story is his big dramatic introduction of the entire work of Jesus. The reading that Jesus does in the synagogue is the perfect summary of what his ministry will look like. And this part of the story that we read this morning is a perfect explanation for why it is that there was so much opposition to everything that Jesus did and everything that he stood for.

The Basis of Opposition to Jesus

So, with that in mind, the issue cannot be that Jesus just said the wrong thing at the wrong time and that that was what set them off. Luke is trying to demonstrate to us in this passage what it was in

general that caused so much opposition to what Jesus was doing. He's giving us examples of the kind of thing that created that opposition.

And that is why these two Old Testament stories that Jesus mentions are so important. Basically, Jesus brings up for these people two stories, that come from their own history and from their own scriptures, of times when God sent prophets to help people who weren't Jews. The only thing that the widow at Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian have in common is that they aren't Jews. So, Jesus told these people about how God had sent his prophets out of their way to help Gentiles and that is what enraged them.

Think about that. The thing that made them turn on a dime from admiring Jesus and what he was saying to wanting to throw him off of a cliff was simply that he reminded them that God had wanted to help and save people who were not like them. The very idea that God would make good things happen to the wrong sorts of people, that was enough to turn them into a murderous mob.

The Problem with Grace

Jesus, you see, is the perfect demonstration and the personification of the grace of God. And what we often fail to realize is how offensive the very notion of grace really is. Oh yes, it is all very wonderful to consider how we might receive grace. But when we think of the idea of the "wrong kinds of people" being the recipients of grace and love, we often experience that very negatively.

I mean, think of how we talk and think during this present pandemic crisis. What are the things we really argue about? We argue about who is worthy to have good things happen to them. The vast majority of the people who have tried to do everything right by social distancing and wearing masks and getting their vaccinations are getting outraged at the people who are not doing the right things. They are enraged when they see them getting away with this. And they kind of want to see bad things happen to them. I'm not saying that anyone wants to see anyone getting horribly sick or dying, surely no one would wish that on anyone else, but there is a bit of an attitude that maybe it is fitting when it does happen.

At the same time, those who have refused to follow pandemic restrictions have gotten extremely upset as they see the privileges given to those who have. In many cases, this is just a matter of not wanting to see the people who aren't like us getting good things. Nothing can enrage people as quickly as that. That's what we see happening in this story of Jesus in Nazareth.

Facing up to who we are

And the reason why this story is given such prominence in the Gospel of Luke is because Luke is telling us that this is the very thing that created such opposition to Jesus. It was not just that he was the demonstration of the grace of God, it was also that he showed people who they really were and how unwilling they were to see God's grace being made available to those who were considered unacceptable. It is kind of disturbing to us when we learn these things about ourselves.

I was kind of struck this morning by one of the verses in our reading from First Corinthians. The thirteenth chapter of that letter is a justly famous passage about love – an encouragement for us to have the same kind of love for one another that God has for us. But there's one verse that seems to underline how hard this is for us. **"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face."** Paul writes. **"Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."**

That image of a person staring at themselves in a mirror and yet only being able to see their reflection dimly stands out for me. The Greek word that is used in that verse for *dimly* is actually the word *enigma*. So, you could also translate that, as I stare into the mirror, all I really see is a puzzle or an enigma instead of myself. It is this sense that we don't truly know who we are. And the idea is that God is the only one who truly knows our proper nature.

Jesus Removed the Enigma

And, you see, that was precisely the reason why Jesus caused such a strong reaction. Jesus removed the enigma. By so clearly showing and demonstrating the love and grace of God, he showed up that lack of love and grace in everyone else. He showed them that they were unwilling to see good things happen to people who were not like them. And they didn't like what they saw. And they tried to throw him off a cliff, though he just passed through the crowd and went on his way.

So, what is it that, more than anything else, makes us inclined to turn against one another, to be consumed with rage? What is it that prevents us from being all in this together? It is what happens when we get a glimpse of who we really are, when we look in the mirror for a moment and we don't just see dimly; the problem is that we don't like what we see. We don't like it when our failure to be loving and gracious towards those who are not like us is shown up. And I suspect that that is what has happened to us as we've gone through this difficult time for the last couple of years. We have become strained and fatigued by an ongoing crisis and our defenses are broken down. We've been shown who we really are, and we don't necessarily like what we see. So, yes, we have become much more likely to turn to rage against each other.

Grace is the Beginning of Hope

But it is my hope and prayer that this is not the end of the story. Yes, it is true that this time of crisis has revealed to us a little bit more about who we are. And, yes, our initial reaction to that revelation has not necessarily been good. But here is the truth: it is only once we begin to come to terms with who we are that we can start to be different. Jesus came to reveal to us who we are, but he did not just do it in order that we should feel bad about ourselves. He did it in order that we might have the opportunity to experience redemption, new hope and new beginnings.

That is what the grace is for, not to make us feel bad because we don't have it, but to renew us with its possibilities. And this is a message we have as the Christian church, one that we can share in ways that no one else can. That is why I believe that the church can have a unique role in healing some of the division that has been created in our society over the last couple of years. We have a message that gives people the strength to see themselves for who they truly are, even with all their faults, and still have hope for change. There are few messages that our society needs more than that at this particular moment in time.