

Sermon, January 23, 2022

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

In the years before I entered seminary, I did a lot of soul searching with regard to my call. The church had disagreed with me. They didn't think I was called to the priesthood. Turned out it was a miscommunication between the guy who did my psych eval and the bishop. The bishop misread the doctor's letter. We didn't find that out until a few years later when Sara went to the same guy for her psych evaluation, and he said, "Your husband should be finishing seminary about now, right?" and she said, "No, he's not IN seminary." and he said, "Oh, why's that?" and she said, "Because of the letter you wrote to the bishop," and he said, "I didn't put anything in that letter to say he shouldn't go," and she said, "Well, the bishop thought you did!" and so he calls the bishop later to straighten it all out.

But this isn't about the after part, this is about what I did while I was wrestling with this call. What I did was I became an "associate chaplain" at a prison near our home in Greenville. Maury correctional institution. "High custody" is what they called it. Half a step from maximum custody. Most of the men in there had killed someone. It was actually a wonderful time of ministry. I directed their "Christian choir" and we performed for the general population at Christmas and Easter, and they were allowed to perform for their families on those holidays, too.

But I spent most of my time just visiting with the men there, and I got to know a lot of them very well, though it took a long time for them to start to trust me. One of them taught me how to play the introduction to Stairway to Heaven on the guitar, and how to play a D major chord with the F# on the bottom.

And one of them, Michael, I've mentioned him before in my Christian Formation emails, Michael taught me what it means to be free in Christ. He was serving consecutive life sentences and yet he was the most free man, the most joyful Christian I think I've ever met. He was in his 40's but he was so radiant that he looked like he was about 25.

But the most unsettling thing I learned in those 5 years was that our penal system isn't about reforming criminals, it's about punishment. It's about leveling the scales, exacting a cost for what the law-breaker has done.

It's about trying to cause someone to repent, which is defined in our language as feeling sorry for or regretting one's wrongdoing. But really, all it does is teach them to regret getting caught. Why? Because once we stick them away in a prison we as a culture have nothing to do with them. Even their families abandon them after the first year or so, sometimes less. Almost no one comes to visit them or spend the kind of time with them that might actually help them to see themselves in a light that would lead them to be sorry for not having been the person they might have been.

We do prison so that victims and victims' families can "get some kind of closure" after a crime, feel like they've been cared for by the system. How many times have we insisted that we "get justice for the victim?" I know even I've said it. I know I have those feelings too, even after all that time as a prison chaplain. It's hard to give them up.

And that, finally, brings me around to the Gospel text for today, believe it or not.

You see, I want to talk about today's text in its full context, not just the bit we read in the liturgy. If you read my email for this week, you'll know a lot of what I'm about to say, but as some of you probably haven't had time, I'm going to go over it briefly here again.

It's about how Jesus's message, the one we heard read already, is rejected, and him with it.

Let me read aloud the whole passage, with the part the lectionary people left out.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And

he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Physician, heal yourself.” What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away. (ESV)

This rejection of Jesus, his rather harsh words in response to them “speaking well of him” and “marveling at the words of grace coming from his mouth,” are all rather confusing until you realize that we’ve been working with a bad translation for hundreds and hundreds of years.

I won’t go into all the details on the translational difficulties here, on the way the dative case is mistranslated, but I can go over that again

with y'all at some later date, I've also brought some printed copies of that portion of my email from this week for you to take with you to read again if you like.

The point is that they did marvel at what he said, but they didn't "speak well of Him." They "spoke ill of Him," literally in the Greek, they witnessed against him for his words of grace! And that then makes sense of Jesus' response to their *rejection* of Him.

Why did they speak ill of Him? He'd just read one of their favorite passages from Isaiah. One probably every Jew in Israel knew and longed to see fulfilled. And He'd told them it was happening. Why would that make them angry?

And this brings us back to the opening of the sermon for today.

Because Jesus left a line off the end of that passage from Isaiah, and all the people hearing it in the synagogue would have recognized that it was missing. The last few lines should have read,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
The day of vengeance of our God."

That's how it reads in Isaiah.

Jesus left off the line about God's vengeance. And they knew it. And they wanted no grace that omitted the vengeance of God, or showed grace to their enemies, so they grumbled against him, and He goes on to prophesy His own crucifixion, and point out to them that God has shown grace to people outside of Israel in their own scriptures.

And they try to throw Him off a hill top.

Not a great first sermon.

Because it's hard for us, even for me, to extend grace to those who've hurt me. And heaven knows the Jews had suffered brutally under the hands of the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Greeks, then the Romans.

But here is Jesus, leaving aside all that vengeance they've been hoping for for centuries. The same Jesus who will later say, during His "sermon on the mount,"

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

But as much as we like to be forgiven, we find that forgiving is much more difficult. Oh, we'll struggle to forgive our children, our parents,

our spouses, people we love, and that's hard, but someone who has killed someone we care about? That's pretty rare.

We wanted others to repent, but it's hard to repent of our desire for retribution.

And that, brothers and sisters, brings me back to something you've heard me say before. Our definition of "repent" has little or nothing to do with its biblical meaning. In the Bible, repenting isn't about feeling sorry. It may *lead to* feeling sorry, but the verb repent in Hebrew means to turn around, go the opposite direction. In Greek it means to change your thinking. When God calls us to repent, He calls us to think differently, and turn around, walk with Him in a new direction.

I saw it happen in that prison, but rarely. I have seen it happen in myself, but if I'm not careful, I get turned backwards and inside out again, so I have to watch for it. When I catch myself, my prayer is usually something like, "Yes, Lord. Help me to see them through Your eyes. Help me to love them with Your love. Mine doesn't seem to be working right now."

In this season of Epiphany, let's not romanticize the revelation of Jesus to the world too much, and forget that His call to grace isn't always an easy one.

Amen.