

Epiphany 4C

January 31, 2010

St. Andrew's

Jeremiah 1.4-10

Ps 71.1-6

1 Corinthians 13.1-13

Luke 4.21-30

One day last week I was at the Sheriff's department picking up some paperwork and application materials for being a volunteer chaplain for the department. I've been talking with them for a while and it looks like it may actually come to pass. There will be a bunch of hoops to jump through as you might expect but since they are anticipating the chaplain's full access to the department, records, and the jail, all the preliminaries are pretty extensive. Besides the interviews, there will be REAL background checks, a psych eval, a polygraph, and fingerprinting. So I have determined that I must now abandon my life of crime because I can no longer hide from the law!

So one day last week I was down there for the fingerprinting which is done in the jail. All the officers and jailers are in full uniform, of course, guns and all, and the regular work of the jail is going on around the fingerprinting station, including movement of prisoners and checking new people in. I was there in my regular work clothes, no collar, but skirt, jacket, etc. being fingerprinted with all regular formality by someone official. The undersheriff told me afterwards that he almost broke out laughing because one of the prisoners was brought by behind me, in orange jump suit and shackles, saw me standing there being fingerprinted, looked at him with shock, and mouthed WOW. As Gary said to me this week, it wasn't even "white collar crime" because I wasn't wearing the collar!

What this man was seeing was not at all what he expected. He must have thought he'd figured out how the world worked and this wasn't it. We have readings today that have something to say about our expectations of how things are supposed to be and how God may have different ideas.

In what is known as Jeremiah's "call" story, he protests, just like Moses had done ages before, that he wasn't qualified to do what God was asking him to do. After all, he was only a boy and couldn't possibly be a prophet to the nations and speak the words of the Lord.

Paul writes to the squabbling Corinthians about love which has nothing to do with hearts and flowers and romance and chocolate. We have used this text for so long in weddings that we begin to think it's regarding romanticized notions about marriage but Paul could easily replace the word love with "loyalty." This loyalty is serious business, greater even than faith and hope. This love is active, tough, resilient, and long-suffering. Its patience and endurance are for nations, communities, and enemies. It will transform and renew the Body of Christ.

And what about Jesus' friends in Nazareth? They were pretty happy to see him in the reading we had last week which was immediately before today's verses. They were amazed at his gracious words and spoke well of him and were probably pretty proud of the local boy. This might not have

been exactly what they expected of hometown Jesus, but they could adjust their expectations since he was bringing such good news. Until it became clear that they would NOT be the vessels for the unfolding of God's new plan. The episodes which Jesus related to them of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, who were Gentiles, not Jews, were jarring and infuriating news, not the narrative they were used to, not what they expected from the living God. David Ostendorf writes that here, now, was the insider who suddenly became the outsider.

Not the way the world was supposed to be. A well-dressed, middle-aged woman getting fingerprinted in the jail; a young prophet who will have words put in his mouth; a messiah sent not only to the Jews; and a demanding love from a God who is more than their own tribal deity, according to Peter Gomes.

In a thought-provoking article, Ostendorf continues that this is God at work; as God has been at work throughout the millennia and as God is at work even now – unfolding new narratives with, through, and among people who are often outsiders to the assumed faithful. Jesus' announcement points to the reality that God is at work in the strangest of places, in the midst of outsiders to the established community of faith.

Yesterday I was on Mercer Island with Pat Milliren for a Communion with Creation workshop and we heard Mark McDonald, the Anglican Indigenous Bishop of Canada, tell about raising up local, indigenous people to minister and looking for those who are making a difference in the life of the community; not necessarily church people. It turns out that one such person had been the big burley guy you paid to take care of someone who was bothering your sister! And she would never be bothered again. This Bouncer was making a difference in the people's lives and he did indeed enter the ministry.

In the unfolding of these new narratives, as we are called to be a part of what God is doing in the world through Jesus, we can be filled with rage and try to shove Jesus and the Bouncer off the cliff, be quietly indifferent, or follow and contribute to a new and redeeming narrative that is God's powerful story. The radical character of this mission, according to Luke Timothy Johnson, is specified above all by its being offered to and accepted by those who were the outcasts of the people. Luke's literary and religious intentions move beyond the poor, the blind and the oppressed, to all people outside the boundaries of Israel. Jesus is widening the circle of grace to include other people, a theme that recurs throughout Luke's Gospel.

God's mercy went beyond God's own people; Naaman the Syrian, covered with sores, got the miracle of healing instead of one of our own. Israel's scriptures themselves bore witness to God's blessing on Gentiles as well as Jews. But the people were not interested in that message and decided to kill the messenger. It didn't work this time but Luke is casting the shadow of the cross over this episode. In Jerusalem a couple years in the future, another angry crowd will get their wish and successfully do him in. It is a glimpse of the resistance that the gospel often received when it is faithfully proclaimed.

Frederick Buechner wrote in *The Clown in the Belfry*:

Israel did not want to be a holy nation. Israel wanted to be a nation like all the other nations, a nation like Egypt, like Syria. She wanted clout. She wanted security. She wanted a place in the sun. It was her own way she wanted, not God's way; and when the

prophets got after her for it [Jesus included], she got rid of the prophets; and when God's demands seemed too exorbitant, God's promises too remote, she took up with all the other gods who still get our votes and our money and our 9 to 5 energies, because they are gods who could not care less whether we are holy or not, and promise absolutely everything we really want and absolutely nothing we really need.

Grant Maruicio blogged in 2007 that this preaching of Jesus is like telling denominational Christians that God is as likely to bless an Imam as an Archbishop, to look with favor on a rebel in Blessed Fidel's Havana as to pass on a miracle to a clergy widow in the Church Home for the Aged. These alarming illustrations of God's universal love and providence are not acceptable to people whose religion has made God small enough to sit in our churches or synagogues or be peddled at a charity bazaar.

The folks at Nazareth were quite content with a Nazareth-sized God. What about us? Luke wants our theology to be broader than our geography and demographics. We all need to take regular inventory of our own attitudes towards Christ and his kingdom. Do we take the attitude that God's primary duty is to be taking care of my problems and solving my crises? Has our prayer, slowly, imperceptibly changed from THY kingdom come, thy will be done, into my kingdom come, my will be done?

We try to define and limit who God is and what God can do by our own limited understanding and narrow view of grace. God knows this and has sent prophets to help turn us around, to realign ourselves with God's purposes and transform us into the people God created us to be. Some things must be torn down before they can be built back up. Our jealousies. Our selfishness. Our greed. When we can move past our own and faulty expectations and partial sight we will see God unfolding new narratives with a love we experience as an enduring, face to face, and unshakable grasp upon our lives.

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