

One of my colleagues remembers growing up in a church where the pastor would often preach a fire and brimstone sermon. At Sunday dinners following those sermons, his father would always say, “Boy, Preacher really told *them* today, didn’t he?” It never occurred to him that any of the words of judgment in the scripture or the sermon could apply to him as opposed to being an indictment of *other* people. Today’s gospel illustrates the opposite problem: what happens when God’s good news is proclaimed for *other* people, especially if the other people are those we consider to be less worthy than ourselves.

This story happens rather early in Luke’s gospel and Jesus’ public ministry, but he has already earned a favorable reputation for his preaching. Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and visits the synagogue on the Sabbath, where he is invited to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus reads the hopeful part about the Lord restoring Israel after the exile. Then Jesus tells them that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing, which seems like a promising start to the kind of feel-good sermon the congregation probably hoped for. They are pleasantly surprised: *Did you hear that? From Joseph’s son? We didn’t even know he could read!*

But any preacher will tell you that it’s not reading scripture that will get you in trouble; it’s preaching about the scripture’s application that will get you thrown off a cliff. Jesus reads this promise of good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor—and certainly the members of the Nazareth congregation would fall into one or more of those categories. They were all living under Roman occupation; it’s likely many of them were poor. Some of them may have been displaced from their family’s land or had been working as indentured servants—losses of fortune which were supposed to be restored during a Jubilee year, the year of the Lord’s favor. Jesus implies that God will bless them as God blessed their ancestors. So far, so good.

But then Jesus recalls two other stories from scripture: Elijah rescuing the widow of Zarephath and Elisha cleansing the leper Naaman. Those are great stories of God alleviating the suffering of people in need. But as Jesus points out, in both of those stories, God intervened not for Israelites but for outsiders. Both the widow of Zarephath in Sidon, and Naaman, commander of the Aramean army, are gentiles. Naaman’s help even comes through an Israelite girl who was enslaved to his family. Neither of these characters are good guys in the eyes of Israel. Most of ancient scripture focused on God choosing the people of Israel, but in these stories God worked in, with, through, and for others.

The people in the Nazareth synagogue are enraged. Jesus, one of their own, the hometown hero who had gone out and made a name for himself, comes home, gets them all excited by the promise of good news, and then tells them he's not going to be doing any special favors for them after all. Luke hasn't told us what it was that Jesus did in Capernaum, but whatever it was, Jesus tells them he's not going to do it there. They are so angry, they drive him out of town and try to throw him off a cliff. Jesus, somehow, eludes them and heads on his way.

There are other places in the gospels where Jesus claims that he has come to minister to the people of Israel first, but Jesus' ministry was not limited to them. He is the son of Joseph of the house of David, but he is also the Son of God, Creator of *all* people. Jesus promised the Nazarenes that the scripture was fulfilled *in their hearing*—that they were part of God's promises coming to fruition. They just weren't the only ones for whom God would fulfill promises. Yet the people are not satisfied by God blessing them; they are enraged at the thought that God could also bless others. They wanted Jesus to give them preferential treatment, which was, after all, how they were used to things working. If you're in with the in crowd, you've got it made. If not, that's too bad for you. Jesus reminds them that God doesn't work that way.

Anthropologists will tell you that a little bit of tribalism was probably necessary for the evolution and survival of the human species. Forming a trusted group to work together and care for each other, and teaching that group to have some fear and skepticism of outsiders, would have helped protect families and clans as nations emerged and competed for resources. Unfortunately, we haven't evolved very far beyond that. We profess that God created all people in God's image; we sing about Jesus loving the little children, *all* the children of the world. But we still draw lines between us and others. Even when we have enough, we still appoint ourselves arbiters of whether others have earned the right to enjoy as much as we have. We fail to see that when we draw a line, Jesus is always on the other side of it, with *them*, not because God loves them better but because to God there is no *us* and *them*, because we drew the line, not God. I sometimes hear people say that we are living through the most divided time in the history of this country. That's ridiculous of course, considering that this nation fought a civil war and some of you were alive when water fountains were still segregated. But we can certainly see that division makes it harder for us to survive, let alone thrive. I don't have an easy answer, but I can tell you that God's vision for human community does not involve demonizing other people. Because we're all in this together, if the good news is not good news for everyone, it's not good news for anyone. May we not only rejoice when God is good to the poor, releases the captives, restores sight to the blind, and frees the oppressed; may we also be at work, making those things happen.