

All Are Welcome

2-3-2013

Luke 4: 21-30

21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." 22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. 23 Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' " 24 "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." 28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

At first, I had trouble really understanding this particular scripture. Why did the people of Nazareth want to throw Jesus off a cliff and kill him? What had he said during this short sermon that had made them so mad? Did any of you wonder the same thing? In verse 21 we read, **“He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”** He just told them that he was the messiah. You would think they would be happy for him. You know, local boy makes good. Prime example; I’m not a huge pro football fan, however, when Chris Johnson from ECU was drafted by the Tennessee Titans, I began to follow Tennessee. And when Dwayne Harris was drafted by Dallas, even though I’m not a Dallas Cowboys fan, I pulled for Dwayne to do well. As long as David Garrard, a former ECU quarterback, was quarterback for the Jacksonville Jaguars, I pulled for Jacksonville. Linval Joseph another ECU player, plays for the New York Giants, so I pull for them. I want to see the local boys, you know, the boys from ECU make it big in the pros. Some of you probably feel the same way. So why didn’t the people from Nazareth feel the same way about Jesus? Why didn’t the people of Nazareth want to see the local boy, Jesus of Nazareth, do well? I think that first you really need to understand the two scripture references Jesus makes. I’m not talking about the one from Isaiah, the one we talked about last week. No, I’m talking about the ones He makes reference to when He says, **²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”** The stories Jesus is referring to come from 1 Kings 17: 7-16 and 2 Kings 5: 1-19. These are scriptures straight from the Torah, the Jewish scriptures. The people in synagogue that morning were very familiar with those stories. I’m not going to read these two scriptures to you this morning, but let me give you the Readers Digest Condensed version. The story from 1 Kings goes like this: Elijah was the greatest of all the prophets. And there was a famine in the land of Israel and surrounding areas for three and a half years. Crops withered. The soil cracked. There had not been a drop of rain for years. Therefore, all the crops had dried up and died. There were a lot of widows in the land of Israel in the time of Elijah. These widows and their children were starving to death because of the famine. But God sent Elijah to a Gentile woman in Sidon. The woman fed Elijah with the little bit she had left for her and her son. So God provided for her and her son as long as she provided for Elijah. The story in 2 Kings goes like this: Remember Elisha? He followed Elijah, and whatever spirit Elijah had, well, Elisha was given a double portion of it. He was a powerful man. And in his time, there were many people with leprosy in the land of Israel. They were sick and covered with sores. But Elisha didn't heal any of them. Instead God sent Elisha to Naaman, a Gentile army commander in Syria who was covered with leprosy. Elisha told Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman did and was healed. Elisha healed the Gentile, but he didn't heal any of the Jews. When the Jewish people heard this, they were absolutely furious. It suddenly struck them what Jesus was really saying. He was declaring the disturbing news that God loves everybody, particularly those beyond their tight, exclusive little circle. It was a scandalous thing to say. You mean God loves someone other than the Jews. They weren't ready to accept that fact.

Let's see if I can put these two stories into context for today to help us better understand how the people of Nazareth felt. How many Americans, no, let's bring it a little closer to home, how many of you would have done something to help cure Osama Bin Laden if you had found out he was sick? That one will make you think for a minute. How about this one. Last Sunday we had a luncheon after church to raise money to help support the mission trip to Nicaragua. A lot of that money will go toward medical supplies. How many of you would donate money for medical supplies if you found out the supplies were going to Al-Qaida? Humm...now maybe the stories Jesus told the people in Nazareth make a little more sense. The Gentiles were the enemies of the Jews. And Jesus just told the Jews that their God helped Gentiles instead of Jews. And Jesus supported those missions. Maybe now we can begin to understand why they wanted to throw Him off a cliff.

By stating that God welcomes everyone, Jesus is closing the book on the old way of doing business. Jesus is closing the door on vengeance and oppression. Jesus is opening the door to a new way of governance. Jesus is opening the door to grace and truth and love and compassion. Jesus is saying that God loves you regardless of who you are, where you live, the color of your skin; God even loves the Gentiles. The Jews in Nazareth just could not comprehend this.

At this point I think we need to stop and try to put this in perspective for us here in Greenville today. What if Jesus had been born here in Greenville. Oh, let's say Joe and Mary lived over on Harding Street or on Library Street. That's where Jesus grew up. Jesus would have gone to Aycock Middle School and would have graduated from Rose High. He would have probably hung around Greenville for a while after graduation. He would have probably been working with Joe, building a house here, doing a remodel there; all in all, keeping a low profile for a few years. All of a sudden we would begin to hear about this man who grew up in Greenville. All of a sudden this man is up in Bethel doing some really good things. He is preaching and healing some people. Then we heard he was over in Robersonville, then in Oak City. Next, we might have heard He was in Snow Hill and then moved over to Ayden. It sounds like he may be working his way a little closer to home. He was in Winterville day before yesterday. Where do you think we would find Him when He came home, back to Greenville? Would He be over at Covenant United Methodist or over at Oakmont Baptist. Maybe He is at St. James. Wow, do you think he might come here to Hooker Memorial? Where do you think you would find Jesus? I'm not sure we would find him in a single one of the churches I just mentioned. However, I think if you really looked for him, you might find Him over at Walter B. Jones Alcoholic Rehab Center, or maybe you could find him at the methadone clinic, or over at the Joy Soup Kitchen. Maybe we should look for Him at the homeless shelter or where the crack whores hang out, or where the Angle Cops are handing out blankets, or where ever the Aids patients are being shunned and dying. Where are the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the lost, the confused? That is where you would find Jesus if He were to come to Greenville. Read the scriptures. Who did Jesus associate with; how about the tax collectors, the lepers, the prostitutes, the widows and orphans, the Samaritans. That is where you found Jesus. I think if He were to come to Greenville today, you would find him exactly where I just told you to look. Jesus went to the lowest of the low and lived among them and ministered to them. He told them that God loves them. Jesus went to the people who needed Him the most and gave them peace and grace and hope and God's love. That is where you found Him. Jesus didn't hang out with the scribes and Pharisees, and Sadducees. He actually called them a bunch of hypocrites. Jesus went out to the people. Jesus didn't stay in Nazareth his entire life. He didn't stand up on the edge of that cliff they wanted to throw Him off of and wave some sort of flag and proclaim "here I am. Y'all come here to see me". No, Jesus went where the people were, where the people needed him.

I'm afraid that we have westernized Christianity. I fear that we have taken the New Testament and interpreted it to suit us. We have turned Christianity into a religion for people like us. Have we become the Sadducees and Pharisees? Is our religion a "**convenience just for just us**"? Each of us wants a God of grace; a God who will care for us, who will love us, who will see to our needs. Do we really want a gracious God? Certainly we do -- for ourselves; but can we have that gracious God if we don't believe that the same grace is given to those sinners outside our church doors, outside our faith, outside our boundaries of "**acceptability**"? Do we really want our God to minister to those people or do we want to sweep them under the rug and pretend they don't exist. Do we really want our God to minister to the prostitutes, the alcoholics, and the drug addicts? Do we want our God to minister to the mentally ill who live on the streets and beg because they have nowhere to live? Do we want our God to minister to homosexuals or pedophiles? Do we want our God to minister to... well, you fill in the blank.

Do we want our God to minister to anyone who isn't just like us? We need to remember the two stories told in 1 Kings and 2 Kings. God sent Elijah not to a church, not to a religious club, but to a gentile widow. And God provided grain and oil for her when Israelite widows were starving to death. God sent Elisha not to the church or the synagogue, but to a pagan general and cured that general of leprosy. There were plenty of lepers in Israel who didn't get healed. That widow and that general are symbolic reminders that God is not merely our God. He is the God of everyone, even those who aren't just like us. This episode wasn't near the end of Jesus ministry on earth. It was fairly near the beginning. Jesus spent the last three years of his life going to those who needed him most. And in the end He told us to do the same. Remember Matthew 28: 19, it's called the great commission. **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.** I'm not sure we are quite ready to go out to the prostitutes and lepers of today's society. But we can't sit here on our little hill called Hooker Memorial and wave that flag and say hey, come to us. No, we have to go out. Start with someone you know. I'm sure each one of you have a friend or acquaintance who is un-churched; someone who may be a spiritual leper, someone whose heart has not been touched by God. Go to them, take the word of Jesus Christ to them. Start small; start with someone you know. You don't know where it may lead them and you.