

Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Sunday, February 3, 2019

1 Corinthians 13:1-13/ Luke 4:21-30

What would make you want to throw Jesus off a cliff? That's how Jesus' hometown synagogue reacted to his first sermon.

Next Sunday is Youth Sunday. I preached my first sermon at my home church on youth Sunday there. I wrote it and rewrote it many times, determined to call that all-white congregation to engage the Civil Rights Movement. As a hometown boy, I figured I could get away with it while the pastor couldn't.



My first sermon was entitled "God is Love," and my text was the passage about love from 1 Corinthians you heard read this morning. In it, I pointed out that, although we read that text at weddings, it really is talking about how the church lives together. The Greek word used for love is not romantic but, instead, the kind of love that puts others first. That passage calls us to take off our bibs and put on our aprons, to live as hosts with patient kindness rather than guests insisting that we have things our way.

Well, they didn't try to throw me off a cliff, which may be only because South Georgia is flat and has no cliffs. What they did after the sermon was worse: they patted me on the head and said that I was young and would learn. Well, they were wrong about that ...

Little in life hurts worse than being rejected, especially if that rejection comes from someone you thought loved you.

I heard about a soldier from Operation Desert Storm who was deployed overseas when he received a “Dear John” letter from his girlfriend back home. To add insult to injury, she wrote, “Will you please return my favorite photograph of myself? I need it for my engagement picture in the newspaper.” The poor guy was devastated, but his buddies came to his rescue. They went throughout the entire camp and collected pictures of all the other guys’ girlfriends. They filled up an entire shoe box and sent it to his ex along with a note saying, “Please find your picture, and return the rest because, for the life of me, I can’t remember which one you are!”

In today's Gospel lesson, we heard how Jesus was rejected by his hometown synagogue after his very first sermon. One Sunday shortly after I went to my first church, an older man who had been ill was going out the door and shook my hand. I said, “Mr. Smith I hope you get better.”



Without missing a beat, he replied, “Lord son, I hope you do, too.”

My preaching professor said, “There are two types of preaching that people won’t listen to: bad preaching and good preaching.” I’ve had congregations not like my sermons, but, so far, none have risen up and tried to kill me.

Last Sunday's Gospel lesson was the first part of today's story. Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue to preach, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of God is upon me because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives, and to set the oppress free.

He then rolled up the scroll and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That kind of liberation theology can get you in trouble in lots of churches, but the Bible says, on that day, people spoke well of him. They knew he was announcing to them that he was the Messiah, anointed by God to do the ministry of liberation.

That would have been a successful sermon if only Jesus had stopped while he was ahead. People were excited by the prospect that someone from their small town might be the messiah. Why, something like this could put Nazareth on the map and give them the inside track!

Like too many preachers, though, Jesus just didn't know when to quit. He was off to a good start, and everyone was nodding their heads and saying "amen." They were so caught up in his announcement, using the messianic verses from Isaiah, they missed him explaining what KIND of messiah he planned to be.



Then Jesus told two stories, and his meaning became clear. I warn my students that illustrations get preachers in trouble.

Now, to be clear, the stories Jesus tells are in the Bible, but, like most churches, they probably read only the parts of the Bible they liked. That's why I follow the

lectionary and read the assigned lessons. It forces us to look at scriptures we might otherwise skip.

Jesus reminds his hometown congregation about stories they had skipped, like how, although there were many widows during the time of the terrible famine, Elijah helped one particular widow in Zarephath. The prophet helped a woman who wasn't Jewish, who wasn't one of them. And, though there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, God sent the prophet to Naaman, a general of the Syrian Army, who was their enemy.

Prophets always stir up trouble, and, clearly, these two managed to cause Jesus problems because, after hearing these stories, the congregation was filled with murderous rage, seized Jesus, and tried to throw him off a cliff. What made them so angry?

Perhaps it wasn't so much what he said as what he didn't say. Maybe what made the congregation in Nazareth so angry was that Jesus didn't tell his hometown congregation how special they were; how they clearly were God's favorite.

The two stories he told indicated that God actually could love widows from the Phoenician village of Zarephath and generals of their enemies in Syria.

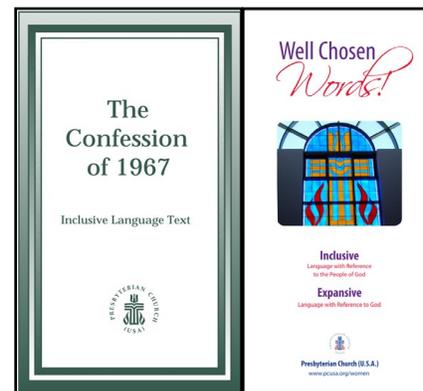
Talking about God's inclusive love is fine, until someone starts talking about people you don't like, approve of, agree with. Challenging nationalism today probably would get Jesus in trouble. Claiming that God loves all people seems to be a safe and acceptable message, until he specifically includes people we don't want God to love, at least not as much as God loves us.



Oh, none of us consciously believes that, but I doubt the congregation in Nazareth knew they felt that way either, until they suddenly woke up on a cliff trying to kill their favorite son.

Authentic inclusion is hard work because it requires us change, to move over, to make room, to become hosts when we are used to being special guests.

At the risk of finding myself on a cliff, let me offer a concrete example. Of late, we have discussed the use of inclusive language in worship. Ironically, these are discussions that seminaries and churches had 30 years ago when we decided that sexist language is as offensive as racist language. Apparently, some people think I'm making this up, but the new Presbyterian Hymnal and the Book of Common Worship both use inclusive language for people and expansive language for God.



Your next pastor may be a woman who attended seminary after inclusive language became the standard, and I don't want her to be blamed for something the larger church has done.

Cliffs are for interim pastors.

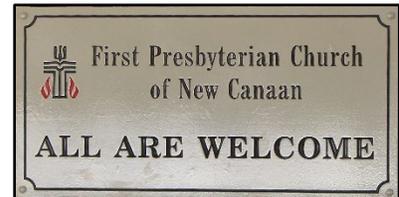
Believe me, I understand being rankled because we used inclusive Christmas carols. We know all the words to these songs, but, if you think you have it bad, I know all the words to almost **every** hymn! I hate not being able to sing songs the way I learned them, but I can't. I can't because:

- I genuinely want to include everyone in the family of God.

- The Bible says, “Love is patient and kind and does not insist on its own way.”
- I want my daughters to know they are created in the image and likeness of a God who is not a boy.

I, too, get irritated by changes like inclusive language, but, on Christmas Eve, two different young women stopped as they left the service to thank me for using language that included them. To them, we were good hosts who prepared a love feast for those who fear church no longer holds a place for them.

Putting up a sign is easy, but even Jesus' own congregation found that doing the work of inclusion is infuriatingly hard.



Do you remember how Jesus was saved from being thrown to his death that day for being too inclusive? Teetering on the edge, Jesus was rooted in faith that God is still love, and, “He walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”

That may be his biggest miracle. Pushed to the brink of the cliff, Jesus walked right through the anger and fear of people who doubted there really is enough of God's love to go around.

I wonder how many people followed him.

I wonder how many still do.

Amen.