

Provocateur?
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 4:16-30

Whenever I employ an image from the game show *Jeopardy*, I accept that for a significant percentage of the congregation, your first thought is not to lean forward as if intrigued. Rather, the thought that pops into your mind is some combination of the words — geezer, nerd, and dweeb. I accept that ... Nevertheless, you know what would make a great *Jeopardy* question? *The Scripture inscribed upon the Liberty Bell* — Without checking your phone, does anyone know it? *The Scripture inscribed upon the Liberty Bell* — Ken, what is: "*Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants thereof (Leviticus 25:10)*"

One could, maybe should, make note of the fact that the word used here is *inhabitant* and not *citizen*. Yet, upon reading the inscription, what is not readily apparent from the inscription is that it is but one portion of the verse in Leviticus. The full verse reads — "*And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.*"

What may also be a mystery to the tourist gazing upon the Philadelphia attraction, is that the verse quoted is contained within a larger narrative in Leviticus giving the Lord's ordinances concerning the year of Jubilee. The number seven plays a significant role in scripture, implying a sense of completeness. Thus, with that understanding, we read — *You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you...*

According to *The Guidebook Study Bible*, in the year of Jubilee, “God’s law demanded some very special things. The people were to take a year of vacation from their normal routine ... Why this break? ... Because God wanted this Jubilee year to be a time when everyone started over with a clean slate. During the Jubilee, all land was to be returned to its original owners, and all Israelite slaves were to be set free. Debts were forgiven and justly settled. The year of Jubilee was like a reset button on a computer, stopping everything and returning it to its original settings.” Doesn’t exactly

capture the way the word liberty is cast today, where it is cast more like — “I’ll do whatever I want, and you have to do everything I want also.” Liberty as a product of self-absorption, fear, and suspicion is very different than liberty as a product of compassion

Our text today shows that 18th Century colonists were not the only ones to seize upon notions of a liberty unafraid of diversity. Jesus brings forward the ancient Israelite concept of Jubilee. *“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”* That’s Jubilee language and that’s the text Jesus turns to for his sermon back in his hometown.

Can you go home again? That’s a question often pondered across generations. People certainly do, quite frequently. They go off to school, the military, grad school, maybe even a corporate job in the city, and then return home to run the family business, set up a law practice, teach at their old high school, care for an aging parent. Sometimes the love for the community more than makes up for any inconveniences or second thoughts. Yet, returning home becomes problematic when the adult you cannot flow seamlessly back into the stream of life and culture back home. If the adult

you feels compelled to challenge the hometown culture or question its ways, the resulting friction can be crushing. The hometown may chafe at your ideas or chase you right out of town.

I remember being invited to preach at my hometown church for a special occasion, and it was delightful, the Sunday school teachers, the community leaders, the widows, and the elders all making a fuss over me. *Look, he's all grown up. So poised. Wise beyond his years. That's our boy.* It was an ego stroking rush. Yet, later when the opportunity was presented to me to return to my home church to be the pastor, the initial excitement about the possibility, providentially, was replaced by the weight of the potential realities .

You've heard the old saying - The Gospel is meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. If I went there, I would be called upon to occasionally afflict the community that knew me as a kid. *Who does he think he is? I knew him back when. That seminary must have messed with his head. I'll bet his parents are embarrassed by his new-fangled ideas.* It is mighty hard to establish a voice with any authority among the folks who used to tell you to tie your shoes and stop running in the Sunday School hallway. I,

thankfully, realized that could not be my calling, not to mention the fact that in those years, I would have been my mother's boss ... How well do you think that would go? No, thanks. I'll stay in the land of sweet tea and azaleas.

Even Jesus knew that would be a fool's errand. *"No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."* But, you have to give it up for Jesus. He didn't hesitate. He jumped right in. They handed him the scroll of Isaiah, *"He has sent me to bring good news to the poor ... liberty to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Can you feel the initial pride and affirmation? *Look at him, talking about Jubilee ... alright, yeah ... bring me some good news ... give me some of that liberty ... free me from that nasty ol' boss who's oppressing me!*

Luke says, *"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."*

However, remember what we said about the Gospel — comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This crowd wasn't ready for what Jesus was going to say about what the scripture meant.

“The truth is,” Jesus says, “there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Now, you may have heard these stories in Vacation Bible School or when your parents read them to you out of the Children’s Bible. Elijah, the Old Testament prophet — During a time of famine, God sends Elijah to a widow in Zarephath, a Phoenician port city, i.e. not in Israel. God informs Elijah, this widow will feed him, only she doesn’t even have enough for the both of them in addition to her child, but Elijah assures her — *“Thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.”* And that is what happens, a witness to our Lord who sustains us.

The second story Jesus alludes to involves Elijah’s successor Elisha and an Aramean general named Naaman. Naaman suffered from leprosy, and a

young hostage taken from Israel tells Naaman of a man who possesses the power to heal in Israel. Naaman is eventually healed by Elisha.

So, why does Jesus refer to these two stories? Because of what they share in common. In both stories the recipient of the Lord's healing favor was a foreigner, a gentile, someone who would be considered unclean, unworthy in Israel. In other words, in both stories the grace of God extends to someone unacceptable to the people listening to Jesus.

So, how do they react? *“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”*

Wow! A Gentile widow and a child are fed, and an Aramean leper is healed, and instantly the mood changes from *“all spoke well of him”* to *“all in the synagogue were filled with rage”* and the congregation wants to *“throw him off a cliff.”* What's up with that? A widow eats and a leper's skin is smooth. Why the rage and the murderous intent? ... Because the grace of God isn't just about you ... or America ... or Christians ... or the people who look like you ... or make love like you ... or vote like you ... or think like

you. According to Jesus, the grace of God welcomes all sorts of folks into your community, and that can make you uncomfortable and easily seduced by the siren song of hostility, the ceaseless chorus of boorish arrogance, and the perpetual drumbeat of blame that, together, hold our culture so captive today.

We can debate all day about the most constructive way to love and care for the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the alien, but we cannot debate whether we must love and care for these children of difference, at least if we're going to say we are following Jesus. For if we are indifferent or hostile to them, we are both indifferent and hostile to our Lord.

A climate of cruelty threatens us today, and we would do well to heed the words of Maya Angelou who both experienced and saw signs of this scourge of cruelty years ago. She observed the following — “Curious, but we have come to a place, a time, when virtue is ridiculed, and even the word itself has fallen out of favor. Contemporary writers rarely employ such words as purity, temperance, goodness, or even moderation. Students, save those enrolled in philosophy courses or studying in seminaries, seldom encounter questions on morality and piety.

“We need to examine what the absence of those qualities has done to our communal spirit, and we must learn how to retrieve them from the dust heap of nonuse and return them to a vigorous role in our lives. Nature will not abide a vacuum, and because we have let the positive particulars go, they have been replaced with degeneracy, indifference, and vice. Our streets [and our halls of power] explode with cruelty and criminality ... Too many of our leaders shun the higher moral road and take the path to satisfy greed while they voice hollow rhetoric ... Since a price will be exacted from us for everything we do or leave undone, we should pluck up the courage ... to win back our finer and kinder and healthier selves.” (Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*)

I read that and I thought, she died ten years ago. How could she know what all was going on this week.

Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of all who say they love God but hate their neighbor, and they wanted to kill him for it. What will we do?

Someone in our Bible Study this week wondered how Jesus, surrounded by the murderous mob at cliff's edge, was able to walk through the crowd unscathed. And, you know, I think, sometimes when truth looks

us straight in the eye, it disarms us, and isn't that the first step towards the good? Amen.