

Last week we read the beginning of this Gospel text, and we heard how Jesus read Isaiah’s words about God setting him apart to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, restore the sight of the blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim the year of God’s favor. And then Jesus claimed that these words were being fulfilled in him right in front of their eyes. And how did the crowd respond? We’re told that “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

Take that in. They weren’t offended by his claim to have been sent by God to free them and heal them and bring God’s kingdom to earth. They were amazed, “Such a nice boy and such a way with words!” “His sermon was marvelous wasn’t it? Marvelous... And oh so short!” A skill I have yet to master...

But the point is: they had no trouble with what he was saying, they were thrilled that the hometown kid had done them proud. But then something happened... Even before coffee hour was over and the folks had left the narthex, they turned on Jesus and instead of loving him, now they’re ready to murder him. Something happened that has them rushing him out the doors and off to the edge of the cliff; intent on casting him into the abyss... And Jesus somehow escapes their wrath... but what I’m wondering is: what is it that set them off?

And it seems to come down to this: Jesus had done some great and miraculous works in other towns and for other people and they want in on the action themselves but Jesus declined the invitation. And he backs his choice not to wow the people with the spectacle of a miracle-show by reminding them how God had often worked through prophets of the past to care for foreigners and outcasts and people who worshipped other gods rather than their own people...

And that’s the trigger. That fills them with rage. They loved his words about being sent to bring good news to the poor—as long as it was their poor. They loved the idea of him proclaiming release to the captives—as long as it was their captivity. They loved the idea of him giving sight to the blind—as long as they were the blind from among their faith community. They loved the thought of him freeing people from oppression... as long as they were the people being freed. They loved the idea of the Lord showing favor on the people as long as it was them and not those other folks out there... those others who were so undeserving, those who had the wrong gods and the wrong values and such despicable manners.

The very thought that Jesus would bring such good things to “others” shattered their loving mood and gloriously selfish hopes, and in an instant they had him on the edge of that cliff... What is it about us that just won’t let good news be good news unless it’s our very own good news? Worse yet... what is it about us that turns good news into terrible news if it’s “their” good news... especially if “they’re” the ones we love to look down on and despise and criticize?

I know it’s not like that for everybody, but for so many of us we just can’t allow ourselves to consider that God’s love might extend beyond our borders... that God might choose to be gracious to those outside our communities and nations and religions and political parties... It’s like we take it as a slap in the face if God chooses to show love to Muslims or Russians or atheists or—lord forbid—those people who voted for the other party in the last election.

What makes us so narrow-minded and hard-hearted? What is it about knowing that we might have to share God’s love that takes an otherwise nice person—like you or me—and drives us to the brink of the cliff with threats on our breath and murder in our eyes?

I think part of it is that most of us are just basically selfish—maybe we were wired that way to promote survival of the species. And we’re so used to living in a finite world with limited resources that we have no way to really understand the concept of God’s abundant love. We’re used to things that come in a limited quantity—time and money, double-stuffed Oreo

cookies, dad's attention, toothpaste... you get it. We live in a world where the more Oreos the guy down the street eats the less are left for me. We're used to the idea that when dad comes home he either has time to play catch with me or teach my sister how to ride her bike—and he can't do both in his limited time. And we generalize this to God, and we imagine God's love as being maybe a bit better than human love; we imagine God as having maybe a bit more love than humans have... But in our minds that's only like the difference between our old brand of toothpaste and the new and improved brand... and it's only like the regular size tube of toothpaste we usually buy and the colossal size tube you can only get at Costco. Either way, we picture God's love as only a moderate improvement in quantity and quality. And even if we're generous we know that whether it's a 3 ounce tube or 3 ton tube there will still come the point where the tube will run dry if enough people are sharing it.

But the difference is that God's love isn't just an upgrade on human love—it's a whole new thing! God's love isn't just a slightly larger quantity it's infinitely larger... it's limitless and never ending so—and here's the thing—so it doesn't matter how many people God loves, it doesn't matter how wide an embrace God offers, it doesn't matter how many people we are called to share God's love with... the tube will never run dry! God's love is deep enough that God can love every person who ever lived—or ever will live—with a perfect intimacy, a super-abundance of compassion and joy, and an endless willingness to forgive all their wrongdoings and still have an eternal storehouse of love left over for the rest of us.

So why be jealous of the love God showers on those other folks? Why worry that God might be showing that other person as much mercy as God is sharing with us... How does that hurt us; how is it any of our business; how does it do anything but multiply the number of friends we can share eternity with, the number of brothers and sisters we enjoy in the family of God?

In a few minutes we're going to have the opportunity to share some of our faith stories with each other. The idea is that we'll share—very briefly—about a time when God has set us free from oppression, or given us sight when we were blind, or given us good news when we were poor, or released us from captivity. And here's mine: I was raised in a faith tradition that was all about who was in and who was out. According to our doctrines God only had enough love and compassion for those who repented of their sins, accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, proclaimed that publicly, and followed that with an exemplary life. And according to our doctrine all those who failed to do this before they died were destined for God's eternal wrath... And I bought into that doctrine whole-heartedly. In my mind good people of any other faith were destined for hell. And in my mind they deserved it; because only us insiders were worthy of God's love.

But then I fell away from my faith for some four years or so. I turned my back on God and became the next thing to an atheist. And something happened... during that time: God cleansed my palette and erased my preconceived notions. And then when—in God's good time—I came back to a faith in God—it was with a heart open to a whole new view of God... A view of God as revealed in the life of Christ Jesus. And in Christ I saw a God who didn't just love those who were worthy—thank God because who among us is—but a God whose grace is boundless and freely given to all people. And friends, it was like I had once been blind, but now—not “all of a sudden,” but through four years of baby steps—I'd come to see just how marvelous and loving God really is.

And I thank God for that grace that brought sight to this blind man; and I thank you for the opportunity to serve you and worship with you. May we be increasingly a people who know God's grace, receive it with joy, and share it with open hearts...now and forever, amen.