

## **Where Grace meets Privilege**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

February 3, 2019

Scripture: Luke 4:14-30

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Those of you here last week may recognize this story. We read the first 7 verses of today's Gospel last week: Luke tells the story of Jesus returning to his hometown church, well his synagogue, really. His reputation had preceded him. He is invited to read from the Hebrew Scriptures, and chooses the prophet Isaiah, people wait expectantly. Are some waiting for him to slip up? He is Joseph's son, so what could people expect of him?

But he is both competent and confident; perhaps over confident! He proclaims the words of Isaiah:

God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
God 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.

Mark and Matthew both also tell of Jesus teaching in his home town synagogue. It is brief, and the congregation reacts negatively almost immediately in these versions.

Luke's version, then, is an interesting contrast; people are amazed at Jesus' teaching, the narrator telling us that the people "*were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.*" [Luke 4:22]

New preachers yearn for such moments; amazement and wonder among the reactions to our sermons. Later in our careers, we recognize that, perhaps, we tend to round the edges in our sermons. I did. But then I try to understand these scriptures more fully and realize that there IS a cutting edge to scripture and sermons. I have noticed many times how, when I'm in midst of preaching and realizing that the critique of Jesus or the apostle Paul is shining a light my own life, my need for change.

Luke's version of Jesus antagonizes the congregation: he proclaims that a prophet is not accepted at home. Jesus has a truth to speak about insider attitudes, about entitlement, and about how the Bible, time and again. Speaks of a God who favours the outsider. Old Testament prophet Elijah who didn't heal anyone from among the God's chosen Israelites. Elijah's protégé, Elisha, who also seemed to be called outside his comfortable homeland to heal Naaman – Naaman a Syrian commander, Syria was an enemy of Israel. To preach that God might not be focusing attention on your congregation, while it might be faithful to Scripture, it is not very strategic. It certainly doesn't sound like Good News.

Here's the thing, though. Speaking truth can be dangerous. Hearing truth can be painful. In this Annual Meeting time of year for churches, as we are setting our goals for Mission & Service, the global ministry of our United Church that needs our support, it is difficult for some among us to understand the need be generous in our contributions toward ministries we cannot see. We need to give to our general local fund. Let's set a

low goal for global justice and mission work, so – they say – people will give more to our local church. One astute leader created a line graph showing both the congregation's givings, local and global, graphed next to one another over a decade. What we saw was a rather convincing direct correlation between generosity locally and globally. When one went up, the other did too. One year they both dipped.

God's mission in and through us is expressed both locally and globally – God's vision calls us to the fringes.

As I said last week; God's Good News is not Easy News. When the home town congregation, the folks who feel that they are God's chosen people, hear the scriptural message that God's focus might be on the people perceived as undeserving, well, that is a place of conflict. Can you think of situations like that close to you?

Stereotypes about poverty and those on the fringes that still circulate within churches today; clinging to judgments around who deserves grace, and who doesn't. It could be any belief you or I hold about insiders and outsiders. Us and them. People who subscribe to a political view that infuriates me. People who have committed a crime and then move into our neighbourhood.

Who knows the name Gretta Vosper? A pariah among United Church ministers on Facebook. Imagine my suggesting that God might have a special care for atheists, and maybe even CEOs of multinational corporations that, I might feel, are unethical. Paul's "Love" – patient, kind, rejoices, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

That means God loves us, with all our goodness & badness. But God's love also touches the places of hatred and pride. God powerfully loves people who are very different from me; God's love never even gives up on the bullies and bigots of our world. Holy Love is not afraid of angry, hateful mobs, it seems, as we see as today's Gospel ends the Jesus emerging unscathed when Grace meets all forms of human sin, Love wins! Amen.