

“Read On McDuff”

If I had only read the gospel appointed for today, we would have started in the middle of the story. That is why I jumped back a week to give us the full picture. Otherwise it would have been like tuning into a football game halfway through. We know the score but not what has led up to it. We don't know about injuries, ejections, who scored the points and how, were there fumbles or interceptions and so forth. We need as Paul Harvey used to say “the rest of the story.” It is especially important to hear Jesus makes two proclamations. One of which receives favor and the other inspires rage.

Also it is important to unclog our ears from similar passages in Matthew and Mark. In both of those passages the people of Nazareth become outraged with Jesus because he is the local boy who has come back to town and is teaching them. They are contemptuous just because he is local. In Luke it is not until he makes the second proclamation that the people of Nazareth become outraged.

Looking at the passage we see that in Luke, Jesus says “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph's son?’” That last bit is more of an exclamation of wonder rather than a putdown. Unlike in Matthew and Mark where it is an expression of disdain.

There is something in what Jesus says in the next part of the passage that changes the mood of his neighbors in the blink of an eye. Only a modern person who is immersed in the Old Testament can understand this rapid change of mood. Having told the people that he is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, he is now telling them that they are not the sole recipients of the prophecy. Rather by pointing out what happened in the times of Elijah and Elisha, two great prophets of Israel, he is showing them that God will shower his blessing on all people whether they are Jew or Gentile.

First Jesus mentions the widow of Zarephath in the First book of Kings.¹ In this passage, God sends Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, to a town near the Phoenician city of Sidon. This area is outside of Israel and one where you would not expect an Israelite prophet to live. But God has designated a widow there to feed Elijah. When Elijah arrives he encounters the widow getting ready to prepare her final meal with the little that she has left before she and her son starve. Elijah commands her to prepare food for him as well. We wonder how he can be so selfish when she is in such dire straits. But he knows that God will keep her jars of oil and meal from running out, and they eat and live. At the same time there is a famine in Israel, but it is the Gentile woman and her son who are saved.

¹ 1 Kings 17:8-24

Jesus also cites the miracle that Elisha performs for Naaman the Syrian soldier.² Naaman is a captain in the army of Aram an avowed enemy of Israel. He is afflicted with leprosy. He learns through a captured servant girl that he can be cured if he seeks the help of Elisha the prophet of Israel. Naaman goes to the king of Israel who does not understand. Naaman (whose name means pleasantness) seeks the help of Elisha, but is outraged that the prophet does no perform some wonder, but rather tells him to immerse himself in the Jordan seven times. But he relents at the advice of his aides he immerses himself and after the seventh immersion he is healed.

Both of these powerful stories are known to the people in the synagogue where Jesus is teaching. They think Jesus by reminding them of these passages is telling them that the people of Israel will no longer receive blessings from God. It is more likely that Jesus is telling them that God's love is not limited to the people of Israel. Rather that God's love is limitless and is open to all people even those people we think are of as outsiders or a threat.

Sadly this perception of a limited God is one that plagues many religious people. Christians, the ones who ought to understand, are often the ones to set limits around God and God's love. Limits that God never set and that Jesus spent his life telling us do not exist.

The Good News of the gospels is often used as a cudgel against those who do not believe a set of fundamentals or dogma that make one group feel right and righteous. But the Good News of Jesus Christ is that God is love. Loving one another, not judging one another is proof that we are followers of Jesus.

What makes us true to Jesus' ministry is to claim as he did that

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
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.”

Hear those words from Isaiah. There is nothing negative in that proclamation. There are no words about who is out and who is in. It is all about good news, recovery, and freedom. When we put on this mantel and take these words into our heart we are truly yoked to the Lord. Then we claim our baptismal vows as our own, and live into the life that God has set before us in the wonder of his love.

² 2 Kings 5:1-19