Jesus's First Sermon in Nazareth

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During World War I, a Protestant chaplain with the American troops in Italy, became a friend of a local Roman Catholic priest. In time, the Protestant chaplain moved on with his military unit. He was later killed by enemy fire. The priest heard about his friend’s death. He asked the military authorities for permission to bury his friend’s body in his church’s cemetery. The army gave permission. But the priest ran into a problem with his own Roman Catholic Church authorities. They were sympathetic, but said they could not approve the burial of a non-Catholic body in a Catholic cemetery. So, the priest buried his friend’s body just outside the cemetery fence. Years later, an American veteran made a sentimental journey back to Italy. He knew what had happened in the village. He visited the old priest, who was still the pastor of that same church. The final thing the veteran did was to ask to see the grave of the Protestant chaplain. When they walked out to the cemetery, the veteran was surprised to find the grave was now inside the fence. “Ah,” he said, “I see you got permission to move the body.” “No,” said the priest. “They told me where I couldn’t bury the body. But now I couldn’t move the fence!”

As we read in our Gospel today, Jesus came into the world to “move the fence,” never an easy or noncontroversial task. Our passage is a continuation from last week’s lectionary reading where Jesus has returned to Nazareth, preaching a message of healing for the sick and liberation for the captive and oppressed, especially the poor. Initially the reaction is favorable…the hometown boy has made good and is a fleeting success. Already though warning signs are flashing when after announcing that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic prophecy, the townspeople start grumbling. Isn’t Jesus the son of Joseph? Now, of course, the crowds must have been aware about the rumors and doubts concerning who Jesus’s father really was. So this comment is really a left-handed compliment, to the effect that considering who he is and where he comes from, he is doing very well. Perhaps Jesus is too familiar to be taken seriously, as surely everyone in town knows him and his family. I don’t know if any of you remember a movie from the late 1980s starring Danny DeVito and Billy Crystal called Throw Momma From the Train, a dark comedy, to say the least. This is one of those films where the title was better than the movie plot itself. Anyhow, we could similarly term this episode in Jesus’s beginning ministry in Galilee as Throw Jesus Off the Cliff. Why has the mood shifted so quickly from praise to rage? The conventional interpretation has been that the people were offended because here was quote unquote Joseph’s son, making presumptions about himself that he was the Messiah and in doing so he now became a sacrilegious rabblerouser. But I think we can read this incident in another light. It is only when Jesus cites the episodes of God providing food to the starving non-Jewish widow of Zarephath and healing Naaman the Syrian’s leprosy, that the crowd is driven to violent action. For the Nazarenes, God or Yahweh, is their own tribal deity who rescued them from slavery and oppression, so they are Yahweh’s chosen people, which is great news...
for them and bad news for everyone else. They are imprisoned by their own set beliefs concerning who could or could not receive God’s grace.

Jesus however is presenting a God who is far bigger than their conceptions of who God is, a God more generous than theirs was, and a God who was willing to extend mercy to outsiders. Remember that during this period, with any mention of non-Jews or Gentiles, the first groups that would come to mind to the people at Nazareth, would be Romans and Greeks, present and former foreign occupiers of their homeland, their enemies. Surely, the God of Israel would not extend compassion to them, these territorial terrorists.

So the issue is not so much what Jesus claims about himself that infuriates his hearers, but it is Jesus’s claim that “My God is greater and more hospitable than yours.” The core of what Jesus is saying, per the World War I story with which I began, is that Jesus’s God wants to move everyone inside the fence! If the Gospel is really good news, it must be good news for everyone or it can’t be gospel for anyone! Jesus is asking them to proclaim God’s love to all people regardless, not just the few deemed good enough or religious enough. This assumption of how generous God is, as Jesus pointed out, was already present in their Scriptures, but conveniently ignored or downplayed. Jesus’s comments provoke an identity crisis, in the people: if God isn’t ours alone, then who are we? Their perception of themselves is further complicated by hearing about the healings and exorcisms Jesus has been performing in the nearby town of Capernaum, which had a large population of non-Jews. The Nazarenes were expecting that if Jesus was doing all these wonders in Capernaum of all places, surely Jesus will make his old hometown composed mostly of all Jews, his operational base, and do amazing feats for them. Yet, Jesus’s remarks suggests Nazareth will not be his capital city of miracles nor will he do special favors for them, which alienates the townspeople even more. Jesus is telling his listeners that God has no favorites but relates to all people by the same standards, with grace universally applied to everyone. What upsets the folks at Nazareth is Jesus’s declaration that God loves people they exclude, whom they consider outcasts and foes. This all-encompassing God who embraces inclusion and liberation, creates a vision of the world in which all people are treated with love and dignity. Thus, the Nazarenes were no longer the sole in-group and it made them furious, as being now confused about their own identity, they were more than willing to end their cognitive dissonance, by throwing Jesus off the cliff and no bungee cord would be provided. So rather than being on the side of all outcasts with Jesus, they made Jesus the outcast.

But what message does this Gospel incident carry for us today? Surely we would never throw Jesus off a cliff, but our Gospel implies that we do exactly that, at least metaphorically, more often than we might care to admit. Our Gospel warns us of the peril of remaking God in our own image and likeness, to refashion God into whom we want God to be, rather than in the words of an old Alcoholics Anonymous slogan, let go, let God, or to let God be God. When God doesn’t appear at the precise time and place we deem acceptable or do what we want when we want it, we ignore or reject God or to use our Gospel metaphor, throw Jesus off the cliff, rather than deal with any unpleasant or life changing truths God may be trying to teach us as disciples. This Gospel story strongly hints that God may not come to us in the old familiar ways which we expect. God may speak to us in some new event, in some place where we least anticipate it, just as Jesus interacted, healed, and loved Gentiles and marginalized peoples rejected by the Jews. Can we be as inclusive and generous in our thinking as God? The purpose here is
not to induce guilt, but to challenge us to expand, as Jesus was attempting to do with the Nazarenes, our awareness of the scope of God’s presence and activity. Often the greatest, most transformative events that happen to us are the ones we never expected, the occurrences for which we did not plan. To speak of grace is to say that the things most **worth** expecting are the things **that** are unexpected or possibilities we never could previously have imagined. Are we willing to look for God in those places we never would have thought to look, such as our failures, our grieving losses, our pressing obligations, for example in the job we lost, the course we flunked, the relationship that ended or we botched, the illness or accident that kept us in bed, the coworker we don’t like, the Church teaching that rankles us, the insult given to us by a friend, the iPhone or now iPad that doesn’t work as advertised, or the Twitter message we didn’t receive?

**Because** God really wants to move all people and situations **inside** the fence, our Gospel is informing us that we never know who, where, when, or under what circumstances, God might be coming or be found, but we are promised that God **is** always present, perhaps just not where we might have initially looked, expected, or desired. If we can surrender our own presuppositions of who, what, when, or where God can act or utilize and **not** see the status quo as **sacred**, then not only may we encounter God, but we can become instruments of God’s grace and begin to love fully as God has fully loved us. And we might be able to accomplish God’s inclusive and liberating plan outlined by Jesus in Nazareth, if we can hear it on God’s broad terms and not just on our own limited understanding as to how it **may** or **may not** benefit us.

The question posed by our Gospel is how **willing** are we to allow Jesus to move the fences in our own lives, so he can make his presence known to us in ways perhaps once inconceivable. The Gospel asks us to what extent do we feel we know Jesus already, such that his words and deeds are **so** familiar to us, that Jesus himself loses his capacity to surprise and instruct us, so in fact we are throwing Jesus off the cliff, maybe not out of anger, but out of irrelevance, boredom, or lack of awareness. As we come up for communion, where surprisingly ordinary bread becomes God’s **extraordinary** body, let us pray that Jesus move the fences in our lives so that his living presence becomes more visible, more prominent, more powerful and that we might exclude no person or situation from experiencing the good news or as potential **bearers** of the good news. Only when we receive Jesus and his message and act on it, can the prophecy of healing and liberation he preached about in the synagogue at Nazareth be achieved. Let all fences be removed so there will be nothing to divide us or obstruct our sight, so we can be **open to, awed by,** and **bring to fruition** God’s magnanimous, grace filled vision for our world.