

February 3, 2019
4th Sunday after Epiphany
Luke 4:21-30
Pastor Lauren Miller

We've probably all heard the good news/bad news jokes.

A ship's captain says to his crew "I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that today we get to change underwear. The bad news is that Swenson is changing with Miller and Lewis is changing with Carlson."

The doctor says to the patient, "I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that there are beautiful golf courses in heaven. The bad news is that you have a tee time Tuesday morning."

"Good news!" says the secretary to the pastor. "Attendance was up 50% the past two weeks. The bad news is, those were the weeks you were on vacation."

In today's gospel reading, it almost feels like Jesus is telling one of those jokes. I mean, he's in the synagogue, he reads this passage from Isaiah that proclaims incredible good news. Release to the captives, sight to the blind, the oppressed go free.

And he tells them, this isn't something you have to wait for in the future. Today this scripture has been fulfilled. God's reign is happening here and now, through Jesus, in their midst.

And the people are eating it up. They are "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth," Luke tells us. They hear God's love and grace through these words and Jesus' proclamation. Good news!

But for some reason, Jesus isn't content to leave it there. It's like he has to move to the punchline, he has to tell them what the bad news is.

Jesus seems to recognize how the people hearing his message will react even before they realize it. Jesus provokes them with a proverb about physicians which he pairs with another about the fate of prophets in their own hometowns. Jesus knows his words of prophetic grace will be met with rejection, even right here in his home town synagogue. And indeed, they do go from amazement to consternation just like that.

But what is it that gets them so riled up? How in the world could this message of grace and freedom make people so mad?

The clue is given in the references he makes to 1 and 2 Kings. Jesus recounts two episodes where the great prophet Elijah and his student Elisha were instrumental in bringing God's deliverance from death and sickness--to outsiders. That's the key. Jesus knows the hearts of his people and knows that they are expecting big things from him, for them. They think they've got the inside track, that somehow the hometown boy will give them extra favor and privilege. They're thinking they can keep him for themselves and they'll have a great life. God's grace right here just for them!

But Jesus says, no, I'm sorry, this good news isn't just for you. In fact, this good news is especially for people who aren't you—those who haven't heard of God's great love and gifts of freedom and release and new life. This good news isn't to be hoarded by the people in here—it's specifically for the people out there.

And that sounds a lot like bad news to them. Why shouldn't they expect to have an extra measure of good favor? He's one of them. After all they've done for him as he was growing up...Shouldn't he take care of his own first? Sure, then if there's anything left over, he can go ahead and help some of the outsiders, but what's wrong with expecting him to focus on their own needs first?

Jesus' words confront and challenge this sense of privilege. The good news can be bad news for people who want to try to control God's work in the world, who think that their ideas of what salvation should look like are the only ones God can use.

This deliberate indictment from Jesus makes the people angry. Very, very angry. So angry they are ready to shove him off a cliff.

In many ways this is a foreshadowing of the way that Jesus' ministry will unfold in the years ahead. Jesus' proclamation of a kingdom in which the poor inherit a kingdom, in which the hungry are filled, and in which the rich and full are pulled down ultimately will lead him to the cross.

The good news is bad news, and this time nobody's joking around.

So where does that leave us, today? Well, I think sometimes we can become immune to just how challenging and even offensive Jesus' message of grace to the outsider can be. I mean, we are enlightened Lutherans, right? We know God's grace is for everybody, that all are welcome here, that Jesus' love extends to those who the rest of the world may reject. We love the good news!

But how much time do we really spend wrestling with the "bad news" side of it? The side that says, if this is really true, then we need to be putting others' needs above our own. Then we must let go of some control over our own wealth and resources so that others may flourish. Then we have to at least try to reconcile what we think and say about people who have different political views or behavior or beliefs with what we heard read about love in 1 Corinthians 13. Then we have to struggle with the truth about what assumptions we've made about that person with the different skin color, or the accent, or the different gender or sexuality or income level or religion.

This is where the rubber hits the road, right? This is where we start to squirm as we realize we need to hear this just as much as the people did back then. This is where we start to feel a little stirred up inside and wonder, why is the pastor talking about this again? Why is Jesus talking about this again? Can't we just sit and bask in the glow of the good news? Or sit and bask in the glow of our good accomplishments? Why does Jesus continue to insist that we turn our gaze towards those who aren't us, and understand what it might look like to live with those persons in relationships of love and grace?

And sometimes those riled up feelings cause us to be angry, and we get so busy arguing with each other that we miss the fact that Jesus has passed through the midst of us, and is already on his way.

Because that's what happens, right? The people are so busy being angry and riled up that Jesus is able to simply pass through them and keep moving on to other people who need to hear the good news, and they are left behind.

Sheri Brown has a beautiful take on this idea of Jesus passing through, which she pairs with Paul's word from 1 Corinthians, and I'd like to close with her reflection.

On Passing Through, a poem with Paul and Luke in the first person

It happens.

When I speak as if I know Jesus best, but can't stand you or your Jesus –
And I use my tongue to spell out just how very wrong you are –
You being expendable to me. So very expendable -
 Love passes through our midst and goes on its way
 Leaves me alone in a ringing silence

When my power is greater than yours, my understanding deeper, and my knowledge wider –
And I use all my power and understanding and knowledge to hold myself above you -
You being nothing to me. Nothing that matters -
 Love passes through our midst and goes on its way
 Leaves me nothing that really matters

When I measure my giving and my suffering and my sacrifice against yours –
And I proudly boast – even if just to myself because it wouldn't be polite to boast to your face –
You and your small offerings being of no value to me. No value at all -
 Love passes through our midst and goes on its way
 Leaves me without the friendship I might have gained

It happens.
Love comes undone, slips from my heart, goes on its way.
Then I am a noisy gong.
Then I am nothing.
Then I gain nothing.

Except that love, in its leaving, also leaves me this:
 Dust gets stirred up when he is passing through,
 The dust of his sandals rising into the air I breathe.
 There's no getting away from this truth:
 Something of him will enter the dust of me, even as he goes on his way.

Next time it happens – the rage, the fear, the pride, the posturing -
 Pray for the dust of him-in-me to rise with my next breath
 Pray that I see the mirror of him-in-you, face to face
 Pray that, this time, love stays