

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

FAVORING THE ORDINARY

Luke 4:21-30

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Analysis by Chris Repp

21Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" 24And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Author's note: Any treatment of this pericope must, of course, take into account the previous week's pericope, vv. 1-20. This analysis depends upon the entirety of vv. 1-30.

DIAGNOSIS: Exile

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Blind*

“Wonderfully spoken!” “Fantastic delivery!” “Such a nice voice!” “He certainly has a dramatic flair about him. It’s very effective, isn’t it?” “Where do you suppose the tradesman’s son learned to speak like that? It certainly wasn’t from his father!”

It’s nice to see a local boy become successful. It’s fun to be able to say “I knew him when....” The crowd here seems caught up in the occasion of Jesus’ homecoming without really paying attention to what he is saying. They don’t seem to notice that he has just claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the anointed one (Messiah!) In a similar way, we as the church of Jesus Christ, who has promised to be present and at work in our lives and services of worship whenever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments administered, we too can get distracted by superficialities.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Doubting*

Jesus notices that they aren’t really listening, that they’re caught up in his new celebrity status, and so he pushes them. If they were to pay attention to what he says they would surely want some proof that he is more than just Mary and Joseph’s kid. They would resent his claim to speak for God, to be God’s chosen instrument, to say nothing of claiming to be God’s own son, miraculously conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. (“Little Josh?” [Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua.] “Are you kidding? He played with my kids!”) In a similar way, don’t we doubt that our churches have anything to do with God’s activity in the world? God’s real work is miraculously saving people from earthquakes, and car crashes—having them miss

flights that crash, and bringing them back to life after flat-lining on the operating table. That's the testimony we hear on TV and those e-mails and Facebook posts that our religious friends send around. God works through unexplained coincidences and the chills that run up and down our spines. But in words of forgiveness read off the page of a hymnal? In Manischewitz and Mrs. Peterson's homemade bread? Get serious.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Out of Favor*

God's chosen people don't listen, certainly not to local boys claiming to be prophets or messiahs. But Jesus is how God has chosen to speak, and so Jesus' neighbors have cut themselves off from God. But God remains active. God's word will be spoken, and it is a word of judgment for those who refuse to share the blessing with all people as God intends (see Genesis 12:1-3) And what is the judgment for us who refuse to believe or share God's reconciling love in Jesus? Are we not also cut off from God and God's blessing?

PROGNOSIS: Return

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Lord's Favor*

"Off the cliff with him!" They miss catching him this time, but eventually the crowd gets their wish. Jesus finally delivers himself into the hands of sinners, to the mercy of the Jerusalem crowd and the Jewish and Roman authorities. Instead of a cliff he gets a cross. But God's mission of loving the world will not be thwarted by even the worst we can dish out. Even we who are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves, who are blinded by hatred and rage-even we get good news proclaimed to us in the crucified and risen Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting*

Now, only after Jesus' death and resurrection, his inaugural address begins to make sense. Having recognized that it is we who are the captives and the blind, we can now hear those words

as addressed to us, as God's good news for us. If God will not abandon us even in our self-imposed exile, even when we have done everything in our power to push God away, then perhaps God is serious about redeeming the creation, the whole creation, even us, from the inside out. Perhaps even in ordinary bread and wine, even in words of a new pastor or an old friend, God is at work for the sake of the world.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Seeing*

Having had our hearts opened, we find that our eyes are also opening to see the world differently than we saw it before. Now we see where God has been looking, and we too begin to look beyond celebrity to see value in the ordinary world, in the lives of those we previously overlooked or avoided. As Christ's body in the world, we become part of his creative, redeeming, and liberating mission.