



Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Date: January 31, 2010  
Sermon Title: The One Thing I Don't Like about Jesus

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is an old story about a young seminary graduate, filled with knowledge and ready to change the world, whose first call is to a rural Norwegian congregation in the upper-Midwest. Early on in his ministry, he decides to correct their long-held habit of using grape juice instead of wine for Holy Communion. He speaks with every member of the congregation, and makes a pretty strong impression on them all (after all, he is young, filled with knowledge, and ready to change the world). Except for Mrs. Johnson. She grew up during prohibition, lost a son to alcoholism, and isn't impressed with a single one of his arguments. Finally he plays his trump card. "But Mrs. Johnson," he says. "At the Last Supper, it was a chalice of wine that Jesus gave to his disciples." "Vell," she says, "Dat's da vone ting I don't like about Yesus."

"That's the one thing I don't like about Jesus." What is the one thing you don't like about Jesus?

There is one thing the people of Nazareth don't like about Jesus.

This morning's Gospel lesson is a continuation from the lesson we read last week. Jesus has grown up, has been baptized by John, has spent forty days in the wilderness, and now he returns to his hometown of Nazareth and preaches to his family and friends for the very first time. Jesus read a text from Isaiah 61, speaks a few words, and St. Luke tells us his listeners were "amazed at the gracious words that come from his mouth." They seem genuinely surprised that one of them – Joseph's son – was able to speak so well.

Then something unexpected happens: Jesus looks out into the congregation, filled with people who have known him and loved him nearly all of his life, and he begins to challenge them. It is as if he says, "I'm sure you are all hoping to see me perform a miracle or two while I'm here, but don't count on it. Hometowns are notorious for rejecting prophets who grow up in their midst." If that isn't enough to get their attention, he goes on to remind them that Elijah only saved one widow from starvation and she was not a Jew; and Elisha only healed one leper, and he wasn't either, implying that neither of them was particularly interested in benefiting the people of their own country and, by implication, neither is Jesus. It is a surprising turn in what otherwise might have been a touching story. Surrounded by admiring friends and neighbors, Jesus rebukes them.

This story suggests that the people of Nazareth want it all for themselves. They are excited to have Jesus with them because of what they hope might come their way; what they might get from being related to the Man of God from Nazareth. That's a very common reaction from religious people. Throughout the centuries, the question has been asked in various settings, "What advantage comes to me from my religious affiliation?" "How is my life made better, because I am a person of faith?" "How will I be blessed, because of the relationship I have with God?" This way of thinking sets up a boundary between insiders and outsiders, where insiders are blessed and (more often than not) outsiders are cursed.

The problem is, the Gospel of Jesus Christ moves in exactly the opposite direction, and that is why he enrages his hometown neighbors with his

LESSONS

JEREMIAH 1:4-10

PSALM 71:1-6 (6)

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

ST. LUKE 4:21-30

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

ALMIGHTY AND EVER-LIVING GOD, INCREASE IN US THE GIFTS OF FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE; AND THAT WE MAY OBTAIN WHAT YOU PROMISE, MAKE US LOVE WHAT YOU COMMAND, THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD. AMEN.

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inaugural sermon. His ministry will not be about bettering the lot of those who are already in the club. His ministry will be about expanding the reach of God's kingdom. His ministry will be about inviting in those who have never been included before. His ministry will be about reaching out to those whom the world might prefer to reject. His ministry will be about touching the hearts of Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes and the like – and inviting them to receive the fullness of God's grace.

That's the one thing the residents of Nazareth don't like about Jesus. That's why they are filled with rage, drive him out of town, and try to throw him off the hill and kill him. This story reveals a dramatic difference between Jesus and his hometown neighbors. They are interested in what they might get out of him. He is interested in what he, and they, can give to the world. They are interested in the inside influence they might have since he comes from their town. He is interested in sharing his gifts in every corner of the world.

That's the one thing they don't like about Jesus. And here is the curious aspect of this story: what enrages them about this first sermon of Jesus, is what stands at the very heart of his ministry; at the very heart of the Gospel. It is the radical character of his welcome to others; the limitless proclamation of his grace. They don't get it. And they won't get it, until this one thing they don't like about Jesus is able to transform their thinking; until it becomes the one thing they really appreciate about Jesus.

If you and I can learn anything from Nazareth, it is this: the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an offensive message. It offended the people of Nazareth to the point that they wanted to throw him off the cliff. It offended the leaders of the first century church to the point that they schemed to have him put to death. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, would later write these words:

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.<sup>i</sup>*

What is it that people find so offensive about the Gospel? What is it that becomes a stumbling block to Jews? What is it that the Gentiles think of as foolishness? It is the radical welcome of Jesus. It is the limitless character of his grace. It is the fact that Jesus insists on welcoming into the fullness of God's grace those people we might prefer to exclude.

So here's the deal: do you want to catch a glimpse of the Gospel? Do you want a hint at what lies at the heart of our Lord's ministry? Do you want to begin understanding what the kingdom of God is all about? Then you've got to ask yourself the same question: "What is the one thing I don't like about Jesus?" Who is the one group of people I might prefer not to be included in the fullness of God's grace?

- Those who are too left, or those who are too right?
- Those who are too evil, or those who are too goody-two-shoes?
- Those who are too needy, or those who are too paternalistic?
- Those who are too profane, or those who are too pious?
- Those who are too cynical, or those who are too naïve?
- Those who are too rich, or those who are too poor?
- Those who are too dumb, or those who are too smart?

When we're honest enough with ourselves to answer those questions, we begin to see what the Gospel is all about. It has to do with tearing down the walls that we so persistently build between ourselves (walls that, not coincidentally, include us and exclude others). It has to do with uniting us all, as equal recipients of the grace God wants to share with us.

Jesus welcomes all to receive his grace, and all means all. Even those who make you and me uncomfortable. Even those you and I despise. Even those you and I might prefer not to be included. The invitation to embrace him in faith, and trust in the promises he makes to us, is given to anyone who can receive it. No matter who they are. No matter what they have done. No matter what the world may think of them. And do you know what? If there is nobody who is beyond the reach of our Lord's grace, then you and I

<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

are not beyond the reach of our Lord's grace. And that is the best news every. The Good News. The Gospel.

So what is the one thing you don't like about Jesus? When we get to the bottom of that question, we find that we are very close to understanding what the Gospel is all about.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

English Text: <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>4:21</sup> Then he [Jesus] began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup> 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?" <sup>23</sup> He 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.'" <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. <sup>25</sup> But 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; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> They 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. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. <sup>iii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>4:21</sup> ἤρξατο δὲ λέγειν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὅτι σήμερον πεπλήρωται ἡ γραφὴ αὕτη ἐν τοῖς ὠσὶν ὑμῶν. <sup>22</sup> Καὶ πάντες ἐμαρτύρουν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐθαύμαζον ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις τῆς χάριτος τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔλεγον· οὐχὶ υἱὸς ἐστὶν Ἰωσήφ οὗτος; <sup>23</sup> καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· πάντως ἐρεῖτε μοι τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην· ἰατρέ, θεράπευσον σεαυτόν· ὅσα ἠκούσαμεν γενόμενα εἰς τὴν Καφαρναοὺμ ποίησον καὶ ὧδε ἐν τῇ πατρίδι σου. <sup>24</sup> εἶπεν δέ· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς προφήτης δεκτός ἐστιν ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ. <sup>25</sup> ἐπ' ἀληθείας δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, πολλαὶ χῆραι ἦσαν ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ, ὅτε ἐκλείσθη ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπὶ ἔτη τρία καὶ μῆνας ἕξ, ὡς ἐγένετο λιμὸς μέγας ἐπὶ πάσαν τὴν γῆν, <sup>26</sup> καὶ πρὸς οὐδεμίαν αὐτῶν ἐπέμφθη Ἰησοῦς εἰ μὴ εἰς Σάρεπτα τῆς Σιδωνίας πρὸς γυναῖκα χήραν. <sup>27</sup> καὶ πολλοὶ λεπροὶ ἦσαν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ ἐπὶ Ἐλισαίου τοῦ προφήτου, καὶ οὐδεὶς αὐτῶν ἐκαθαρίσθη εἰ μὴ Ναιμάν ὁ Σύρος. <sup>28</sup> καὶ ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες θυμοῦ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ ἀκούοντες ταῦτα <sup>29</sup> καὶ ἀναστάντες ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω τῆς πόλεως καὶ ἤγαγον αὐτὸν ἕως ὄφρου τοῦ ὄρους ἐφ' οὗ ἡ πόλις ὑπεκοδόμητο αὐτῶν ὥστε κατακρημνίσαι αὐτόν. <sup>30</sup> αὐτὸς δὲ διελθὼν διὰ μέσου αὐτῶν ἐπορεύετο. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [www.elca.org/worship/church\\_year](http://www.elca.org/worship/church_year).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Luke 4:14-21, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iv</sup> St. Luke 4:14-21, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).