

LIVING ON THE EDGE

Luke 4:21-30

Sunday, January 31, 2010 – Epiphany 4

Rev. James Campbell

If there is anyone who sings the praises of Broadway United Church of Christ, it's Marcos. He's proud of what we have done together and hopeful for all that yet might be. So I was not really surprised when he told me that he had invited our Jewish neighbors, Charlie and Lucy to the Christmas Eve Service of Lessons and Carols.

Being Jewish, I wasn't sure that they would come. But they did and I was delighted to see them – delighted and a little nervous. After all, we were about to proclaim the birth of the Messiah, the Ruler of Israel. Well, they loved it. I even noticed them singing the more familiar carols. In the receiving line at the end of the service, Lucy complimented the superb quality of the music and then asked me: "So what's the music like on Easter?" "Glorious" I replied. "But it's not all music" I warned her. "I also preach a sermon... about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ." Lucy smiled and said: "That's OK; we just won't listen to that part." To which I replied: "That's OK. You see it's a fine old Congregationalist tradition to not believe half of what the preacher has to say on any given Sunday! You'll fit right in!"

All kidding aside, sometimes I wonder how much that knowledge influences what I have to say to you week after week. Knowing that there are such sharp and independent minds in the pews, how much do I edit myself in order to be heard or liked? Do I travel the road of least resistance? Do I buy into the popular notion that the goal of good preaching is to make people feel good? Or is the goal of preaching to let the Bible read us and not just us read the Bible? I remember that once at a Board of Stewards meeting, then president Gay Brookes encouraged me to “be bolder” in my preaching. It’s good advice, but not so easy to do.

Well, apparently no one ever had to tell Jesus to be bolder in his preaching. In fact, Jesus was so bold that directly after his very first sermon, the congregation tried to kill him. Theologian William Willimon suggests this cautionary note about this story: “Preachers beware. This is what happens when you get the Gospel right.”

Our story today actually begins with the reading from last week. Jesus was back in Nazareth, his home town, and on the Sabbath he went to synagogue, as was his custom. He stood and the attendant handed him the scroll of the

Prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it and found his place and began to read: *"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."* Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to attendant and Luke implies some dramatic tension, for he writes that everyone's eyes were fixed on Jesus. Then in what was perhaps the world's shortest sermon, Jesus said: *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Well the people really liked that. "Isn't he something?" they said. "Joseph's son turned out all right." But suddenly the tide turned and Luke is painfully stingy with the details as to why. Instead of accepting their compliments, like any good preacher would have done, Jesus sensed that they hadn't really heard him at all; therefore they didn't know him at all. He reminded them that prophets are always scorned by those who think they know them best. And then he told them two stories that sent them right over the edge.

"In the time of Elijah", Jesus said, "There were lots of widows in the land of Israel." Now remember that widows were completely dependent upon male relatives to care for them. If not, they faced starvation or prostitution. And of

all the widows in the land, God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow at Zarephath, a foreigner, not part of the covenant people. And in the time of the prophet Elisha, the land of Israel was filled with lepers: unclean, untouchable. And of all the lepers in the land, God sent the prophet to Naman, the Syrian, another outsider, unclean.

Well, the not-so-subtle implications were too much for the good church-going folk of Nazareth. Their compliments turned to rage, such rage that a mob surrounded Jesus and drove him to the brow of the hill upon which Nazareth is built. They had every intention to throw him off and then, if he survived the fall, to stone him to death. Some scholars suggest that this was a punishment for blasphemy, implying that what Jesus had said struck at the very heart of their religious self-understanding. And it drove them right to the edge of their tolerance and Jesus to the edge of a cliff.

Why such an extreme reaction? All Jesus had done was to remind them of what we all know about our faith, even if sometimes we don't like it very much: namely that God delights in turning our expectations on their heads. Jesus reminded them that this Good News we proclaim often stands in direct opposition to our all-consuming self-interest.

The story of the widow makes that point. The story of the leper makes that point. And if you dig a little deeper you find another reason for their white-hot anger. Perhaps most dangerous of all, Jesus was messing with their money.

When Jesus read from Isaiah and proclaimed good news to the poor, he also proclaimed something called the “the year of the Lord’s favor.” That is a very specific reference to the Biblical concept of the year of jubilee. Built into the very foundation of Jewish and Christian religion is the notion of economic justice. The Year of Jubilee required that every 50 years, property reverts back to the previous owner. Now that sounds like the radical redistribution of wealth – some awfully dirty words in 21st century America. But the Bible is relentless. It speaks again and again and again about how money and property and hospitality and stewardship are direct indications of the genuineness and health of our faith.

Now I suspect that when any of us hear stories like this one, we are prone to see ourselves as the ones who understand how all of this works. We are those good, liberal folks who believe in helping the oppressed, especially the

outsiders. We believe in giving money for God's work in the world. We pay all these things a lot of lip service. But when was the last time that we heard a sermon about economic justice or any kind of justice that put us right on the edge?

You see that's the thing about a Gospel boldly preached. It's meant to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. And we are some of the most comfortable people who have ever lived on this planet. And knowing that, we should be very suspicious of any preaching that only makes us feel good about ourselves.

William Willimon, the theologian quoted earlier, also relates the following story about edgy faith. He writes: In a seminar for preachers...I led with Stanley Hauerwas ... one pastor said, in a plaintive voice, "The bishop sent me to a little town in South Carolina. I preached one Sunday on the challenge of racial justice. In two months my people were so angry that the bishop moved me. At the next church, I was determined for things to go better. I didn't preach about race. But we had an incident in town, and I felt forced to speak.

"The board met that week and voted unanimously for us to be moved. My wife was insulted at the supermarket. My children were beaten upon the school ground."

Willimon says that his heart went out to this dear, suffering colleague. But Hauerwas replied, "And your point is what? We work for the living God, not a false, dead god! Did somebody tell you (the Christian life) would be easy?"

To really follow Jesus is not easy and we know that. So why do we still do it? Why not just live for ourselves? It's a good question and one that every Christian should seriously contemplate. I don't have a definitive answer for myself after all these years. But I can at least say this, and I bet you can too: that it is when we are on the edge that we feel most alive. To do what is right even when it hurts; to give when you feel poor; to speak for the ones who have no voice; to suffer for doing right; to be pushed to the edge of a precipice because you dared to speak truth to power, will make you alive. And that is the one thing we all really want before we stand before God – to say that we have truly lived. May God grant it to be so. Amen.