



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

God's Love, Mercy and Justice: Unbounded

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 31, 2016
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany — Based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Luke 4:21-30*

It's hard to believe that this time last week we had 30 inches of snow outside. If you were able to be here, you found our service going on as usual. Ushers and Altar Guild and Welcome Committee and Lay Ministers and staff were all here pitching in where needed. We had especially stunning music offered by our choir and musicians, who had made their ways here. All of us entered the church from the cleanest, driest sidewalks in the city, thanks to St. Bart's Facilities team, who'd spent the night here shoveling 'round the clock. And after the services, we enjoyed hot coffee and cider made by Giash and Uddin, who walked through the streets all the way from Astoria to get here.

Our Gospel reading for last week and our Gospel reading for today are two halves of the same story. A short story, but hugely important. We need to pay attention to all of it. Quick background: Jesus has just started his ministry in Galilee. If you'll remember in Luke, Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," returned from the Jordan where he had been baptized by John, and was led by that same Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted for forty days.

Immediately after that, in last week's first half of the story:

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report spread about him through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and read this:

"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."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

(Luke 4:14-21)

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. The eyes of all fixed upon him. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Yes, this is our hometown boy! We've heard about all those signs and wonders and miracles you did in Capernaum—second-rate Capernaum, pagan Capernaum. We're your people, your tribe, your clan, we are the people of Israel, we are entitled to that and more—do the same and even greater things here for us!

Did any one-sentence sermon ever get such acclaim? Did any preacher ever start off so well?

Now, from our Gospel reading today: Jesus responds by reminding them of two stories these good Hebrew people would have known from their scriptures. First, the story of God's sending Elijah to save not the widows of Israel but a widow in Zarephath in Sidon—a Gentile widow, a pagan. Then the story of God cleansing not the lepers of Israel but Naaman, the Syrian—a Gentile, a pagan.

The scripture is being fulfilled in their hearing, but it's not the fulfillment they were expecting. God is saving not only the people of Israel but also Gentiles, pagans!

One moment the people in the Nazareth synagogue could not speak or think highly enough of Jesus, their hometown boy, the prophet who had arisen in their midst. The next moment, they are filled with rage. They drive Jesus out of town and try to throw him off the cliff: the punishment for a false prophet.

Jesus must be a false prophet because he said God's love and mercy and justice are not limited to the people of Israel—they're not just for our group, they're for everyone. God would bless ALL the poor, release ALL the captives. Jesus was saying, in effect: No historical or ethnic or any other kind of boundaries would contain or limit what God was about to do. [1]

Expectations not met. Vaguely insulting. Words that upset the order of things. Did ever a sermon go south so quickly?

Well, almost ... We might remember Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons. His last "I've been to the mountaintop" sermon on the night of April 3, 1968 at the Mason Temple in Memphis. On the morning of April 4, a sniper's bullet ended his life. But not his work.

Many of us know how, within our own hearts, approval and acclaim can turn on a dime into rage, even revenge.

When our own expectations are not met, or when we feel insulted, how do we react? Anger flares. Physical violence ... road rage, easy access to guns, even the smaller incivilities of subway shoving. It's possible now to attack, even kill, someone without ever coming near them. We can now push someone off a cliff by nasty use of social media.

It's a hard thing, isn't it, sometimes even a dangerous thing, not to meet people's expectations.

During my years in seminary, I remember one priest trying to prepare us fledgling preachers and pastors for the inevitable things that would be said about us. The priest said, "Remember: you are not as bad as people say you are. And remember: you are not as good as people say you are."

This short, powerful story of Jesus beginning his public ministry invites us to examine our own expectations, even our own unacknowledged assumptions of entitlement.

Are there any places in our hearts where we believe that we/I/my group is better than or more deserving of God's favor and blessing than this other group, especially a group that is very different from us/our group?

This story invites us to ask, both for ourselves as individuals, and especially as a faith community: How is this scripture being fulfilled in *our* hearing? How are *we* to participate in God's work of bringing good news to the poor, of proclaiming sight to the blind, of letting the oppressed go free?

Those of us who attended St. Bart's Forum this past hour heard an important and disturbing presentation on sex trafficking, particularly how sex trafficking is happening not only far away but right here in our own back yard. New York City is a huge hub for sex trafficking. (If you did not attend the Forum, I urge you to listen to it from St. Bart's website.) Fighting sex trafficking is surely one way we can help let the oppressed go free. Make no mistake: those who are being trafficked are captives; they are oppressed. They need to be released. They need to be set free.

It's no accident that this short, powerful story of Jesus is paired with the reading from 1 Corinthians. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude." Surely one of the best-known passages in our Scriptures. How many have heard this at a wedding? [Many hands raised]

It is a beautiful passage. But, contrary to popular notion, it's not about romantic love. Paul wrote this to a community that was having a very hard time staying together. On second thought, maybe this is a helpful text for a wedding!

The difficult realities of relationships and communities are exactly where the love described by Paul needs to be lived out. Without love, it does not matter what budgets, buildings, strategic plans for mission we have. We can—and should—pursue various forms of spirituality, excellent education, right teaching, activism in the name of justice. In our pursuing these very good things, we can't forget that the church is called to be a community that practices love. [2]

The kind of love that Paul is describing is not warm and fuzzy, easy, feel-good love. The mission of the church is not about gathering like-minded and likeable people together, tempting as that may sound. In the context of 1 Corinthians, it would be better to say that *the measure of love is its capacity for tension and disagreement without division*. [3] Unity, not uniformity.

Paul calls the Corinthians—and us—to envision and to foster the kind of Christian community where unity and difference can co-exist, and then to live that way of being into God's world. It is not something we are to keep in here for ourselves. That understanding, that way of being and living is something we are called to take outside these doors.

As Christians—as radical Christians we might even say—we are first to acknowledge our own deep need of God's love and mercy and justice. Then, with God's grace, we are to act as channels of God's indiscriminate love and mercy and justice, trusting that God can and will work through us. Even us.

The very good news is that God's love and mercy and justice are unbounded. Unbounded.

Amen.

[1] *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII: Luke (Abingdon, 1995) p. 108.

[2] Brian Peterson, Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

[3] Krister Stendahl, "Preaching from the Pauline Epistles," in *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor's Treasury* (Westminster, 1983), pp. 306-326.

©2016 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022