

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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Facing an Unpleasant Truth

Luke 4:21-30

Imagine the talk about town the day after Jesus' spoke in the Synagogue at Nazareth. You remember the story. He visited the synagogue, as was his usual practice. Since it was in his hometown, we can safely presume that it was the synagogue he had grown up in. He quoted the prophet Isaiah to everybody's approval. Then for some reason he began to speak of God's love for other people besides just them. He mentioned incidents from the lives of Elijah and Elisha where they ministered not to the people of Israel, but to foreigners. Well that angered the people of Nazareth so much that they tried to kill him. They hauled him out of town to throw him off a cliff. But he escaped. Just walked away. But it didn't end there. People continued to talk about it for weeks. Just imagine what they were saying!

Listen in on one conversation at the town square. Imagine him talking to us like that! Who does he think he is, anyway? Why I remember him as a little boy, running through the schoolyard, playing hide and seek with the other children. Seemed like a nice enough boy then. Do you remember the time we caught him skipping school? He was just coming back from a day of fishing with Fred Schulz. Was his mother ever mad at him! As I recall, he was quite precocious whenever we studied the Scriptures. Always offered an interesting twist on a familiar story, something we hadn't noticed before. He seemed to understand the scriptures better than his teachers, something I, for one, found exciting. But not yesterday! Yesterday he just made me mad saying what he did. I could have killed him myself.

What do you suppose set him off? I mean, when was the last time a visiting Rabbi spoke to us like that, much less one of our own? What he said to us was downright insulting. And to his own people, even. He's changed. He's not the same boy I remember. It's a good thing Joseph died a couple of years ago. He would have been so embarrassed! I'll bet he's rolling over in his grave at the thought of his son disrespecting us that way. Where does he come off telling us a prophet is not accepted in his hometown. Who commissioned him a prophet, anyway? Got a big head studying down at the academy in the Jerusalem Temple, I tell you. Big head just like someone who went to West Point or Annapolis.

West Point or Annapolis? I never heard of them. I know. I know. Those are military academies that haven't been founded yet. But mark my words, someday there will be people who graduate from schools with those names, and they will all have big heads. (Now, as an aside, please note that I, an Air Force Academy Grad, I am not saying that people who graduate from West Point or Annapolis have big heads. I am merely quoting a conversation that occurred in Nazareth a couple thousand years ago, and having a little fun in doing so. I confess to you, however, that my wife, who grew up in Denver, is convinced that Air Force Grads also have big heads, with one exception, of course.)

Now back to that conversation in Nazareth after Jesus spoke. People were still worked up about it days, even weeks later. I'm jealous. Not many ministers have people talking about their sermons a few weeks later. Oh, once in a while people get mad at the preacher just like they did at Jesus. Then they wonder along with those people of Nazareth, "Why do you think he said that?" "I didn't hear him. What exactly did he say?" another would question. More to the point, they wondered what he meant by saying it? Remember, he started off OK, quoting the prophet Isaiah as he did. You remember that prophecy. They say that when the Messiah comes the Spirit of the Lord God will be upon him, because the Lord will have anointed him to

bring good news to the afflicted. The Messiah will proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind. He'll set at liberty those who are oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

All that may be true when the Messiah comes. But it isn't true now. Jesus said that scripture was fulfilled in our hearing. Everybody loved it. Then they realized what he said. Fulfilled? Hardly. Who is more oppressed than we, living as we do under the boot of Rome? And has anything changed since he came on the scene? Who's more captive than we, having to pay exorbitant taxes to Caesar? They siphon off our life-blood and send it to Rome to support big government. But I ask you, do they care about us? Noooo! Who needs to hear good news more than we do, we who scratch out our living day by day in this little town? Who, I ask you, hopes for the Messiah's coming more than we? When the Messiah comes Rome will be history, mark my words. But you heard him! That Scripture is fulfilled, he said. Such nonsense! He's all talk and no action.

You talk like that's what made the people mad. But it wasn't. They all praised him when he said that. It was what he said afterwards that really set us off. He said that God sent Elijah not to the widows of Israel, though there were many. No, Elijah was sent to a widow in Lebanon, Sidon of all places. Then, to make matters worse he pointed to Elisha. There were many lepers in Israel, but Elisha didn't heal any of them. He only healed Naaman, that Syrian general who commanded the army of Syria. That's what made us mad! Apparently he thinks God acts to help others while leaving us, God's own people, to fend for ourselves. Yes, I know the scriptures, but that was then and this is now. Suffering as we do now, how could God possibly care more about them than he does about us?

Is that what you heard Jesus say, that God cares more about them than us? Maybe all he was saying is that God loves them too, that God loves them as well as us? Do you suppose he was announcing a new age, and inviting us to be part of it, an age when it's clear that God loves everybody and not just us? Of course that's a hard sell when we're struggling as we are, but I believe God does love us. But maybe God loves all people and wants us to tell them that. The unpleasant truth is we haven't done a very good job of spreading that good news. Didn't God call us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God? Have we done that or have we caved in to special interests? Where did we get the idea that God calls us to be passive? Maybe God wants us to get involved, to let others know they are not alone in their struggles. The Scriptures are full of the prophets' complaint that the people haven't done all they could. And when that's true, doesn't God have the right to call us to account?

That may be true, but you know what would happen if we took him seriously, if we started ministering to people as he calls us to. You know what people would say if we started meddling in politics, marching in the streets, protesting the fact that some stores buy their tomatoes from farmers that tolerate slavery. People would be furious with us! Might even try to throw us over a cliff. What do you think the neighbors would say if we started feeding homeless people in Fellowship Hall every day? You talk about trouble! Well that's not likely to happen soon, so don't get all worked up about it. We are doing plenty to help with support for the Neighborhood Health Clinic, Grace Place and St. Matthews House.

I suppose you're right. If we did stick our necks out, the community might be angry with us, try to throw us over a cliff. Still I can't help but wonder about him. I don't know what to make of it at all. Didn't you sense something strange and powerful about him? When he walked away from us it was as if our hands were tied. There were over thirty of us, for heaven's sake. We carried him out to the cliff and planned to throw him down. But before we could do that, he walked away. Walked right through the midst of us and we couldn't lift a finger to touch him. He looked me in the eye, and I froze. Joseph's son! I grew up with him for heaven's sake. I thought I knew him. Now I wonder. I wonder if I ever really knew him. I can't help but wonder who he really is and what he's up to... and what it might be like to go with him.