

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG
(Luke 4:21-30)

Jesus, it seems, just didn't know when to stop, when to leave well enough alone. He read the scripture beautifully. (It was one of the congregation's favorites!) He commented on it – and had the good sense to keep his comments brief. He wowed the hometown folks, all those good people who knew him back when Joseph was still bouncing him on his knee. They couldn't say enough nice things about him. A prudent preacher would say "Amen," sit down, and shut up.

Not Jesus. He has to go on and tell them – his family and friends and neighbors – that they're not so special, that they aren't any closer to God's heart than – horror of horrors! – those godless gentiles.

I'm sure you've all sat through sermons where the preacher reached what seemed like the climax, made a really strong point – and then kept on going and going until it finally just fizzled out, ended not with a bang but a whimper. I've heard a few of those, and the critic in me can never help thinking, "You should have stopped right there."

Jesus has just the opposite problem. His sermon doesn't fizzle out, oh no. He gets the congregation on his side – and then he hits them right between the eyes with his real point. Maybe he had even more to say, but he never got the chance because the next thing you know, they're hustling him out to the cliff at the edge of town.

There's something odd about the congregation's reaction. It would be one thing if Jesus had preached something radically, outrageously new, something that went against the promises that had sustained the Jews through their centuries of hardship and loss. But Jesus doesn't do any such thing. He goes back to the vision of Isaiah, the vision of a day when God would make everything right and whole again, a glorious vision, a vision that everyone knew and hoped in.

Where Jesus steps over the line, at least as far as the folks in Nazareth are concerned, is when he reminds them that Elijah ministered to the gentile widow in Zarephath and ignored the widows in Israel and that Elisha healed the gentile Naaman of his leprosy and turned his back on the lepers in Israel. Of course, the good folks in Nazareth knew these stories. But they didn't much like Jesus' take on those stories.

You may have heard about the fellow who gets to heaven and asks St. Peter for a guided tour before he settles in. St. Peter leads him through a magnificent palace with room after room filled with merrymakers. There are Baptists dancing in one room, which they didn't get to do on earth; Methodists drinking in another room; Presbyterians in another room enjoying unaccustomed chaos. As they go around a corner and approach another room, St. Peter whispers, "We have to be quiet now; those are the Lutherans, and they think they're the only ones here."

I've heard several versions of that story, but for some reason the UCC never gets mentioned.

The point is pretty plain: God isn't bound by our ideas of who's in and who's out – and it's awfully arrogant to believe that God's blessings are only for a select few – a select few like us. That message hadn't sunk in with the folks in Jesus' hometown. They still thought they were God's favorites. And they weren't going to hear anything different from Jesus, even if he was one of them.

We chuckle at a joke about who we think ought to get into heaven. But there's something not so funny about the message Jesus delivered in the synagogue that day. Remember his text? It's from the prophet Isaiah and it mentions good news to the poor, release of captives, freedom for the oppressed, all of which gets summed up in the phrase "the year of the Lord's favor."

"The year of the Lord's favor" had a definite meaning. "The year of the Lord's favor" was the year of jubilee decreed in the book of Leviticus. That jubilee year came around every 50 years, and in that jubilee year all debts were forgiven, indentured slaves were set free, and land that had been sold to pay a debt was returned to the seller's family. In other words, when Jesus quotes Isaiah on the "year of the Lord's favor," he's talking economics – and radical economics, at that – the kind of radical economics that insists on justice, the kind of radical economics that's offended when the rich get richer and richer while the poor sink deeper and deeper into poverty, the kind of radical economics that denounces bankers who get enormous bonuses while they foreclose on homeowners who have lost their jobs. Jesus is talking about the kind of radical economics that are governed by moral values and not market forces.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says the jubilee principle "is the most difficult, most demanding, most outrageous requirement of biblical faith." And if it was difficult, demanding, and outrageous way back then in a society that was pretty egalitarian to begin with, what is it today? It doesn't just sound radical; it sounds downright crazy, which makes it easy to dismiss as so much pious hot air.

Let's forget about the specifics, though, debt forgiveness, wealth redistribution, and the rest. Ultimately, what Jesus is talking about in his sermon is community. The stories of two gentiles, Naaman and the widow of Zarephath, remind us that God doesn't care about faces but hearts – hearts that know they need God, regardless of whether they're Jewish hearts or gentile hearts. And "the year of the Lord's favor" reminds us that God cares about the poor and doesn't want them to be forgotten or left behind. So what Jesus is proclaiming here is an inclusive community – a community that isn't defined by ethnic differences or economic status, but only by the expansiveness of God's grace.

That's the biblical vision – and it's a vision that challenges some of our basic assumptions.

The biblical vision challenges our assumption that we are autonomous – challenges the ideal of the rugged, self-sufficient individual who owes no one anything, who is accountable to no one, and who relies on no one but himself or herself. The Bible has a name for that assumption: according to the psalmist, it's the assumption of "the fool," the one who says in his or her heart, "There is no

God.” Biblical faith, on the other hand, invites us away from notions of autonomy to a covenantal existence that binds us to God and to our neighbors. That’s the whole point of the jubilee year. It says the future welfare of the community is put at risk when wealth gets concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer. You can’t have a viable, peaceable community when you have glaring inequities, with deep poverty alongside huge wealth. There will always be inequities, but the biblical vision insists that rich and poor, haves and have-nots are all in it together and that we’re all neighbors and that we all, one way or another, depend on each other.

The biblical vision also challenges our assumption of scarcity – that fear that there isn’t enough to go around, so we had better pile up more and more. Of course, with that mindset, there is never enough. Examples of that kind of anxious mindset are everywhere, from Wall Street bankers with their disgraceful bonuses to professional athletes with their outrageous salaries. Biblical faith, on the other hand, says there’s always enough, if we will only share.

And the biblical vision challenges our greed. If we have to rely on ourselves and if there’s not enough to go around, the only sensible thing to do is look out for No. 1, get more for ourselves, hoard what we do get, and make sure nobody takes it away from us. But where greed sees competitors and threats, biblical faith sees neighbors, brothers and sisters in a community of solidarity that shares our God-given resources for the well-being of all. The Bible affirms that every member of society, including the poor and even the “undeserving poor, should have enough to live in dignity and safety.

It’s strange, isn’t it? Jesus lays out the biblical vision, which is God’s vision, and people don’t like it one little bit. They get angry. His friends and neighbors turn into a violent mob. Does it have to be that way?

I guess the real question, though, is whether we’re any more willing to embrace that vision than the folks in Nazareth were. Maybe the current economic crisis presents us with a *kairos* moment, a moment when our defenses are down and we may be willing to look at things in new ways. It ought to be encouraging that even Allstate Insurance Company is giving lip service to a new way of looking at things. You may have seen their commercials on TV where they talk about rediscovering values and the importance of relationships instead of things and then ask whether we will look back on this as the great recession or the recession that made it great. I might be encouraged if I didn’t turn cynical when an insurance company starts talking about values.

But values are what it’s all about. I’m more encouraged when Jim Wallis talks about the need to rediscover values. Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” What would it mean if this scripture – this scripture that gives us a glimpse of God’s vision for our world – what would it mean if this scripture were fulfilled in our hearing today, in our midst, in our nation? What would it mean?