

“QUESTIONING TRADITION”

Luke 4:16-30; 6:6-11

June 13, 2021

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Jesus was a Jew. I've said this before, but I think I need to keep saying it if for no other reason than to remind myself that it's more important to follow Jesus than to be a "good" Christian. I have a growing sympathy for those who observe that many Christians reflect Jesus less and less. In fact, large parts of the church are distancing themselves from traditional "Christian" positions against divorce, homosexuality, women in authority, and abortion.

Jesus was a Jew, but like me, he was not always happy with what Jews were doing or saying. Unlike me, he refused to be complicit in what he regarded as sinful. As a Jew, it was his "custom" to attend synagogue. He valued the reading of scripture and he believed it was important that the tradition speak to the world in which he lived. When he fulfilled the expectation of his faith community, they were pleased with him. When he stepped out of line, they were angry.

When Janet and I began to think about this sermon series on following Jesus, it seemed important that we should consider those stories where Jesus made people angry, stories that questioned the tradition. Are there times when following Jesus will lead us to challenge the tradition, to issue a call for repentance, or to question the intent of certain common practices?

Things are going well in Nazareth. Jesus reads a text which proclaims good news. He tells them that it is being fulfilled in their presence. You can imagine yourself there as he elaborates on how this good news will speak to the poor. You can feel the joy of captives, maybe a friend of yours carried off by the Romans, being freed. The blind will see. The day of Jubilee when debts are forgiven is just on the horizon.

They did not expect such "gracious words" to come from Joseph's boy. Maybe they're anticipating a healing or a miracle like the one in Capernaum. Of course Jesus will do the same in his home town!

And then Jesus applies the brakes as he sites two stories from the Hebrew Scriptures in which foreigners receive relief from disaster or disease while none from Israel do. You can hardly miss the point: "I'm not doing it here!" Happiness over. Anger erupts. Joseph's boy is edged toward the cliff. They're not just angry. They have murder on their mind.

I think there's a certain resonance with this story like it's happened before and has happened since. Jesus is neither the first nor the last preacher to offend the congregation and be sent packing. Only a few churches have not experienced a time when preacher and congregation seem to hold to different versions of the gospel.

So let's take a closer look at this story. Why does Jesus move from saying things that excite the folks in Nazareth to saying something that he has to know will deeply offend them? What would be wrong with doing a little healing, casting out a demon or two? Why not something for the home town?

On the other hand, why were they so angry at his words? Did he say something that merited death? Typically, we wonder more about Jesus' change of tone. We're surprised by the apparent lack of generosity. This is not the Jesus we know today! We may acknowledge that the response of the crowd is extreme, but we sort of get it. Therein lies the problem.

We understand the crowd's reaction because we see it again and again in our world. Where people disagree, someone deems murder appropriate. It sounds horrible when I put it like that, but this is precisely what happens. People kill people over little things, over words.

The reaction of the people of Nazareth betrays the reality of a serious dysfunction in the faith community. They are turned inward, taking care of their own. They want to use their connection with Jesus for their own profit. Maybe they want to keep Jesus for themselves, keep him in Nazareth. We aren't told. But if this had been a functioning community, instead of getting angry, they might have cited counter-examples. Didn't God stand with the Israelites against Pharaoh? Didn't God defend them from enemies during the time of the judges? They might have asked for clarification on Jesus' point. Did he mean that God intended to exclude Nazareth from the good news announced in the Isaiah passage?

Rev. Dr. Christopher Ellwood spoke about the strength of the Presbyterian Church during times of crisis and polarization at last week's Presbytery meeting. We do not have a hierarchical structure, he said. We make decisions as a body. Intrinsic to the structure of the church is what he called a "deliberative space." I'm wondering if "deliberative space" is what's missing in Nazareth, what's missing in the controversy over Sabbath in the other story we read, and what's missing in Jesus' relationship with the religious leadership and the political authorities.

Now I didn't coin this phrase, but if I had, here's what I'd say about it. First, it's not the same thing as a safe place where people who disagree can come together and say what they think without fear of being ostracized. Deliberative space is not a place where all points of view are acceptable. Deliberative space isn't interested in hearing both sides of an issue.

It's a space where the church chooses. One expects that a variety of ideas and options are raised, but the ideas don't remain idle, standing side by side. They engage with one another. The body aims at some sort of resolve. Deliberative space is not about an individual who acts as an authority figure. Ultimately it is a place where the faith community comes to agreement on an action to take, a value to hold, or a position to claim.

When Jesus asks his disciples about what people are saying about him, they feed him the information. "Some say you are John the Baptist...." And then Jesus asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" He's inviting them into deliberative space, to make a choice, to take a stand.

The church is currently wrestling with the problem of racism. How the church responds is critical to the world's perception not just of the church, but of the gospel. I'm excited to see that the church is creating space for conversation, is re-examining its complicity, repenting of past and current practices that reinforce the structures of racism and advocating for changes that create more equity in society.

The synagogue in Nazareth was not prepared to even begin the conversation. Jesus tells them that good news has arrived for the poor, release to captives, freedom to the oppressed, sight for the blind, and the day of Jubilee for those in debt. When they begin to offer him congratulations for such a fine sermon, he senses that they don't fully understand. Is it that he thinks that they're being presumptuous in applying these categories to themselves or just that they underestimate the scope of these promises.

He's not tactful in citing these two stories, but I do see it as an invitation into deliberative space. To paraphrase his point, soften it really, he reminds them that this promise applies to foreigners, that God's grace does not belong exclusively to them. They decline the offer.

A short time later, in a different town, Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath when an opportunity to do some good arises. The tradition, as understood by the religious leadership in Jerusalem, was that to heal on the Sabbath would be to do work that was forbidden. This time he invites them into a conversation with a question. "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm, to save life or destroy it, on the Sabbath?"

The question of course challenges the traditional practice of the Sabbath at the time. It was still a day of devotion to God, but it also involved ceasing from all the activities of the week. "Work" was strictly confined by a series of regulations developed over the years by Pharisees. Jesus asks them to look at it differently, to look at it from his perspective. Here is this man with a withered hand. I could heal him today which would be good. Or I could choose not to heal him today which may result in a lasting harm. Maybe circumstances will keep the two apart for the future. Should I abide by the Sabbath rules and leave him with this injury? Or should I violate the rule and do for him a good?

Each new day brings challenges to the current way of doing things. I like traditions, but how tied to them should the followers of Jesus be? How many times have congregations or church leaders shouted down the person who questioned current practice? How many invitations into deliberate space have we declined?

What remains of the gospel when we won't try something new, when we are silent about injustice, or when we serve only ourselves? These two stories are not the only times that Jesus questioned tradition. It was enough to refrain from evil actions. Jesus cautioned us

against holding evil intent within our heart. It was enough to love your friends. Jesus urged us to love our enemies. He didn't do it carelessly or thoughtlessly, but he must have known that if the oppressed were going to be set free, something would have to change.

I wish that he had found a way to be faithful to God and true to his message that didn't make some people angry. Sometimes he makes me angry. Thankfully, he holds open a space, a place not just for reflection, but for resolve. When the faith community is healthy, there's a space for us to gather as we work through our calling, a place where we can decide who we're going to be, who we're called to be, and what we're called to do.

As I think about following Jesus in this community of faith, I am thankful that questions do not stand idle, unasked, and unanswered. I am thankful to be part of a community that treasures the deliberative space; that we have asked hard questions, made difficult changes, and engaged the challenges in the world with love, grace, and hope. My prayer is that we will never be so attached to being the same kind of Christian that we've always been, that we forget to follow where Jesus leads. As the old hymn says, "May God grant us courage for the living of these days." Amen.