**Welcoming Jesus**

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 4:21-30

Following worship today is our annual meeting. As a rule our annual meetings tend to go smoothly with general agreement on the budget and any other items up for consideration. I always assumed that the meetings went well because of the excellent job done by the moderator. But, after reading today’s Gospel lesson, I am wondering if maybe it might have something to do with the bluffs by the high bridge. They are, after all, reasonably close. If someone was keeping us from Fellowship Hour by raising unwelcome issues, it would be altogether possible to head on down to the edge of the bluff and give them the old heave-ho. That possibility would certainly give one pause about pointing out too many issues with the minutes, raising objections about the pastor’s salary increase or any other issue that might disturb our harmony and keep us from a cup of coffee and a snack.

One of the central questions the Gospel writers raise for the early Christian community, a question that remains no less relevant for us today is, “would Jesus be welcome in our community?” Or, would we find the questions Jesus raises so troubling, so disturbing that like the folks in his hometown of Nazareth, we would be walking Jesus down toward the High Bridge with the intent of “hurling him off the cliff?”

For Luke, as for the other Gospel writers, the question of whether Jesus is welcomed lives in direct relationship to what it means for us to be welcoming the Realm of God for which we pray every time we say the Lord’s Prayer. “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Are we ready to welcome Jesus? Are we ready to welcome the Reign of God’s justice and love? That is the question Luke and the other Gospel writers are all asking.

I have yet to encounter a congregation who thought they were anything other than welcoming. I am guessing that is true for the people in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth as well. They no doubt think of themselves as good hearted, open minded, welcoming people, faithful in their place of worship and their community.

It has apparently been a good while since Jesus has visited his hometown of Nazareth. Some folks recognize him right away. Others are a bit unsure and wonder out loud if this person they have heard so much about is the same Jesus they knew as a child, the son of Joseph the carpenter.

Initially Jesus does receive a very warm welcome. They even invite Jesus to be the liturgist for the day, which he accepts. It apparently comes as a surprise to them, but Jesus does a remarkably good job as the liturgist. His pronunciation is clear and understandable. He has excellent emphasis on the words, bringing this passage about God’s justice, liberation and Jubilee from Isaiah to life as it is read. Jesus even adds a strong contemporary feel at the end when he says, “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Everyone is pleased, complimenting Jesus on what a great liturgist he is. This is a place where Jesus is truly welcome.

But then in a matter of what seems like just a few minutes, the crowd goes from welcoming Jesus to angry rage with the intent of tossing Jesus over the cliff. It was almost as if Jesus had missed a chip shot field goal in the closing seconds of a football game, keeping the team out of the play offs. Jesus was welcome. Now, suddenly, they are so infuriated by Jesus that they are ready to see just how far they can fling him.

What could possibly cause Jesus to become so unwelcome in Nazareth or anywhere else for that matter? Unfortunately for Jesus he believes that as a community and as individuals we have the capacity to grow as human beings and grow as a community of faith. We have it within us to become better than we are. The reason the church came to speak of Jesus as the incarnation of God is that Jesus was insistent on putting our deepest values about God’s love, our deepest hopes about God’s justice into practice. Love and Justice are more than concepts or ideas. They take on flesh. They are flesh. When it comes to living out the words of the prophet Isaiah about God’s Jubilee Justice, Jesus expects and assumes no less for Nazareth or for us. Jesus knows we fall short of who we might be, but Jesus never quits believing in who we might become.

As a result of this non-cynical approach Jesus can be rather direct in naming those places where growth is possible, which is what makes the welcome of Jesus begin to run a little thin. Most of us, after all, like to see ourselves in the most positive way possible. Have you ever sat across the table from someone who starts looking at you and then begins brushing the side of his mouth with his hand? You know the signal. There is some piece of food that has somehow lodged itself on your cheek or the corner of your mouth. You try and get it, but apparently it is still there, so your table partner motions again. Pretty soon the whole table is watching while you try and clear your face of whatever is there. On the one hand you would rather not have a piece of food clinging to your face for everyone else to see, but on the other hand it is hard to avoid a little resentment creeping in toward that person who is pointing it out.

Perhaps you saw a recent poll conducted by the Star Tribune on race relations in Minnesota. One of the questions that was asked is do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of Black Lives Matter. 69% of White Minnesotans reported having an unfavorable view. 94% of Black Minnesotans reported have a favorable view. How does one explain such wide discrepancy in perception? One possible answer is that Black Lives Matter is pointing to the face of White Minnesota and noting food stuck on our cheek that we are unable to see and rather resent having it pointed out.

Jesus is pointing out the food that is stuck on the face of the people in Nazareth and it is beginning to sour the mood. He says to them “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" Apparently the people of Nazareth were approaching Jesus’ arrival as if they had won the lottery. They have heard that Jesus is a source of healing and that sounds good to them. If Jesus sets up shop in Nazareth, it is bound to be good for business. Who knows, maybe this little out of the way town will become a going concern. Nothing is expected of them. No change or growth is required. They simply get to cash in on Jesus.

Dietrich Bonheoffer, the German theologian, killed by Nazi Germany referred to this way of welcoming Jesus as cheap grace. One commentator summarizes Bonheoffer by saying, “the Christianity of cheap grace is the Christianity which is remorselessly nice. It is as bland as an easy listening radio station. It is a Christianity which is concerned for social approval and belonging, and risks nothing. It is the Christianity which has misunderstood what Christianity really is”. In telling the story of Jesus arrival in his hometown of Nazareth, Luke invites the early Christian community and Luke invites us to consider what it means to welcome Jesus. Or asked a little differently, is cheap grace stuck to the side of your mouth? Do we welcome Jesus only because of how it might benefit us or are we prepared to grow in ways that expand the Realm of God?

Things really take a turn for the worse when Jesus decides to quote a few more passages of Scripture. This could be a warning to our liturgists about the potential danger of reading Scripture. You never know when people will get upset because of what is in the Bible. It may be a riskier assignment than you imagine.

Fred Craddock, a highly regarded and well known preacher and teacher, tells the story of a time when he preached on the story of the Prodigal Son. After church had ended one of the members came up to him and angrily stated, “preacher, I don’t think we should be reading that story in church. It sets a bad example for the youth. They get the message they can run off and do all sorts of wild things and then come home with all being forgiven. That is NOT the message we should be giving our young people”. He was mad. He felt the father had no business unconditionally welcoming back the prodigal son.

The story Jesus quotes to the people of Nazareth are stories about God’s welcome as well. The first story Jesus reminds them about is a story in which the generous welcome of God is offered by the prophet Elijah to a widow in Sidon during the time of famine. As Jesus notes there were lots of widows in Israel, but God’s welcome was extended beyond Israel. The second story Jesus quotes is a story about Naman the Syrian who was healed of leprosy by Elisha. Again, Jesus notes, there were plenty of lepers in Israel, but God’s love and justice is not limited to Israel.

Apparently the people of Nazareth are enraged by the notion of just how broad, inclusive and all encompassing the promise of God’s love and justice actually is. Their welcome of Jesus suddenly turns to anger with the intent of giving Jesus the heave-ho over the cliff.

Luke believes this story of Nazareth has relevancy for the early Christian community and if it has relevancy for them it has relevancy for us. Where do we see that type of anger today? Who are the ones that people would push over the side of the cliff rather than see them included in the depth and breadth of God’s love and justice? Are they immigrants from Central American, immigrants from Syria or other war torn areas? Are they people whose gender identity or sexual orientation is different from our own? Are they people who have been to jail and have a prison record? Who are the ones that would be excluded from the Realm of God’s love and justice?

Jesus not only regularly welcomes those others would exclude, Jesus goes a step further and says when you welcome them you welcome me. One time when the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest Jesus “took a little child and put it by his side, 48and said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.’ Matthew leaves it abundantly clear what it means to welcome Jesus when Matthew repeats these familiar words, “5for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

We are pleased to welcome new members into the life of our community of faith today. I am hopeful there will never be an occasion that folks here want to walk them down to the High Bridge and toss them over the bluff. If we are welcoming Jesus than it is a given we will welcome the gifts, the insights, the talents of all those who will help this community of faith grow in our commitment to the love and justice of God’s Realm.

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

*In our first lesson we hear the story of Jeremiah as a young person being called by God to be a voice of God’s justice. Jeremiah’s reluctance is responded to with the assurance that God is with all whom God calls. It is no easy task. Jeremiahs is given a prophetic charge that involves over throwing the ways of the world so that the ways of God might come into being.*

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,  
 "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

**Luke 4:21-30**

*Our second lesson from Luke is a continuation of the reading in which Jesus returns to his home town of Nazareth. Jesus is invited to read Scripture and proceeds to read that now famous passage of God’s Jubilee, which many see as the passage which defines the mission of Jesus and hence the church. It is a passage about God’s love and justice working on behalf of those for whom it is denied. In our lesson today, the people of Nazareth, who first welcome Jesus with enthusiasm, become enraged when Jesus points out the implications of God’s love and justice for their town.*

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.