

January 31, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 20, 2016

After Jesus takes the scroll, reads the words of the prophet Isaiah, and then delivers the startling announcement that he is the fulfillment of scripture, he pushes the shock index even further. It's not enough to proclaim to the poor, the captives, the hurting, and oppressed that freedom is now theirs, that their long-awaited Messiah brings them good news. Jesus challenges those around him, people of low social and economic status, to accept others whom even they may have disregarded—the widow, the leper, the foreigner.

First, Jesus dares the people to ask for a demonstration of the wonders he performed in Capernaum, a city with many gentiles. Surely he would do for his hometown what he did for strangers, people who aren't even in the fold. But Jesus answers his own question—"no prophet is accepted in his hometown," he tells them—and instead of miracles, he gives them two stories from their own scriptures. When there was famine in the land during the time of Elijah, the prophet was sent to a widow not in Israel but at Zarephath in Sidon, in order to deliver the good news of reconciliation. And when there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha, only one leper was cleansed and healed of his affliction: Naaman, in Syria.

In these two instances, God chose foreigners over the faithful—a theme Jesus signals when he visits Capernaum before traveling to Nazareth. Upon hearing this, the people in Nazareth become enraged and turn on him with deadly violence.

In contrast to this week's Gospel reading's violence, the epistle reading is the famous "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way . . ." The writer of Luke may be challenging his readers to accept even those whom the oppressed might reject, but Paul reminds us to act with love in all things.

In 21st-century America, the call to include all people is strong among Christians. Yes, Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr. has invited students to deter terrorism by carrying guns on campus. ("Let's teach them a lesson if they ever show

up here.”) Presidential candidate Donald Trump has called for blocking Muslims from entering the United States. Yet many American Christians have embraced a radical hospitality that would protect foreigners in the United States.

In my own city of Indianapolis, the Roman Catholic archdiocese recently challenged Governor Mike Pence to release state funds (as required by federal law) for the support of a Syrian refugee family relocating to Indiana. The response from Christian (and non-Christian) communities throughout the state was overwhelmingly positive. A United Methodist church in town organized a vigil and rally to show its support. Danyelle Ditmer, a pastor there, told the *Indianapolis Star* that the refugees “are real people in need.”

Outside the statehouse, people protested Pence’s attempt to prevent any Syrian refugees from coming to Indiana. “Jesus was a refugee” was a favorite slogan on handheld signs.

The protesters could easily find support for their cause in Luke 4, when Jesus proclaims good news and inclusion for the poor, the oppressed, and even the foreigner in the kingdom of God. But the human spirit, when compelled by a faithful commitment to social justice, can sometimes become so consumed with outrage that it fails to heed Paul’s equally important call to act with love in all things.

As a young pastor fresh out of seminary I could get so caught up in my anger about the many wrongs that flourish unchecked in the world—poverty, war, sexism, racism—that I would forget that the people I was preaching to were not generally the perpetrators of this injustice. They were more likely to be its victims. They were not powerful people in their social and political worlds. They were not government officials; they were not wealthy. If I could remember Paul’s “still more excellent way,” the way of love, I could stay in a frame of mind to care for hurting people while also calling them to work against injustice. A message based in love is much easier to hear than one emanating from anger.

Anger has its place in social justice movements, of course. Love, in Paul’s understanding, doesn’t replace anger. Love rejoices in truth, and sometimes the truth is infuriating—especially when it reveals suffering and loss, discrimination and inequality. What’s more, love outlasts everything. “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Thanks be to God that love will outlast every injustice and oppression, every humiliation and regret, every impulse to violence and discrimination. Without love, we might just be a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.