

Reading from the Gospels: Luke 4:21-30

A Word of Truth

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Did you know that many Christians are worshipping another god? That's right. This god is all powerful ... all knowing ... and like the God we worship ... this other god is everywhere at the same time, too. And let me tell you ... there are many, many Christians who spend a lot more time with the new god ... in touch with this new god ... than they do praying to the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

Wow ... sounds like a god that will give our God a real run for the money. And there's even a name for this new god ... it's the Google god. Now you might say I'm just kidding with you ... but think about it. Everything I said about the Google god is true ... at least to a degree. Because if you ask this god a question ... well ... you'll get an answer ... usually within .0453 seconds. Of course, you might end up with 6,000,000 answers that you might have to whittle down to the one you want ... but at least you get an answer.

How many times have you prayed and wondered when THE God was going to answer your prayer. Google god is pretty fast. Unfortunately ... even though Goggle god knows everything ... and I do mean everything ... what you learn from Google god can sometimes be a bit confusing and even contradictory.

Google god tells you everything ... and I mean everything. It will provide you with answers on the whole spectrum of knowledge on any subject. That can cause some problems. Because unfortunately, many people accept anything on the Internet as the truth. Or ... if you're looking for a particular answer to back up what you personally believe about something ... Google God's got one.

That's so true of human nature. We like the truth ... as long as the truth fits what we believe. Most of us recoil at the truth when it hits us between the eyes. Who wants to hear the real truth ... when I can have a truth that keeps me from changing ... from feeling anxiety ... from facing the demons of my life? Who wants that kind of truth? Not me. No ... keep me in my simple world of denial ... where the truth has been softened ... or glossed over ... or buried in the sand ... and I'll be just fine. That's because the truth ... the real truth ... can be so hard to hear and accept. And it will demand something of me.

Last Sunday we heard how Jesus returns to his hometown. He brought his friends a word of truth ... when read from the scroll of Isaiah these words: "God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

And then he went on to tell them that those words were fulfilled in their hearing of them. But that wasn't all. He also told them a hard truth ... a reality about who God is and who God loves. They really didn't want to hear that. So I wonder ... do we?

Listen now with your hearts to our Gospel reading from the fourth chapter of Luke, verses 21-30. How do you react to what Jesus says? I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Messenger*.

21 Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

22 All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, "Isn't this Joseph's son, the one we've known since he was a youngster?"

23 He answered, "I suppose you're going to quote the proverb, 'Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.'

24 Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown.

25 Isn't it a fact that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah during that three and a half years of drought when famine devastated the land,

26 but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Sa-rep-ta in Sidon?

27 And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian."

28 That set everyone in the meeting place seething with anger.

29 They threw him out, banishing him from the village, then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom,

30 but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The hometown folks really don't want to hear what Jesus has to say. Who does he think he is ... this son of a common carpenter ... to come waltzing back into town and tell them what God is really doing in this world. They already know what God is doing. God is the God of the Hebrew people ... the chosen ones ... the favored ones ... the ones with the inside track.

And no one ... not even someone who seems to read the scriptures with such authority ... and particularly not one who is just the son of an ordinary carpenter ... is going to tell them anything differently. If that is his idea of truth ... well they will just take him and his truth and ride him out of town on a rail! And they almost do.

I actually saw the cliff on the edge of the Nazareth. It's pretty steep and it's a long way down.

It's a good thing Jesus did give them the slip.

But those words of Jesus ... those powerful words of Jesus ... those words that bring a hard truth to the people of Nazareth ... do transform the world ... and we, being here this morning, are a testimony to their power and their transformation.

I remember a story about a preacher who had a similar problem. I may have shared this with some of you ... but it's worth hearing again. Because the preacher in this story, like Jesus, discovers that being prophetic in leadership and preaching is challenging ... but it can also be transforming.

The story takes place in the once racially segregated churches in South Carolina. One of the Baptist Churches there appointed a new preacher, who though very uneducated, understood the gospel. Most pastors would recoil at his preaching method. For his first sermon he simply flipped the Bible open ... and started preaching the words his finger landed on ... which just happened to be Paul's words to the Galatians that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female.

In the 1950's South where churches were racially segregated the application was obvious, at least to the preacher. There shouldn't be black churches and white churches ... there should just be churches made up of black and white. The deacons weren't so appreciative of this message and demanded that their new preacher preach something different!

And the preacher did do something different ... he fired the deacons and kept on preaching his message of racial unity. Unfortunately, many people left the church. His already small congregation became even smaller, dwindling to just four people. But then something amazing began to happen ... that little church started to grow, bit by bit, until it included people of all races.

One congregation member was a lecturer in English literature at the University of South Carolina who would drive 70 miles to listen to this uneducated preacher. His reason? "Because that man preaches the gospel." (Tony Campolo, *You Can Make a Difference.*)

Same thing happened to Jesus. His little flock starts out pretty small. But ... Jesus keeps right on preaching the truth ... and bit by bit ... his little flock grows, too. Thousands actually come and listen to him preach ... and to hear him speak the truth. But Jesus never pulls any punches ... and it seems that many who hear him ... will walk away.

Some are angry by what he says ... they want to hear a different kind of truth. Some of the people don't like what they hear because it will mean their lives will have to change. That isn't so appealing either. Once again ... not everyone is willing to hear the truth.

There seems to be a lot of truth out there in the world today. I guess it just depends on who you're listening to. For some people the truth means lots of prosperity ... wealth ... a few bucks in the bank provided by a blessing from God. That one doesn't do a lot for me ... oh, don't get me wrong ... wouldn't mind a few bucks ... but the God I worship isn't an ATM machine.

Some people prefer a simple truth ... just tell me what I need to believe and I will believe it ... just tell me the magic words to say and I'll be saved ... then I'm in the God Club and saved forever. Honestly ... I really don't really like that one either. That one makes it hard to have a true and meaningful relationship with your Savior.

That one doesn't leave room for doubts ... and struggles ... and growth in your walk with Christ. It's also rife with lots of judgment for those who might have those doubts and struggles in their faith journey. Then you have the truth spewed out by folks out there like Pat Robertson whose vengeful god brings down punishment on evil people ... like the people of Haiti. Don't even get me started with that so-called truth.

However ... the truth Jesus is talking about that day in Nazareth has always been a hard truth for many people to swallow. It's the same truth ... preached by that pastor in that little South Carolina church ... that must continue to be heard.

And it's a much bigger truth than just the integration of a little church in South Carolina. Oh sure, you say, we're way past that kind of discrimination in the church ... we're totally accepting of everyone. And that's the problem. Whenever the church becomes complacent with the way things are ... that's when the truth of Jesus Christ begins to create a lot of friction and a lot of heat.

On that day in the synagogue there in Nazareth ... Jesus tells his friends and neighbors that God is not just their God. And he illustrates it to them by pointing out two powerful stories in the scriptures. One story tells how the prophet Elijah only helps a Gentile widow in Sidon during a period of terrible famine and drought ... the other reminds the people of the prophet Elisha cleansing a Syrian General's leprosy.

Why would hearing those stories cause such anger amongst the people of his hometown? Because both stories point out that God is the God of all the people and not just the chosen ones. God is a God of love who reaches far beyond boundaries ... beyond cultures and class differences ... the God of love crosses all national boundaries as well as society's boundaries ... the God of love doesn't forget those the world forgets. . . the God of love reaches to every corner of this world and offers grace and love to everyone.

Those words create friction as they rub up against the beliefs and the half-truths of Jesus' old friends and neighbors from Nazareth ... and a lot of heat is produced ... angry heat. But believe me ... don't begin to think that we've gotten past all that today.

Those words are just as important and need to be heard here in the 21st Century as they were back there in the First Century. Because as I said a moment ago ... whenever the church becomes complacent with the way things are ... that's when the truth of Jesus Christ begins to create a lot of friction and a lot of heat.

The word of God never stands still ... it's not a static word ... it's a word that's alive and it keeps on challenging and changing this world. And those very words are still producing lots of friction and heat in the church today. Because whenever or wherever any church slams its doors in the

face of any of God's children ... because their skin color is different ... or there is a disagreement over some theological point ... or someone is of a different sexual persuasion ... or gender ... or nationality ... or of another culture ... or they are an immigrant struggling to make it in a new land ... or they dress differently ... or they don't have a home with a roof over their heads ... or they've been to prison ... whenever or wherever happens ... the word of God ... the truth spoken by Christ that day in Nazareth ... is going to create a lot of friction and a lot of heat.

The truth spoken by Jesus Christ was hard then ... and it's hard now. The question will always come back to us ... are we a complacent church ... or are we a church that is willing to be challenged ... willing to take some heat ... and willing to grow in the Spirit of the truth of Jesus Christ?

As Christians ... as some of God's chosen people ... we need to always be willing to ask ourselves ... Where are the boundaries of God's love? Does God's love stop here ... or here ... or here? What is it about God's love of others that seems to make us angry?

What happens to us ... what are we called to do ... when we hear Christ's truth being spoken? Is God's love and grace only poured out on Christians? Or on a particular kind of Christian? Is God's love and grace something that is meant to be offered to all of God's children in this whole wide world?

Those questions can be hard to answer. To be honest with you ... they create a bit of friction in me ... they challenge me and my own complacency as a Christian. And I pray they will challenge you, too.

Let us pray:

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In your company I'll go ...

where your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.