

*Throwing Jesus Under the Bus*

Last week's gospel reading was the first half of the story about Jesus giving his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. If you recall, Jesus read from the book of prophet Isaiah and made the comment, "Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing." These ancient words of the prophet Isaiah had been written centuries before Jesus was born, and they were addressed to Israelites living in Babylon during the Exile. Undoubtedly, Jesus knew that. Yet, Jesus said these words could be applied hundreds of years later among Jews living in their own land. God's word is not captive to history. His Word is reaching out and speaking to us across time and space. Jesus knew that too

Well, for Jesus' sermon, it was "so far so good." At that point the hometown crowd seemed pleased with the hometown boy who had made good. But that was to change, quickly and dramatically. As Jesus went on to apply more specifically what these scripture mean, the crowd got offended and angry. They grew mean and ugly. Jesus had taken them out of their comfort zone. Nobody really wants to hear the Word of God because it goes against our corrupted human nature – we all think we know better than God -- but Jesus had the audacity to proclaim God's Word to everyone anyway. The good people of Nazareth didn't like what Jesus was saying, he offended them, and they weren't going to let him get away with that.

Hear how the Bible describes that scene again: "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 the town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” Who were these people about to kill Jesus? Were they strangers, the people who drug Jesus out of the synagogue? No! They were people that knew him well, his friends and neighbors, or at least they were supposed to be his friends and neighbors.

Having lived there for about 30 years, Jesus had been to these people’s weddings, and bar mitzvahs, and funerals. They had broken bread together and talked together; they had laughed and cried together. You can bet Jesus loved them, and, being the kind of person he was, you can be had been there for them in many ways in their times of need. But, they didn’t like what Jesus said that particular day, and suddenly all that other stuff didn’t matter – it was time to throw Jesus under the bus and off the cliff! “Challenge our beliefs, and you have to go. Challenge our way of thinking, and you have to die.” That’s the way of the world.

People have short memories. People are not naturally grateful. People like to exercise power and control. That’s the reality Jesus was up against, and, if the crowd had had their way that day, Jesus would have died right then and there. But that was not the way it was supposed to be. It was not God’s will for Jesus to die that way, not just yet. God grants us human freedom, and every now and then God allows us to throw up roadblocks impeding even His will. But anything contrary to God’s will is only temporary.

Evil may win a battle, evil may win many battles, but the ultimate outcome of the war between good and evil was already decided by Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus wasn’t going to die there that day because that is not

what God had already foreordained in scripture. Jesus would die another day at a mob's displeasure on a hill outside of Jerusalem, but his death there would be for our salvation, for the pardoning of our sins, although we are mightily unworthy.

Why would Jesus die for us? Why would he willingly submit to the evil intentions of evil people at the Father's request? It's all about love, God's love for us. Our second reading today, 1 Corinthians chapter 13, is known as the "love chapter." It's been read at almost every wedding I have ever officiated at. But what Paul is addressing there wasn't so much marital relations. Paul was talking about the love Christians should have for one another; he was talking about love in community as gift from God. God loves us with an unconditional love, and he calls us to love one another unconditionally.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in a time of conflict. There were divisions and factions and people saying harsh words to one another. Has there ever been a time when that was not so in the church? Ironically, the battle was over God's gifts. Some people thought they were more gifted than others. They were quick to instruct and correct others. They were sure that they were more spiritual, more knowledgeable than anyone else. They pointed out the speck in the other's eye, and missed the board in their own.

To such a conflicted group, Paul spoke God's gospel of love. A love that puts away childish things. A love that rejoices in the right, not in the wrong. A love that transcends the individual and puts Christ and his church first. A love that even endures suffering and sacrifices one's self for the greater

good. That is the kind of love we are called to. That is the love Jesus offers to us. That is the love that Jesus lived out.

The story of Jesus' first sermon in his hometown ends with the people not killing him after all. They wanted to, but Jesus walked right through the midst of them. It wasn't his time. But what's a shame it is that Jesus' very own people let him go. They had Jesus, the very Word of God in human flesh, in their midst, and didn't realize it. They did not know God's Word when they heard it. They could not recognize God's will when it was laid out for them. God sent them life, and they tried to kill the very life he sent.

God's Holy Spirit was tugging at the people of Nazareth to follow Jesus that day, but they would not. There are always less than holy spirits tugging at us as well, leading us away from God. As we've been examining in our Bible studies recently, we really don't have any free will when it comes to our salvation. Salvation is a free gift from God we cannot earn. But how we live out our lives is largely us to up, and the question is always, will we follow Jesus or not, will we receive his Word or not? May the Holy Spirit guide us, and rule us, when we are called to follow Christ. Amen.