

Is God's Mercy Too Wide?
 Luke 4:16-30; 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, 13
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If this had been Jesus' candidate sermon in the synagogue that Sabbath, it did not end well. Not only did they not vote him in as their next Rabbi, they actually tried to kill him. And after such a strong start! In a few short moments, this hometown crowd, the ones who had watched Mary hold toddler Jesus' little hand as he took his first steps on their way to market; The very friends and relatives who had commiserated with Joseph and Mary when they heard how twelve-year old Jesus ditched his parents for three days when they left Jerusalem after the Passover festival actually tried to kill him. Yes, those hometown folks flipped from a gush of love and pride for their hometown hero into full-blown anger: "all in the synagogue were filled with rage...led him to the brow of the hill, so that they might hurl him off the cliff." Keep in mind that hurling someone off a cliff was an alternative form of stoning in Jesus' time. Yikes. At first glance, this may seem an odd choice for my candidate sermon today. Or perhaps a risky one. We'll see.

What did he say or do that made them so mad? How did this exciting day in the synagogue turn ugly so quickly? How did these church going, Bible-reading, law-abiding people get so, "envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable and resentful," so scary fast? All the love had left the synagogue to be sure. I think it has to do with the gap between what Jesus said and what they actually heard. This gap threatened to hollow out the real Good News to some First Century "fake news" version of it. And boy did that light up Jesus. No room for slippage or spin when it comes to the Gospel, which in the Greek means, "Good News."

Let's look at the tape again and review the play-by-play for a moment. Jesus began by proclaiming his Messiah mandate by reading the words of the prophet Isaiah. Actually prophet identified as Third Isaiah who wrote these jubilant words after their return from Babylonian captivity: *Good news to poor; release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind; freedom for the oppressed; Erasure of all debts.* Clean slate. Freedom, health and dignity for all people. Next came the opening line of Jesus' first sermon, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." WOW! They loved that. At last the prophecy they had been longing for, after 500 years was being fulfilled in their very own Jesus!!. Woo hoo! Doesn't get better than that!

Perhaps they were so excited to be there that day, that they may not have caught the thrust of the text he read: Jesus had come to *change things* for everyone. He had come to upset the status quo. Of course we all love change, right? Especially Presbyterians. [You have probably heard the joke, "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?...Change?!?!] The love word in the eyes of God, the love word as described by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth, the love at

the heart of Jesus' mission and mandate: Divine Love, made known through the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ -- changes the hearts of people and it changes the system. If it doesn't, the Divine Love has become diluted, diverted, derivative.

The hometown folks were not ready for this kind of love. They were not hearing him. So next, he moved swiftly from Isaiah to the story of two other prophets: stories of Elijah and Elisha. Stories where God, through these prophets chose to heal and restore not the insiders, the people who already knew themselves to be the chosen, (like the synagogue crowd) but outsiders: a widow in Sidon, and a leper from Syria—Naaman who was not a Hebrew at all.

These were old, familiar stories that they knew like the back of their hand. Yet the new light that Jesus shed on their Holy Word infuriated them to the point of violence. About three years later—another riot—also fueled by rage and fear, would end with Jesus nailed to a cross. What made them so mad? What did they hear him say? This gentle and humble in heart Jesus, who showed love with every breath and step he took.

God's mercy was too wide. That's right. They wanted Jesus to be their own Jesus. They wanted God's love and mercy to shine on them, first and foremost. "Hey Jesus, remember where you came from!" They wanted Jesus and whatever kind of power and love he may be peddling to be their local event. They were excited about the prospect of having their hometown boy, with questionable parentage, put them and their town on the map.

You know the way mid-size towns pride themselves on a local person that makes it big. Like the way Dayton, Ohio tries to claim the Wright Brothers as theirs because they grew up in Dayton, discounting the fact that they made their first historic flight in Kitty Hawk, NC. Or like the way Marshfield prides itself that Gary Varsho made it into "The Show" as a Second Baseman for the Chicago Cubs back in the 80's; or that Melvin Laird became President Nixon's Secretary of Defense; and even more local and more recent: our very own Don Zais being named the Wisconsin AARP's Volunteer of the Year. I just learned last from you on Friday, that Howard Rice, former Moderator of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) and one of my mentors at seminary was raised right here in this congregation. Yes, we love our local heroes.

Well, you can just imagine the pride and excitement when their very own, Jesus of Nazareth, a two-bit town, "where nothing good had ever come," started making the news. Reports were spreading through all the surrounding countryside. "Yes, didn't you know? That's our Jesus! He's from Nazareth. Can't you picture it? From any direction as camels and donkeys would approach they were imagining signs: *Welcome to Nazareth. Hometown of Jesus.*

But Jesus would have none of that. He came down fast and hard on them with the full-throttle, high octane Good News: God's mercy cannot be contained. God's mercy does not work that way. You've got it all wrong. It is not just for you. God's mercy is wider than that. If you want to get in on the saving work of God, get ready to let me expand whatever boundaries you have erected to contain or control the spread of God's love and mercy. My mission is release, recovery and restoration of all people, not just us. You, or anyone, or even any religion cannot contain me.

Is God's mercy too wide, for us? "Come on, Christ, there's got to be a limit somewhere. You can't mean *everyone*. Not those foreigners. Not those people *not* like us." We see this gap, between God's lips and our ears, throughout the Bible and throughout our nation's history. We see this gap now, too. Yet, Jesus was so absolutely clear on this. Remember when the lawyer stood up to test Jesus, and began with an A+ answer to his own question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He quoted, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." But then Luke tells us wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29) Jesus answered this question with the parable we call, "The Good Samaritan." Jesus took another old story trope and turned it on its head, making the third traveler, the one in the hero position, a non-religious despised outsider, a Samaritan of all things, to be the one who is the neighbor to the man who fell in the hands of the robbers.

It's not about rank or race or even religion, it's about widening the aperture of mercy. The scripture is fulfilled *whenever* we hear Christ's call and do whatever we can to release, recover and restore all people to freedom and justice. Especially those on the margins, those who are captive, those who are suffering. Like the Nazareth crowd in Jesus' hometown synagogue, we have these scriptures in our Bibles, in both the Old and New Testaments, but how are we living them? Are we fulfilling them in our hearing? Or is God's mercy too wide for us?

One day at St. George's church in Philadelphia in 1787, as Barbara Lundblad (ELCA Pastor and former Professor at Union Theological Seminary) recounts in her book, *Transforming the Stone*: "Two black ministers, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, are pulled from their knees as they pray in a church gallery reserved for whites. There was a place for blacks in the balcony, but they refused to go. Instead, they passed through the midst of them and led their people out into the light of day. "What do these people want?" The white folks must have asked. "We ordained these men to attend to the needs of black people. How many other churches would have done that?" But the two black preachers believed that the fullness of God's blessing had come upon them and their people and they would acknowledge those blessings by praying on the main floor—if not in this church, then somewhere else. Thus the African Methodist Episcopal Church was born."ⁱ God's mercy was too wide for those well-intentioned white folks, apparently.

How far have we come? 228 years later, on the evening of June 17, 2015 at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, nine people were gunned down in a mass shooting during a prayer service by a 22 year old white man intentionally. Later in court he claimed: "White people are superior." The scripture was not fulfilled, it was desecrated right there in church. And Jesus wept.

Closer to home are the multiple, more subtle yet spirit-killing ways we all unintentionally draw boundaries on God's mercy. I was moved by a distinction that Pastor Mieke Vandervall made recently regarding the folks in her faith community, one of the "1001 New Worshipping Communities" initiative of the PC(USA) and one of the young adult progressive communities I visited and researched for my doctoral project. The church she started in Brooklyn, New York is called "NotSoChurchy." She described it like this, "Many in the community identify as queer, she said – "queer in the sense of strange. There's something a little bit different about us. And we all want to be in a place where LGBTQ people are not welcomed, but included."ⁱⁱ This is an important distinction. As important as being truly welcomed is, if you think about it, that's really only a first step. Just being "welcomed" implies, yes we are glad you're here. But please fit in to what we already have going – be like us, and you will be fine. That is not quite the full gospel. Being welcome is a good start, but it is not the Good News fulfilled. God's mercy calls for everyone to have a place at the grown up's table. Not just welcomed, but also fully included as co-equals: integral and vital to our evolving identity as the Body of Christ.

Finally, to bring this question into the room with us here today, I will let Anne Lamott, contemporary spiritual writer describe the way Christ widens our aperture of compassion as only she can do, in her most recent book titled, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*.ⁱⁱⁱ "Micah says do justice—follow the rules, do what you're supposed to do—but to love mercy, love the warmth within us, that flow of generosity. Love mercy—accept the acceptance; receive the forgiveness, whenever we can, for as long as we can. Then pass it on. We are bread to be served to the poor and the hungry, and sometimes it is we who need the bread. To give it or receive, we move out of our shells and personas, scooching toward the real. The real is hard, time-consuming and badly lit. I much prefer fantasy. And by the same token, change is hard. We like the familiar. We're self-centered, and we have a lot of fear—equal fear of love and death. Welcome to the monkey house, as Vonnegut wrote. We like breakthroughs, while the changes toward evolution and greater humanity are incremental. We don't want to grow. It hurts. And yet we do, bravely and scared, bit by bit. We tell it—it hangs in the air with its amazingness—we being to cooperate with kindness, and we remember the good we've seen in our own lives. We soften ever so slightly, with one to two percent willingness, and isn't that enough? The Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote, 'Anyone who moves forward, even a little, is like Jesus walking on water.'"

Does the wideness of God’s mercy, especially when it comes to people not like us, scare you? Maybe a little? That’s OK. Here’s what makes the Good News doable: We are not called to fulfill the scripture *alone*. That’s why God called us to be a church, to be a faith *community*. Does God’s mercy call us to be a sanctuary, not only for worship but also as a refuge for those in peril? Does God’s mercy call us to go out into the coffee shops and breweries and young adult hangouts of Marshfield and be present where God’s mercy is yearned for, but not yet experienced? Are you ready to move forward? Even a little? Let’s ask Jesus what can we do here, “scooching toward the real” Good News. Let’s walk on water, together.

Let us pray:

**O God of all creation,
 Who has come to us in Jesus,
 Lead us in your way of love
 And fill us with your Spirit.
 Choose us
 To bring good news to the poor,
 To proclaim release to the captives,
 To recover sight to the blind
 And to let the oppressed go free.
 So shall your new creation come
 And your will be done.**
(from Iona Abbey Worship Book)

ⁱ Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2001), pp. 90-91.

ⁱⁱ *The Presbyterian Outlook*, “1001 New Worshipping Communities IN FOCUS,” June 19, 2007, pp. 20-21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, (Riverhead Books: New York, NY, 2017), pp. 135-136.