

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

When I entered seminary, we seminarians were told that we should ask members of our family to help with insurance premiums while we were in school. We were forbidden to have any job off campus, so putting gas in the car or paying for a cell phone or keeping up with insurance premiums could get a bit dicey. Most of my classmates were just a few years out of undergraduate school and had parents who were in a position to help them financially. My family consisted of my three grown children. Two of them had good jobs and were married to people with good jobs, but the idea of a role reversal was something that I had to contemplate prayerfully. I finally got up the nerve to talk to my son, the Naval officer, to ask him if he could pick up the cost of my longterm care insurance.

"For the rest of your life?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, no...just for the three years that I'm in school."

"How much is it?" he asked.

"It's \$2,000 a year."

His face lit up and then came the comment,

"Wow! If I can get you through school for \$6,000 that's a great deal!"

I had no idea that he had been thinking that he was going to be responsible for putting his mother through school!!! I straightened that out right away!

Fast forward to Christmas of my first year in seminary. Graham and I went up to Hoboken to spend the holiday with my daughter and her family. While I was there, my two grandsons ages 6 and 5 were surreptitiously working on a craft project that they didn't want me to see. On Christmas morning, they very proudly handed me an envelope that they had made that was bigger than the two of them put together. I opened it very carefully and found taped to a very large piece of cardboard, a check made out to me for \$2000. I was just thrilled and thanked my daughter and son-in-law profusely; to which my daughter answered, "Well, my brother gave you \$2000!"

Don't you just love sibling rivalry!!! Thank you, God!

When the chips are down and the ox is in the ditch, my kids come through for me every time. Bless 'em!!!

Now all of us grew up in families of some form or another, so most of us are familiar with the phenomenon of sibling rivalry. Most of the time, it's pretty good-natured, but sometimes it can cause real problems. What we're hearing about today in our gospel reading is a form of sibling rivalry that has gone completely awry.

Our travel through the season of Epiphany brings us closer and closer to understanding the true identity of Jesus and to understanding the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As we come to know the identity of Jesus, we see his ministry unfold and his mission take place in ways that also give us some insight into the nature of God. Jesus comes to clarify for us what God is all about...what God wants from us...and how God feels about us. The fact that God has been incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ is the strongest statement ever of God's undying love for us as human beings and for all of his creation.

Just last week, we heard the story of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth, in the synagogue, reading the passage from Isaiah and announcing to all those gathered for worship that the prophecy of Isaiah, the coming of the long awaited Messiah and the description of that Messiah had been fulfilled on that day within their hearing. That last statement is where we pick up the story in our gospel lesson for this morning.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus says.

No sooner has Jesus announced that the Messiah has come, but he begins to explain the parameters of his mission. Jesus begins talking about going *outside* of the nation of Israel. Now we know that this story of Jesus reading Isaiah in his hometown and preaching that he is the Messiah that everyone has been looking for also appears in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. But their versions of this story differ significantly from the version that Luke tells. In Matthew and Mark, this episode occurs after Jesus has completed an extensive ministry throughout Galilee, including some spectacular miracles in and around Capernaum. The gospel of Luke puts this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry...almost immediately after his temptation in the wilderness. He's done some brief healing in and around Galilee prior to arriving in Nazareth, but Luke seems to want to impress upon his readers that Jesus announces his identity and mission statement to the hometown crowd at the *beginning* of his ministry.

The gospels of Matthew and Mark make no mention of Jesus' references to Elijah and Elisha which is the cause of the furious uproar from the synagogue congregation in Luke's gospel. In Matthew, this story doesn't appear until the end of chapter 13. And in Mark, it doesn't appear until the beginning of chapter 6. In neither of those two gospels does Jesus make any reference to the prophets Elijah and Elisha. His references to these two prophets in Luke not only explains what kind of Messiah he will be, but sheds additional light on why the congregation in the

synagogue became so furious with him. In both Matthew and Mark, we are left to believe that the hometown crowd rejected Jesus simply because he was the hometown boy and nobody could believe that anyone they had helped to raise could possibly have grown up to be the long awaited Messiah. Both Mark and Matthew propose that Jesus didn't do very many miracles in Nazareth because of the unbelief of the people. Luke provides another explanation for the ensuing rage against Jesus from the hometown crowd. In Luke's gospel, they don't just casually dismiss Jesus' claims. They become enraged!

Granted, the congregation in the synagogue in Luke's version of this story is a bit bewildered, but they are also full of praise...proud of the hometown boy made good...at least initially. They all spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words. But Jesus knows peoples' hearts. He knows what people are thinking. And he begins to reveal to them what he sees. He tells them that they're going to tell him to cure himself and they're going to ask him to do in Nazareth all the healings and miracles that he has performed in Capernaum, although in Luke's gospel, Jesus' ministry in Capernaum has been scant so far, if at all.

And then Jesus brings up Elijah and his tending to the Phoenician woman, a Gentile, in Sidon during the famine. And he reminds them that Elijah didn't relieve the hunger of the Israelites during that famine. He went to the aid of the Gentile woman in Sidon. And Luke told them about Elisha and the Syrian military commander, Naaman who was also a Gentile and who suffered from leprosy . Although there were many in Israel at the time who also had leprosy, Jesus reminds them that Elisha healed only Naaman the Syrian...a Gentile. It's at this point that the crowd in the synagogue begins to get it and they turn on Jesus in a murderous rage. The idea that the Savior of the Chosen People should also be the savior of all of humanity is a pill too bitter to swallow. They have *always* been God's favorite among the nations...or so they believed. To have that assumption of privilege and superiority challenged by one of their own...the One who was supposed to *confirm* their privileged position...was just too much to bear. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. The Messiah of the Jewish people was supposed to redeem the nation of Israel...not *all* the nations! And if that's what he's going to do then let's just get rid of him. Nothing and no one is going to challenge the special relationship that the Jews have with God. They are *His* people...and according to them...they are His *only* people.

Jesus has just told them that he has come for *everyone*, not just to those in Israel. Jesus is going to color outside the lines. The Israelites are not the only ones who will be redeemed by God and while they may be the chosen people as they believe, Jesus is going to make a point of letting the Israelites know that God loves *all* that he has created...every single one of them...Jew or not! Gentile or pagan. God's love is available to *all* humans who suffer...and that is *all* human beings.

This is a story of sibling rivalry at its worst. Jesus has come to expand the kingdom, not exclude anyone from it. God's message is one of inclusion, not exclusion. No one who wants to enter into the Kingdom will be denied. And just like any good parent, God loves *all* his children whether his children believe that or not! No one who wants to be on board will be left behind. If we follow Jesus' ministry as it unfolds, we see that Jesus makes a point all through his ministry of going to those who are on the margins not just of the Jewish community, but to all those who have been pushed aside for one reason or another. And Jesus goes repeatedly to those *outside* the Jewish community. In this way, Jesus reveals to us the nature of God and God's love for *all* of us. Each and every one of us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.