

"Ministry on the Edge" a sermon by the Rev. Marsha E. Brown, Pastor of New Horizons Presbyterian Church and President of Ritenour Co-Care, Inc. a 501c3 Non-profit that assists with food insecurity and rent and utilities for Ritenour residents.

Luke: 4: 21-30

Preachers are commonly taught that they need to do two things when they preach: comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. In this passage I am about to read from Luke, Jesus manages to make people really mad..... So mad that they try to throw him off a cliff. And to make matters worse, he is speaking to people from Nazareth, his hometown. I wonder what would make people so mad to attempt to do that? And I wonder what this passage could say to us today- after all it is here for us help us to be transformed by God- not to dissect and argue about the meaning, but to be changed. How do we need to be changed today?

The passage today came after Jesus read Isaiah's famous words; "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I invite you to listen for the Word of God in Luke 4: 21-30:

**Luke 4:21-30**Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>21</sup> He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

<sup>22</sup> Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"

<sup>23</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum.'"

<sup>24</sup> He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown. <sup>25</sup> And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. <sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed."

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. <sup>29</sup> They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the crowd and went on his way." This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God"

Today we are being asked to consider what it is like to do ministry at the edge- ministry that may not be popular or even accepted, but is in reality what God is calling us to do. Working for justice, struggling to help those who have been hurt and broken is crucial work for us to be about when we recognize that we are called to follow in the way of Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus is pointing to examples of helping gentiles, the widow of Zarephath or Naaman the Syrian, are people outside the Jewish culture. Outsiders. And when he says that this is what God is calling them to do- to care for gentiles, they get angry. Really angry. So angry they want to kill him.

So the question to us today would be: Who do you consider to be outsiders?

Those who are not members of our church that are left alone at dinners instead of people sitting with them?

Those who visit, but look different than us?

The poor? The hungry? Those who have different cultures or skin color than you?

Do you think that those who need a food pantry are different than us hardworking folk because think they are entitled?

Or that they are lazy?

That giving them food only encourages them to be lazier than they were before? And by the way- some say; "we pay for them- OUR TAXES pay for these freeloaders"

Who are the outsiders for this congregation ?

This is an important question.

What a person or a congregation's actions actually are speak louder than what they profess. What people DO is more important than what they SAY. I have been told by the session when I showed my pastoral evaluation to them last month that had 3 angry comments about the food pantry on it, that this congregation supports the Ritenour Co-Care Food Pantry downstairs. One person hiding in anonymity, said that I should consider another call and that I was a bully and distracted and that they would certainly pray for me! I invited our congregation's Committee on Ministry liaison, Bill Person to moderate this discussion as it seemed contentious. But more importantly, I felt that the discussion about whether the pantry was a mission of the church should be had- OUT LOUD. Cause a lot of people sure don't want to hear about it at all.

The upshot of it all is that the session agreed that I should not talk about the pantry, but it is a ministry of the church. This non-profit community based pantry is feeding almost 2,000 people a month over \$500,000 amount of food per year with help from over 60 volunteers from all over St. Louis. People all over the county have noticed this work. We have received awards for it! I have been told that of course' this congregation supports this pantry- it always has. But when there was an extra charge for dumpster fees or electrical fees, the church was adamant that that was not their responsibility. So the pantry covered it. The pantry cleans the whole Fellowship hall and spaces that it uses regularly and pays for deep cleaning. The pantry has about \$37,000 dollars that comes from individuals mostly in Overland. This church has near \$600,000. This last week there was discussion at the session meeting when it was reported that the church had about 3 years left with the money we have. One possible solution was

that the pantry be given the building and that they support the church. It is clear that the church is in more decline than 3 years ago when we did the New Beginnings Program that was supposed to help us consider how to use the resources that we have for God's glory.

What do you think the answer to that is? What is the best use of these resources? Keep the lights on for as long as possible?

Everyone gets a say-not just the elected session. We will have a potluck and a church wide discussion about this suggestion and consider the best use of our considerable resources on Feb 14<sup>th</sup> after worship with Rev. Linda Maconochie, who is on Giddings Lovejoy Presbytery Staff and leads New Beginnings work all over the nation now.

One other thing:

You all need to know that last Wednesday night it was reported that the Mission Committee- in a meeting of 3 people voted to continue to collect the five and dime which I had told them could be discontinued because they seemed unable to continue it after Sy died. At the next meeting without me present, they voted to continue to collect it and to give it to Room at the Inn instead of the Ritenour Co-Care Food Pantry, quoting me as saying that the pantry did not need the money.

This is support?

Last fall the session voted to remove the walk-in cooler from the inventory that was reported to the IRS by Ritenour Co-Care Food Pantry. A cooler that has been used exclusively by the pantry as long as it has been here.

This is support?

You may be angry right now. You may be afflicted right now. My job as a pastor is to point us to what Jesus called us to do. Feed the hungry, care for the sick, have compassion for our neighbors. The Ritenour Co-Care corporation is doing that now and intends to grow to offer mentoring, job training, and development of all sorts for this community. It has support from the community: the mayor, the school district- but apparently not from this church.

I think the answer may hinge on who God has called us to care for- exactly the passage that Jesus read from Isaiah. A colleague says of this passage: "We need to be reminded who God is, what God prefers. When we pray for blessing, we usually picture a flood of good gushing in on us. Maybe God pictures something else. Maybe God pictures those we step away from, those we deem unjustified, those we reject being given all they need. When we start to see the way God sees, the way Jesus is here to show us, we can either stomp off in a rage and threaten to kill the messenger, or we can join the coalition of the caring."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kayla McClurg, Blessings for Whom?, inward/outward January 31, 2016

You may want to run me off a cliff- so be it. God has called me here to this ministry  
and I am your pastor to preach it to you.

Comfort the afflicted- and afflict the comforted.

That is the call.

Let those who have ears hear. Amen.

