

When Jesus Stepped over the Line

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1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13; Luke 4:21-30

One of the great things about being pastor at Knollwood is getting to be with people smarter than I am. Regardless of any subject that comes up, or any challenge we face, there is always somebody around here with a deep well of expertise. This is a great blessing, *if* the preacher can just get over his need to be the smartest person in the room!

For example, last Sunday I preached on Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth. Taking his text from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus proclaimed, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because (the Spirit) has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then Jesus said, "*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" That left the locals breathless because it sounded like God was about to let the good times roll.

"But did you notice what Jesus left out of that text from Isaiah?" asked one of my smart, sassy preacher friends at the door last Sunday after the sermon.

"No, what was that?"

“He left out the part where Isaiah proclaims, ‘and the day of vengeance of our God’ (Isaiah 61:2b), because bringing God’s vengeance was not what Jesus was about.”

I checked after the service and found what my friend said was true. In proclaiming his text from Isaiah, Jesus omitted Isaiah’s reference to unleashing God’s vengeance.

Just goes to show you that often, the most important question is not, “What does the Bible say?” but “What *part* of the Bible do you choose to quote?”

Jesus’ careful editing of that text from Isaiah should have been a clue to the synagogue crowd: That Jesus came to announce God’s reign of justice and love, not just for them but for everybody, even Syrians and other outsiders they were hard-wired to hate.

Now at first, the hometown crowd loved Jesus’ sermon. “All spoke well of him,” Luke reports, “and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

“Is this not Mary and Joe’s boy?” they cooed, chests swelling with pride.

But then Jesus starts to push back, making his point clear. And that’s when a nice, Sunday-go-to-meeting crowd turns into an angry mob inflamed with killing hate.

This descent toward anarchy and violence begins when Jesus tells the locals, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

“But truly I tell you,” Jesus continues, “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” Then he refused to cut the locals any special favors.

Here Jesus takes on the “us-against-them” mentality so deeply imprinted in our DNA. It’s the very thing that has our nation in an uproar as politicians on both sides of the aisle, along with their commentators and cronies and supporters lash out against those who disagree with them. But if Jesus is to be believed, even the people we are inclined to distrust and despise-- *especially* the people we are inclined to distrust and despise--are God’s beloved children too.

One of the few bright spots in the ugly partisanship now gripping our nation is Chris Coons. The senator from Delaware, Mr. Coons has been called the GOP's "favorite Democrat." He is the Democratic senator who worked with Republican Jeff Flake to hit the pause button during the Kavanaugh hearings to allow more time for investigation.

Many will find it surprising that Coons grounds his capacity to create flickers of bipartisan cooperation in a toxic political environment in his Christian faith. A committed Presbyterian, Coons was active in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa before earning both a master's in ethics and a law degree from Yale. His shared faith with some Republican colleagues has helped forge some unlikely friendships and partnerships.

In a recent interview, Coons recounted a pivotal encounter with President Trump just before the National Prayer Breakfast in 2017. That year, the breakfast came just four days after the president signed his controversial travel ban directed against Muslim countries. At the time, Coons' home church was working to welcome a Syrian refugee family, only to have the family's arrival blocked by the ban.

Scheduled to pray, right after the president's address, Coons sought him out privately beforehand and said, "I believe (that travel ban) is wrong. I believe it is against everything my faith and everything that this breakfast is about." Then Coons added, "And 'Mr. President, I also want to pray for you today. We're called to pray for our enemies.'" That moment of prayer calmed the President's fury and won his respect.

Coons said in a recent interview that he stills prays for the president on a regular basis. "Frankly, I have found the practice of regularly praying for our president a powerful and purposeful spiritual discipline." The practice helps him remember, says Coons, amid many political clashes, that President Trump is also a beloved child of God.

I think the reason Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies is he knew we could not long keep them as enemies, if we pray for them. Instead, through prayer, and struggle, and spiritual

discernment, we can come to see our enemies as lost, bewildered children of God who can't find their way home.

No, Jesus offered no special blessings for the hometown crowd that day in Nazareth. Instead he challenged them to recognize the sacred specialness of *all* God's children.

But where things really go south for Jesus in that synagogue sermon is when he tells a couple of stories. Again, a lot turns on *what part* of the Bible you quote. And Jesus told two provocative stories from Israel's own scriptures about God being gracious to hated outsiders: a Syrian leper, healed by the prophet Elisha, and a destitute widow up north in Sidon.

"The *truth is*," says Jesus, just before telling these stories.

"And when *they heard this*," Luke's gospel reports, "all in the synagogue were filled with rage." It was the stories that pushed the crowd over the edge.

Recently, I read about a play called *The Jungle*. It the story of a refugee camp in Calais, France. In one exchange, a Kurdish smuggler named, Ali, argues he is not to blame for all the migrants willing to hazard a dangerous sea crossing into Europe.

"Once, I was the only way a man could ever dream of arriving on your shore," the smuggler admits. "But today, migrants can plan out the journeys using their phones. It is not about this border. It's the border in here," says Ali, pointing to his head, "and *that* (border) is now gone."

In his encounter with the parishioners of First Church, Nazareth, Jesus is challenging the border in their heads and ours. He is challenging all the ways we consciously and unconsciously wall people in and wall people out. "And *the truth is*," says Jesus: the people on the other side of the walls we construct are just as precious to God as we are. So while demeaning and degrading such outsiders and casting them all as terrorists, drug dealers, and thieves, may be politically expedient, it is not biblically expedient, at least not if you read the Bible as I do, by making the words and way of Jesus the test of all other scripture.

And worse, Jesus doesn't just *preach* the gracious, seeking love of God for all; Jesus *embodies* the gracious, seeking love of God for all by making tax collectors and sinners the epicenter of his movement, and by welcoming beaten up and broken down men and women of every description to the table of God's grace.

Jesus is what the Bible looks like when lived in love: "For love is patient and kind, not arrogant or resentful or boastful or rude. Love does not insist on its own way . . . Love never ends" (1 Cor. 13).

A member of our church recently attended a seminar at *World Refugee*, our church's mission partner in welcoming refugees. At that seminar, it was reported that 86% of Protestant pastors in the U.S. believe Christians should "care sacrificially for refugees and foreigners." *86%! And yet only 8% say their church is currently involved in serving refugees.*

It is said that "All politics is local." I would argue that all authentic, life-transforming religion is local too. That's why I'm so grateful for a church like Knollwood, and several others in our community, who see welcoming the stranger as the heartbeat of Jesus' movement.

A newer member of our church told me she came to Knollwood because of its welcome. She recalled Ken Wilson's famous song, "Come Sit by Me," sung every Sunday morning with the children of the church.

"The Sunday Ken Wilson sang 'Come Sit by Me' with the children," she wrote, "solidified our commitment to Knollwood for me. Knollwood doesn't just sing about it, she truly means it. I will never forget that moment or that sweet song. It's who I want to be and it's who I want my children to be."

It's who / want to be also.

In fact, were Jesus to preach his sermon from Nazareth at Knollwood, would he get a different reaction? Dare I say it? "Yes!" I believe he would.

Granted, we would be miffed and put out by Jesus. Because were Jesus preaching that sermon here, he wouldn't be talking about Syrians and foreigners from Sidon or other characters from faraway Bible places. He'd be talking about people we feel it's safe to exclude like those on the wrong side of the political divide, or religious fundamentalists, or people who for whatever reason, we consider beneath us.

But while Jesus would annoy us, I don't think we would throw him out. Because we've learned, as challenging it can be to follow him, it is infinitely more painful to live without him.

On a recent Wednesday night, we heard from three remarkable young women ministers. One of them was Lin Story-Bunce from College Park Baptist in Greensboro.

Lin told a story about her grandfather, Dearl Bunce, who served a small, rural church in eastern North Carolina at the height of the civil rights movement.

The church had a ministry to the nearby state prison, leading services each Sunday morning. One Sunday, the members of a black quartet from the prison offered to come sing at the church. Pastor Bunce decided to take a chance and bring this before the deacons.

Clearly, the request left the group uncomfortable, as everyone hemmed and hawed. Finally, the chairman of deacons stood and said, "As long as I have breath in my body and can stand on my two feet, no black person will ever cross the threshold of this church."

Undaunted, Pastor Bunce told the deacons about his recent reading Charles Shelton's classic, *In His Steps*. Then he added he wanted to ask only one thing of those deacons: that for the next two weeks, they pray and ponder over the question, "What Would Jesus Do?"

Two weeks later, a congregation meeting was held to decide the issue. The pastor recounted his challenge and then opened the floor for discussion. The first person who rose to speak was the chairman of deacons.

He told the church that as he pondered the question, "What Would Jesus Do?" God spoke to him. And God said this was *His* church and that everyone was welcome. The deacon told the

congregation he had learned his lesson. And in the future, he would welcome all to that church, regardless of color.

And by the grace of God, he did and they did

Yes, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus stepped over the line by insisting his good news was not just about an inner spiritual peace, but about welcoming all God's children in the rough and tumble of the real world. The local weren't willing to hear him, much less follow.

But thank God, others are. Kicking and screaming at times, but they do their best to hear and follow Jesus.

I want to be numbered among *that* crowd, don't you?

Gracious, courageous, Lord Jesus, just when we get comfortable, you push us toward some new frontier of your boundless, all-encompassing love. Forgive us the fear that keeps us stuck in the safe and familiar. Then lead us toward the very person or group we thought it was safe to dismiss and despise, for it is in them that you wait to meet us.

We ask this of our loving heavenly Abba in your precious name, Amen.