

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

God's righteousness reaches to the heavens,

God, who has done great things!

I will praise him for his faithfulness;

I will sing praise to the Holy One of Israel!

My lips will shout for joy;

my tongue will tell of his righteous acts!

(Psalm 71.19, 22-24, ad.)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: Praise the Lord with the sound of trumpet!

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty God, our Creator and Sustainer:

It is fitting that we should come into your presence at the beginning of a new week to remember your great acts of love, to thank you for your generosity, and to listen for your message to us. As we do these things now, we ask that we may be renewed in our faith, and strengthened in our personal commitment to you.

God of mercy: Although we claim to want to hear what you have to say to us, we confess that we too often refuse to accept what you say, because we feel it demands too much of us. Your message often challenges our values, our priorities, and our way of living. Too often, then, we prefer to ignore your message, and to remain the way we are.

Forgive us, we pray, for our unwillingness to be influenced, shaped, and re-created by you.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, help us to see that your ways are the best way, to want to live in your ways, and actually to live in your ways more faithfully.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

Jesus Christ gave himself for us,

to redeem us from all sin,

and to purify for himself a people of his own,

who are eager to do what is good.

(Titus 2.14)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely, let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **OT Reading:** Jeremiah 1.1-10 - God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet
In this reading, the young Jeremiah is called by God to be a prophet — that is, someone who acts as a spokesperson for God.
However, Jeremiah is not very enthusiastic about this assignment.
- **Psalm:** Psalm 71.1-15 - “In you, LORD, I have taken refuge”.
Psalm 71 is a lament, a prayer for God’s help.
In it, the writer asks God to save him from his enemies, and expresses his trust in God.
His references to his younger days tie in with things said in the Old Testament reading we just heard — that Jeremiah was young, and that God had chosen him to be a prophet even before he was born.
- **Letter Reading:** 1 Corinthians 13 (.1-13) - Paul’s passage on love
This is Paul’s famous passage on love. It arises out of his discussion on the topic of “gifts of the Spirit”, which begins in chapter 12, and concludes in chapter 14.
In this passage, he argues that the use of *all* gifts of the Spirit must be governed by love.
- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 4.20-30 - Jesus’ inaugural sermon (Part 2)
This is the second half of the story that we began reading last Sunday, in which Jesus teaches in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth.
Jesus has just read a couple of verses from the Book of Isaiah, and the story continues from there.

HYMN: I will enter his gates

SERMON: “God Loves Others, Too”

The Gospel reading for today is the second half of the story that we began to read last week. It’s a story from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus starts his ministry by speaking in synagogues in various towns in the region of Galilee, in northern Israel. Here in Luke, he doesn’t have any disciples yet; for the moment, he’s on his own. *Everyone praised him*, Luke says (Luke 4.15), which indicates that, so far, his message was going over well.

As we *saw* in the first half of the story, Jesus eventually comes to his home town of Nazareth, and speaks in the synagogue there, as well. Matthew and Mark also tell a story in which Jesus speaks in his hometown synagogue, but in their Gospels, the incident takes place quite a while later. In addition, their accounts don’t report what Jesus actually said on that occasion.

Luke’s account is more detailed in that respect. In last week’s reading, we were told that Jesus read two verses from Chapter 61 of the book of Isaiah, and then began his sermon by saying,

Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4.21). Today's reading, then, picks up the story from there.

In Luke's Gospel, the reading from Isaiah 61 functions as a preview of Jesus' ministry, a quick summary of what it was to be all about — proclaiming good news to the poor, and liberating people from various kinds of misfortune.

So far, so good. *They all spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips*, Luke tells us (Luke 4.22) — amazed, perhaps, because he was a hometown boy, whom many of them would've known since he was a kid. They ask, *Isn't this Joseph's son?* (Luke 4.22). Perhaps they're impressed that this carpenter has become a rabbi in such a short period of time.

But then, the story takes a sharp turn. For some reason that I've never understood, Jesus goes on the offensive. Anticipating a hostile response from the congregation, he says, *Surely you will quote this proverb to me: "Physician, heal yourself!" And you will tell me, "Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum"* (Luke 4.23).

This is the first that we hear of Capernaum in Luke's Gospel, although it will be a name that comes up from time to time in the rest of the book, as well as in the other three Gospels. It was a town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and was apparently the home town of at least four of the disciples that Jesus would soon recruit: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Presumably, it was one of the places where Jesus had already spoken in his preaching tour through Galilee. However, Luke doesn't say anything about Jesus' having done any miraculous healings there, which, apparently, the Nazareth crowd wants to see him do in *their* town as well.

How did Jesus *know* what the people in the congregation were thinking? Did he have supernatural knowledge of their thoughts? Or, as someone who had grown up in Nazareth, did he just naturally know what their mindset was?

Was there some rivalry between Nazareth and Capernaum? We don't know. A couple of the commentaries that I consulted this week claim that Capernaum had a substantial Gentile population, which Nazareth didn't, and that Nazarenes may have looked down their noses at Capernaum for that reason.

If that is true, Jesus' choice of the two Old Testament stories that he reminds the congregation of makes sense. The first story is the one in which the prophet Elijah is sent by God to live with a widow in Zarephath, during a severe famine, rather than a widow in Israel. Zarephath was a town in Lebanon, to the north of Israel — which means that the widow was a Gentile. Because of her hospitality to Elijah, God miraculously keeps the widow supplied with flour and oil for as long as Elijah stays at her home.

The second story is one involving Elijah's disciple and successor, Elisha. A Syrian army officer called Naaman comes to Elisha's home, wanting to be cured of his leprosy. Elisha tells him to go and wash himself seven times in the Jordan River; and when he does, he is miraculously

healed.

Jesus' point in reminding his audience of these two stories is that, in both cases, it was not an Israelite, but a Gentile — a foreigner — who benefited from the prophet's ministry.

No prophet is accepted in his home town, is Jesus' comment (Luke 4.24). Whether it's the fact that Capernaum possibly was mainly a Gentile town, or just the fact that it was somewhere else, Jesus' fellow Nazarenes seem to resent the attention that Jesus has paid to its citizens. They seem to expect preferential treatment from their hometown prophet. The proverb "Physician, heal yourself" means essentially the same as *our* proverb "Charity begins at home".

And so, the mood of the congregation quickly changes — from admiration to outright anger. Enraged, the men in the synagogue drive Jesus right out of town, to the edge of a cliff, intending to throw him off — in other words, to kill him.

Fortunately, though, Jesus manages to escape. *He went right through the crowd, and went on his way*, Luke says (Luke 4.30). Whether this means his escape was miraculous or not, he lived to tell the story. If the Gospel writer *John* were telling this story, he might have added the words, *his hour had not yet come* (John 8.20). Jesus would *eventually* be put to death by hostile, angry people, but not yet.

As such, the story foreshadows his eventual death on the cross — even at this early point in the Gospel narrative. In fact, the whole story, including the segment we read last week, serves as a quick preview of Jesus' entire ministry — a sample of his preaching that gives the gist of his message; a hostile response from his fellow citizens; and an attempt to silence him by killing him, which, in the end, fails. Jesus' escape from the crowd in today's story hints at his *resurrection* from death in the final chapter of the Gospel.

What might the message of this story be for us? By pairing it with the story of Jeremiah's experience of being called by God to be a prophet, the people who put the lectionary together perhaps thought the message in today's Gospel reading is that those who speak a message from God can expect to receive a hostile response from their audience.

This was certainly the case in Jeremiah's experience. His task was to call on the Israelites of his day to stop worshipping foreign gods, and to worship Yahweh, their own God, exclusively. If they didn't, he warned them, God would allow the Babylonians to conquer them, and take them into exile. This is in fact what happened, but not before Jeremiah was subjected to abuse and imprisonment for preaching an message deemed unpatriotic and defeatist. Israel's leaders would've preferred to hear him say that God would defend Israel, no matter what, and that the Babylonians would never be able to defeat them. The call story in today's Old Testament reading, then, hints at what will happen to Jeremiah, for God says to him, *You must go to everyone I send you to, and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you, and will rescue you* (Jeremiah 1.7b-8).

There's *another* possible message in today's Gospel reading, though, and that is, "God loves others, too". This seems to be the gist of Jesus' message in today's Gospel reading. God loves not only the people of Nazareth, but also the people of Capernaum. God loves not only the people of Israel, but also people outside of Israel.

This is a message that we encounter a lot in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, since this was a message that particularly appealed to Luke. The apostle Paul also gives it a lot of attention in his writings. Of course, for Luke and other First-Century Christians, this had to do primarily with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. First-Century Jews seemed to have lost sight of the fact that God had a love and a concern for Gentiles, even though there are indications of this fact right in the Old Testament — such as the two stories that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel reading.

We, too, generally think of this issue in terms of ethnicity and race — that God loves people of all nationalities and all races equally, and that we as his people, should too. This is certainly true; we do need to recognize and accept God's love for people different from ourselves. But perhaps we need to think not only of people who look and sound different from us, but also people who *think* differently than we do.

In the past decade or more, our society has become increasingly polarized. This is certainly true of the United States, and it seems it's becoming increasingly true of our own country as well. People divide into factions depending on their opinions on a particular topic, and seem to have no interest in having any kind of discussion with those who hold a different or opposite opinion. This seems to have been intensified by the modern phenomenon of social media, in which people can easily seek out and converse with people who agree with them, and who reinforce their opinions. At the same time, they vilify and demonize those who *disagree* with them. Disagreements regarding the COVID-19 pandemic seem to be intensifying this situation even more, as people put others down who disagree with them on issues such as restrictions, mask-wearing, and, yes, vaccination. Rather than coming together to fight the spread of the COVID-19 virus, it appears that we seem to be more interested in fighting those whom we disagree with! One of the symptoms of this situation is the large-scale protest going on in Ottawa this very weekend.

This is most unfortunate. Of course, it's unrealistic to expect that we should all agree with each other on everything; but at least we should be able to have some consideration and respect for those who disagree with us, no matter what our opinion — or theirs — is. What has happened to civility and reasonable discourse? Why do we feel we have to shout at each other, and put each other down? Why can't we agree to disagree? Why can't we disagree without being disagreeable? Why can't we seem to remember that God loves people on both sides of any debate, and that there is possibly some truth and validity in both opposite opinions?

In today's increasingly secular society, of course, people are less concerned about whose side God may be on, but for us Christians, it's important not to assume that God agrees with us, and disagrees with those who disagree with us. I'm sure God must shake his head sometimes

as he watches us human beings squabble!

In a religion that values good relationships, not only between human beings and God, but also between human beings and each other, we need to remember that the relationship is usually more important than who is right and who is wrong about a particular issue. This is in line with what Paul says in today's reading from the Letters, in which he emphasizes the importance of love.

Love is patient, he says; love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast; it is not proud. It does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13.4-7). Love is important because it promotes mutual respect, and is essential in any relationship.

Let us, then, not be those who put down those who disagree with us. Rather, let us work for ways to maintain a relationship with them, especially in cases in which a relationship has already existed, and may now be strained. Let us remember that God loves others, too — not only those who look or sound different from ourselves, but also those who think differently from ourselves.

HYMN: O Spirit of the living God ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE [See separate document]

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Loving and caring God:

We thank you for your faithful love — for us, for all humanity, and for your entire creation. We thank you for all the expressions of this love in the things you do for us — providing for our needs, and giving us guidance, strength, and encouragement.

We present these offerings to you now as a demonstration of our gratitude; and we set them apart from all normal uses to be used in strengthening the work that your church does for you in the world. Guide the uses to which they will be put, we pray; and prosper the work that they will help to accomplish.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Be thou my vision

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,
in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to strive to maintain good relationships with those who disagree with you,
as well as with those who share your opinions.

And may God bless you:

May he give you wisdom and discretion,
strength and peace;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.