

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Love Without End

Luke 4

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Have you seen anyone get really angry? If you've ever had a 2-year-old, you know... Have you experienced that burning hot shot of dopamine anytime recently? Today's story from the gospel of Luke shows that rage has been around a long time. A congregation listening to Jesus speak is at first delighted at what he's saying and then, in a moment, in the course of just a thought or two, are so filled with rage they turn on him so fully and try to chunk him off a cliff, which was the first step in a thorough stoning to death.

Luke is writing a gospel story of Jesus Christ, the son of God, who was by the end of the story unjustly killed by a conspiracy of religious and Roman leaders. So it's not completely unsurprising that here, at the beginning of his ministry, there would be a foreshadowing of what is to come later. They wanted him dead by the end; at least some of them want him dead already. This won't be the last time that Jesus' words and Jesus' actions earn him the disdain, rejection, and violence of a crowd. Yet it raises an obvious question: what in the world is going on here? What could he have said that would cause them to erupt with lava like that? What did Jesus say or do to make people so mad?

There's a danger lurking in asking this question—a risk present in any reading of scripture. Might this also have to do with us in some way? And where are we in this story? Scripture isn't just a history recitation, but an encounter with the living God. So it is at least possible that if we understand their rage, we open ourselves to the self-awareness that we may have reacted the same way. And then what? What do we do with that? Confess? Be shamed? Seek self-justification? We open ourselves to the possibility that the word of God may say the same sorts of things to us now, and as we do, we may have to ask: how are we hearing it? Are we listening? How are we reacting? How are we responding? Do we embrace the gospel or do we want to chunk it off a cliff?

At first look, what he says would seem to have very little to do with us. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." So far, so good. They'd heard he'd been doing some pretty amazing things in other villages, and now he's come back to his hometown, so they thought, to do great things for them. "You're going to say doctor, cure yourself" and you're going to say, "Do here in your hometown Nazareth the things we heard you did at Capernaum". Every head nodded. Ya, that's exactly right.

Things begin to sour quickly when he turns it back on them: "No prophet is accepted in his hometown." I think he saw what was coming. Jesus has already quoted Isaiah the prophet in hope; now he embodies Jeremiah the prophet in challenge. He's going to challenge them, stretch them, he's going to try to open their eyes to what God is doing in the world and the lives God desires them to live. There's going to be some spiritual struggle here with some personal cost. Will they go along? Jesus is already skeptical. He's read his Bible, including the prophets. He knows how this usually goes. Gale force winds blow against

God and God's ways when they challenge some of the basic assumptions we have... especially about foreigners, which is exactly the subject Jesus goes to in his very first sermon in Luke right in his hometown. The other, the stranger, the foreigner. I doubt this was random. I suspect he knew this is a hard place in the human heart for a gospel of grace to penetrate.

I don't know why that is exactly, but it's always been true. Perhaps it's rooted in our neurobiology as we evolve to seek survival through self-protection in people who look just like us, come from our backgrounds, share our stories and values—our tribes. When we feel threatened, we seek people like us with whom we feel safe—our clan, our gang, our race, our nation. This seems hardwired into human nature--for good reason. There are people in the world who can hurt you and who may want to hurt you. To have some defense against that threat is a pretty basic human instinct that we share with all the animals. All of them--except for my golden retriever, in whom there's no reflex at all that anything or anyone might hurt him except the following: thunder, the FedEx truck, the kitchen floor which he will not cross, and the nice lady who walks past the house every morning. Mortal enemies all. Everyone else is just a friend he hasn't met yet. Most of the rest of us have a circle of trust in which we feel at home and a wide expanse of others who may or may not be threats but also may or may not be friendly. We might stretch the limits of our circles of trust, but they'll be there. We all build walls.

There may also be other reasons mapped onto what's coded within us. What about race? We aren't born racists, but we become so through social training. In the dialectic between nature and nurture, there are a lot of things that may appear to be hardwired but are actually learned over time and experiences. Racism is one. People aren't born that way; they become that way. We learn. And, if we are open to God's grace, we learn to unlearn. We have much to unlearn.

I'm sure there's more that could be said about all of this from psychological, sociological, and geo-political perspectives. We could plumb the human psyche and cultural malformations that make us who we are and help explain why we act and respond the way we do. Jesus doesn't do any of that. On this day, he's not a teacher nor an explainer. He's a prophet, and that gets you in trouble, especially if you're poking your homiletical scalpel into the deepest wounds of fear and anger. But what else should he do? He's a doctor, and this wound is deep. It has infected everything the gospel has come to heal.

Eugene Peterson in his commentary on Jeremiah describes prophets like Jeremiah and like Jesus. He says, "The task of a prophet is not to smooth things over but to make things right. The function of religion is not to make people feel good but to make them good. Love? Yes, God loves us. But his love is passionate and seeks faithful, committed love in return. God does not want to tame pets to fondle and feel; he wants mature, free people who will respond to him in authentic individuality. For this to happen there must be honesty and truth. The self must be toppled from its pedestal. There must be pure hearts and clear intelligence, confession of sin and commitment in faith.

“And peace? Yes, God gives peace. But it is not a peace that gets along with everyone by avoiding the hint of anything unpleasant. It is not a peace achieved by refusing to talk about painful subjects or touch sore spots. It is a peace that is hard won by learning to pray. There is evil to combat, apathy to defeat, dullness to challenge, ambition to confront. There are persons all around us, children and parents, youth and adults, who are being trampled and violated, who are being hurt and despised. Any preaching of peace that turns its back on these is a cruel farce.” (*Run with the horses*, 86)

“Peace, peace,” some of the religious leaders assured. Jeremiah responded, “Do not say peace when there is no peace.” Jesus did not say peace, but he actually didn’t say much. In Jesus’ first sermon, all the heavy lifting is done by two old stories from their way-back past, from 1 Kings, Elijah, from 2 Kings, Elisha. Elijah and Elisha, two of the great prophets who crossed old, hard borders, and who broke through tall, hard walls.

About Elijah, Jesus asks rhetorically, “Weren’t there many widows in need in Israel in the terrible drought in Elijah’s day? But God sent him only across the border to a widow in Zarapheth in Sidon.”

About Elisha, Jesus asks rhetorically, “Weren’t there many sick lepers in Israel in Elisha’s day? But God used Elisha only to heal Namaan, who crossed border from Syria to come to him for healing.”

They knew these stories of Elijah and the widow woman and Elisha and the Syrian officer. They weren’t new, but maybe they didn’t think about them too much. Maybe they were one-offs that illustrate God’s compassionate heart that perhaps can, sometimes, in limited circumstances, under the right conditions, in the divine freedom to do whatever God wants, do something good for foreigners in some limited way. Or maybe they just didn’t tell those stories.

But Jesus does. Not only tells them, but highlights them on day one, as if to say: this way of being in the world is going to define me and all who follow me. The church--my church, my people in the world are going to cross borders to the other; and they are going to welcome others who cross borders to them. Borders can still have meaning; the world is still a dangerous place—(who knows this more than Jesus?); strangers can still be a threat, or they could be a sign of God’s love—like a Samaritan on the road—all of this is still true. But my people are going to go out, and they will welcome those who come in. And they’ll figure out the rest as they do it.

Did he know on that day just how fully the church would follow him in this? Did he know that the church would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And that the church would be a universal congregation on every continent on the planet? Did he know Thomas would go to India, and Peter to Italy, and Paul would try to get to Spain. Did he know about the Ethiopian eunuch who would be welcomed in Israel and baptized? Did he know already about the Baptists? About Lottie Moon who devoted her life to the Chinese? About the Judsons who went to Burma? About John Day who went to Liberia? All Baptists... Baptists are always making trouble.

Did he know about Hickory Rock Baptist Church in rural eastern North Carolina that asked: how can we minister to the migrant workers in the fields all around the church? And they hung a sign that said “ESL classes on Sunday afternoons—Come and learn English”. And they came as migrant seasonal farm laborers from Mexico and from Nicaragua and a refugee from Cuba. And then refugees from the highlands of Vietnam resettled in the area by the US Government and the compassionate hospitality of a network of North Carolina Baptists. They came, too. And the day would come when a little white steeple church in rural North Carolina just down the highway from the old clubhouse of the KKK would celebrate the Lord’s Supper in three languages.

Did he know about Pentecost breaking out? In Jesus’ telling these kinds of stories aren’t exceptions to the ministry of the gospel. They reveal the heart of God, and the community Jesus would inaugurate. It seems that those who would follow him are given a moral duty to love those who are in need with special attention for the one who’d be last on the list by natural instinct. That’s the person in whom the person and presence of Jesus Christ will be made known to you.

It was just that simple; so deceptively simple, retelling those two stories. Together, they tell a story of a God who crosses borders or maybe a God who just doesn’t think the borders are all that interesting, or maybe a God in whom there are no borders in the body of Christ. Jesus doesn’t really give a sermon—he doesn’t tell them what they should do, or how they should feel, or what their national policy should be. He just takes two stories and sets that in front of them. And when they rejected him, he went away. It’s a sad ending. He just left them and went away.

Our prayer, then, is something like this: Jesus, you sure about this? Because this is hard, and it can be risky. You sure about this? Because you wouldn’t get thrown off cliffs if you’d just come and be Emmanuel with us just as we are and let us stay that way. If you’re sure about this, we’ll follow you as so many have done before in your name, if your Spirit helps us. Open us then to that peace which passes our understanding and that love that never fails and to your church that binds us together from every background into one body. Stay with us always and give us hearts and hands to receive your gospel in all the ways it does its transformative work in us. Teach us to be patient and kind, to rejoice in the truth, to bear all we must, believe all we can, and to endure in our faith in you. Let your love within us find no end.

Amen.