

*A sermon preached February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 based upon Luke 4:21-30.*

We all need a “tribe” to belong to – a group of people with whom we feel a sense of connection, of belonging and identification – some shared values and world view. Otherwise we would be alone in this world, and that would be a terrible thing.

The members of our tribe seem inherently worthy of love. They are our people. And we in turn feel some entitlement to love from our tribe.

Hopefully our family is at the heart of our tribe, but not always. If you’ve made a commitment to call this church your home, than we are a part of each other’s tribe.

From a core circle of people who make up the center of our tribe there are usually larger circles of tribal identification. Ideally, we feel such a connection to our local community, and beyond that to our country.

In our Gospel story this morning the concepts of tribe identity and worthiness of love are front and center. Let’s quickly review what happens.

We heard the first part of this story last week. Jesus begins his ministry Jesus wandering from village to village teaching and healing in the region of Galilee. Word spreads quickly about him as he is making quite an impression.

Galilee is the northern region of Israel. Nazareth, the small village in Galilee in which Jesus grew up would have contained perhaps only 400 people in Jesus’ day. A person living in Nazareth would have viewed the people in the other towns in Galilee as a part of their larger, extended “tribe” of fellow Jews but the center of their tribe would have been the folks right there in Nazareth. There is, as they say no place like home.

So after being a way for a time Jesus finally comes back to his hometown, to his tribe, the people who he grew up with, the people who helped raise him, and they are proud as can be of their hometown boy and the sensation he has been making all across Galilee.

Last week we heard how on the Sabbath Jesus went to the local synagogue just like he always did and the people gave him the honor of reading Scripture. Jesus chose the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and a particular passage that reads that

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor, to release the captives, give sight to the blind, and set at liberty those who are oppressed.*

And then he gave that short, short sermon:

*“This day this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*

And everybody in that synagogue was mightily impressed by his gracious words.

It is important to briefly note that not everybody who lived in or near Nazareth would have been in the synagogue that day. Remember the story Luke tells earlier about how when Jesus was born there were certain poor shepherds watching their flocks by night? Folks like this were on whole other level of poor. They were in complete survival mode, and didn't have time, money or energy to devote on religion. They were outcastes – viewed as “sinners.” They wouldn't have been particularly welcome in the synagogue. And when Jesus spoke of “*good news to the poor*” it was people like this that he had first and foremost in his mind.

Anyway, in a matter of a few short verses the good, hometown folk go from being altogether impressed with Jesus to being so mad that they try to kill him. This is part of the reason Luke chose this story to start off his recounting of Jesus' ministry. It gives us a little glimpse of what will await Jesus when he finally gets to Jerusalem – how the crowd that welcomes him will quickly go to demanding his crucifixion.

So what triggered this sudden surge of rage in the good folks of Nazareth? Well, it has a lot to do with assumptions of who is and who isn't in our tribe, and who is worthy of love.

People start saying things like, “*Isn't this Joseph's boy?*” *Jesus belongs to Joseph as his son, right? And by extension he belongs to us since we're the extended family that raised him. This is 'our' Jesus. It was nice of him to do those good things for the folks in the other villages of Galilee, but we're the inner circle of his tribe. So surely Jesus will now commence doing even greater things for us.*

There is an irony here in the people calling him “*Joseph's boy*” because Luke has already let us in on something that the hometown folk don't know which is that actually Jesus' *isn't* Joseph's boy – he's God's boy. They have no special claim on him. Only God has a claim on him. He is here to do God's will – not their will.

Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace and the central thing about grace is that we don't earn it – we aren't “entitled to it.” It is a gift to be received humbly like a child. When we get things turned around in our relationship to God – when we miss the nature of grace – our spiritual health is in danger -- which is why Jesus proceeds to lash out at the hometown folks' sense of entitlement and their assumptions that they are somehow *more worthy* of God's love than others.

Jesus starts tellings Bible stories about prophets of old – one story from a time of famine when Elijah multiplied food for a Gentile widow, having not done any such thing for any Jewish widow and another story about how Elisha healed a Gentile General from Syria of his leprosy, having never healed a single Jew of leprosy.

*Humble yourselves, Jesus is saying, or you'll be in danger of missing out on the grace of God.*

It's outrageous – infuriating – this idea that God might choose to bless Gentile sinners instead of the good folks of Nazareth, the faithful people who go to synagogue week in and week out -- the people who, *heck! helped raise Jesus!*

Well it makes them so mad that they are ready to kill him right then and there.

It's shocking how the hometown folks turned on Jesus. But truth is, we all have our own notions of entitlement. It's often easier to see it in others.

A couple of summers ago our family was in Cape May for a family reunion. We were sitting on the front porch of a hotel. Sarah has this remarkable gift for engaging people in conversations and she was talking with this nicely dressed, silver-headed gentleman – a good law-abiding, upstanding, church-going kind of guy.

Somehow the conversation got on the topic of the opiate crisis and all the people who were dying from overdoses and this man said something foolish – horrifying actually. He expressed the opinion that society shouldn't invest in trying to help addicts – that when they overdose we shouldn't be given Narcan – we should just let them die.

Well, my wife looked him straight in the eyes and said, *“That's very un-Christian of you!”* It was a read conversation stopper – but boy, was I proud of her.

*What a pompous ass*, I thought. Since he's lived what he imagines to be a “good” life he assumes he is entitled to love but others who fail to live up to his standards of a good life aren't.

I suspect most of you would agree with our assessment of this guy because we know that no family is immune from opiate addiction – that it's rampant in every segment of our society – that it could just as easily be our kid who overdoses – somebody from our “tribe.”

Something similar has occurred in relation to how Gay and Lesbian people are viewed: Where once there was a pervasive condemnation, now hopefully a majority of people recognize that some people are simply born with this orientation and accept them as they are. This shift has taken place because in the tribes of most of us somebody we love has come out of the closet.

Unfortunately, one place where condemnation of gays continues is in certain churches that view homosexuality as sin – and people who belong to such churches have a built in mechanism whereby they can avoid having to actually getting to know a gay person. They proclaim doctrines that don't allow gay people to become a part of their tribe.

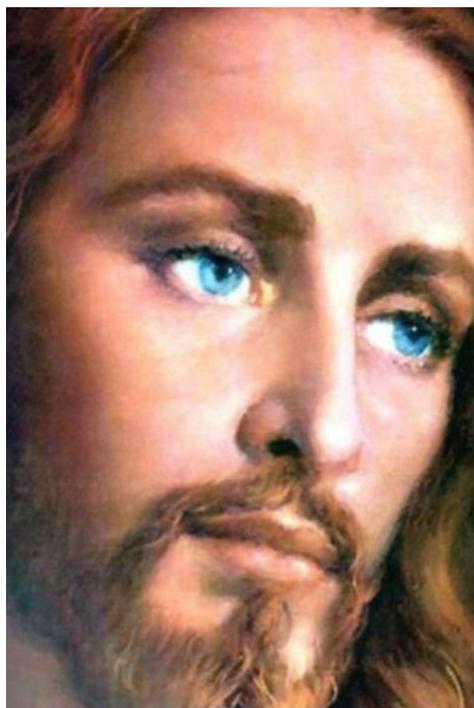
Back to the silver-headed gentleman: he didn't have any empathy presumably because he'd never had a loved one from his tribe become addicted – one at least that he was aware of. Instead of feeling gratitude for this apparent good fortune he took it as reason to pat himself on the back. In his mind, his tribe didn't do that kind of thing.

But opioid addiction truly is an epidemic and most of us here agree that there should be a concerted effort involving all the communal resources at our disposal to address this crisis – government, business, civic organizations, schools, churches and temples – all have a part to play.

Now I think as “good church people” ourselves we are supposed to be challenged by this story. We’re supposed to identify with Jesus’ hometown folk and the offense they took because, *heck! we’re Jesus’ hometown folk too, right? He’s our Jesus, right?* After all, we come to church every Sunday to honor him. If we had been in the synagogue that day we too would have gotten really mad at Jesus.

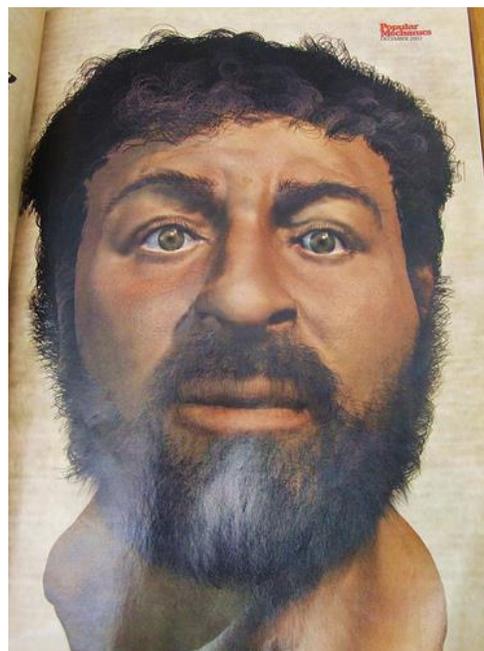
Up to this point I don’t think I’ve said anything particularly controversial but now perhaps I will, which is to briefly point out that before there was an epidemic of opiate abuse in suburban and rural settings there had already been an epidemic for quite a while in inner cities in America affecting mostly poor, black people. As a society as a whole we didn’t feel particularly compelled to address this epidemic and the reason for this was that we didn’t really view poor, black people as a part of our tribe.

It’s worth noting how we typically picture Jesus. The most common way he is imagined is as a blue-eyed Caucasian, like this:



This isn’t necessarily a bad thing – if picturing Jesus this way helps us feel His love for us well that can be a useful thing. But we need to remind ourselves that in reality he probably looked more like this:

We need to be aware of the possibility that picturing Jesus as a blue-eyed Caucasian could unconsciously lead us to view Caucasian people as somehow God’s preferred people -- God’s special tribe.



And that’s the thing: although we all need tribes to belong to, Jesus’ challenged the notion that tribes define the limits of our compassion and our inclination to view our tribe as more worthy of God’s love

and that was a big part of the reason the good folk of Nazareth tried to throw him off a cliff that day.



Later in Luke's Gospel Jesus tells a story in which a man gets beat up and left half dead at the side of the road, and neither a priest or a Levite who come along – both members of the man's larger tribe – stop to help. The one who does stop to help is a Samaritan – somebody Jesus' listeners would have never included in their "tribe." When Jesus told the story, it surely made a lot of people indignant.

But it wasn't only the way Jesus challenged tribal boundaries that upset people.

It's also the nature of grace that we find unsettling. The fact that we can't earn God's love with merit badges. We like to feel in control and to receive grace we have to give up control – we have to turn as Jesus said and become like little children.

In a little while we will celebrate Holy Communion. Holy Communion is all about grace.

Here in the United Methodist Church we practice what is called "open communion" which is to say unlike Roman Catholics and some other denominations everybody who is worshipping with us this morning is invited to come forward to receive the gift of the bread and the cup that remind us of Jesus body and blood – the love which led him to willingly die for all of us.

We even let children receive communion, sometimes even serve communion, and occasionally that bugs people. *"They don't even understand what it all means! Nor do they appreciate how sacred this Holy Communion is supposed to be!"*

If you think much about this line of thought you will recognize a problem. Where exactly is the line regarding how much knowledge you need to attain and how reverent you need to act in order to qualify to receive the bread and the cup?

If there were a test we needed to pass, I suspect we'd all fail it. Then again, if passing a test earned you the right to receive communion, well, it wouldn't be grace.

*"Now (we) know only in part;"* said the Apostle Paul. When we die and stand in the presence of God, *"then (we) will know fully, even as (we) have been fully known."*

There are mysteries expressed here that are beyond our earthly knowledge. And in the end, it's not head knowledge we're after – it's heart knowledge -- and sometimes children have more of this than we adults.

It's the humility that recognizes that we have no more right to receive God's love than anybody else. It's the recognition that, as Paul says, without love I am nothing – and there is plenty inside me that isn't of love – and I have no more right to the grace of God than that silver-haired gentleman in Cape May.