

Filled With Rage; Fulfilled By Love
Luke 4: 21-30 and 1st Corinthians 13
February 3, 2019

Last week, I shared with you about the first sermons I ever preached; the very first at a Youth Sunday when I was fourteen years old and the first “real” sermon at a Day of Prayer service after I had graduated from seminary and was an ordained pastor. You might remember how I said that EVERYONE loved those sermons. But not because they were that great, or even very good, but they loved them because they had a personal investment in me. They had helped raised me and had nurtured my faith as they guided me on my journey to the the ministry. They were naturally proud in that moment because my presence in that pulpit at Ardmore Moravian was a reflection on them and the ministry of the congregation.

As I said last week, I don’t really remember what either of those sermons were about, one was almost 35 years ago and the other was over 20 years ago. But imagine how different the reaction would have been if I had stood in that pulpit and said that while Ardmore Moravian was a good church, the churches just around the corner, Ardmore Methodist and Ardmore Baptist, were much better. And that God’s grace was more present among those churches than it was in their church. How would they have felt if I told them that they just didn’t really get it- that they didn’t understand what it meant to be a church, but their Methodist and Baptist neighbors did?

I don’t think that everyone would have loved it very much after that. I don’t think that they would have loved me very much. In fact they probably would have been “filled with rage” as the people in the Nazareth synagogue were when Jesus basically said the same thing to them. Our gospel reading last Sunday was Luke’s account of Jesus’ visit to his hometown synagogue.

However it was only the first half of the story. We read about how everyone was completely enthralled by his teaching “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon

him.” And about what Jesus said after he read from the scroll of Isaiah- “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” But we stopped right there.

This morning we pick up right where we left off and we read about the people’s reactions to Jesus. At first it was positive. They loved what he was saying; they were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” And they wanted to hear more from him. Jesus obliged them and continue teaching. But this time they weren’t as amazed at his teaching, in fact they were ENRAGED by what he said to them.

And with good reason. By bringing up the stories of Elijah going to the widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian being the only one cleansed from leprosy, Jesus was pointing out that prophets in Israel, who speak on behalf of God, had taken God’s favor to people outside of the Jewish faith. He was telling them that they were not as “special” or as “chosen” as they had always believed themselves to be. This was not what they expected to hear and they didn’t like it at all. They were “filled with rage” and tried to run Jesus out of town to throw him from a cliff.

Their reaction is actually understandable. Well, maybe not to the point of literally throwing Jesus off a cliff, but their rage is understandable. Jesus had called into the question the very core of their identity. They had long believed that they were God’s “chosen people” and that God reserved his favor for them, and for them alone. It was what set them apart from all other people. So for the “carpenter’s son”, who they had raised and nurtured in his faith, for him to come to them and tell them that they aren’t who they always thought they were, was outrageous.

It would be like me telling Ardmore Moravian that Ardmore Methodist and Ardmore Baptist were better churches than they were. Even if I had done that, I doubt that they would have run me out of town and certainly wouldn’t have tried to throw me off a cliff. Because they would know it wasn’t true. They would have been hurt and

disappointed. But the reaction to Jesus in Nazareth was so much stronger because what Jesus was telling them was true. And they knew it. They just didn't want to hear it.

The examples that Jesus gives them were stories that they would have known well because they were part of the Hebrew scriptures. It would be like me using the New Testament to make the point that the Methodists and Baptists were better than the Moravians. Which I couldn't do because it isn't true. But Jesus could because it was. The people who heard him that day knew that God's grace was extended to all people. Their own Scriptures told them that it was. Yet they tried to pretend like they didn't. So when Jesus reminded them of this truth, they tried to kill the messenger because they didn't like the message. Fortunately, Jesus was able to "pass through the midst of them" and continue his new ministry.

This is an unusual story. It is so discordant. First Jesus is "praised by everyone", "all eyes are fixed upon him" and they "spoke well of him" and were "amazed at his gracious words." Then, almost immediately, they try to throw him off a cliff. It hardly seems likely that they could turn on him so completely so quickly. In fact, it almost seems like it could be accounts of two different events that Luke combines into one for narrative purposes.

Regardless, whether it is one story or two, Luke uses it for an important function. When we take what we read last week and what we read this morning as a whole instead of separately, what we have functions as Jesus' mission statement for his ministry. Luke uses these verses to tell who Jesus is, what his ministry will be, who his followers (his church) will be, and how the people (the world even) will respond.

By saying that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me" Jesus is telling everyone that he is the Messiah, which literally means "anointed one". The Messiah was the one the people of Israel were waiting for to come and set them

free; to save them from oppression and captivity; to unite all the tribes of Israel. Jesus' claim to be this person would not have been made lightly. He knew what people would expect when he said that's who he was. He knew that they would expect him to lead them to victory over their Roman captors and make them the greatest nation on earth.

Then he told them what he was going to do- bring good news (in actions and not just words) to the poor; proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free- all of those things that we talked about last week. This was what his ministry was going to be and what he was going to expect his followers to do.

So far so good. Everyone liked what they were hearing. But then Jesus tells them that he is not going to just be the Messiah for them, for the Jewish people, but for the whole world. He tells them that his salvation is for all and that they won't even accept him. "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." He tells them, in effect, that he has come to bring God's grace to all, not just to the "chosen people." He is telling them that his followers will be different from them, that they will be people of all the nations, sheep of many flocks.

This is what fills them with rage. And this, Luke tells us, is how MOST people will respond to Jesus' and his ministry, it will fill them with murderous rage, which will seem to culminate with Jesus' death on the cross. But of course, even then, Jesus is able to eventually go on his way, just as he does in Nazareth when they try to throw him off the cliff.

The people were filled with rage because the ministry that Jesus was bringing to life wasn't the ministry that they were expecting, that they had been anticipating for generation after generation, that they thought they deserved. So they responded with anger and rejection of the messenger and the message. Sadly, this has been the

response to Jesus throughout the two millennia that have followed his proclamation in Nazareth, even up to today. Whenever Jesus and his ministry fail to meet our expectations, we can get angry, even filled with rage.

And whenever we do, we are the opposite of what we are supposed to be, we are the opposite of WHO we are supposed to be. For the ministry of Jesus, the followers of Jesus, the life of Jesus, all of these things are not defined by being filled with rage, but by being fulfilled by love. And as his followers, we too should not be filled with rage, but we should allow ourselves, our lives, our ministry, our church to be fulfilled by love. For it is, as Paul writes, the most excellent way.

The passage from I Corinthians about love is one of the most familiar in all of Scripture. And often one of the most misunderstood. The love that we read about this morning is not the romantic love of a husband and wife, or even the brotherly love we have for each other, but it is the self-giving love that God has for his beloved children, it is the self-sacrificing love that Jesus has for us. It is the love that Jesus calls us to give to each other. This is who Jesus is and it is who he calls us to be.

Nothing matters more than love is what Paul is telling us. Since I just preached on this very passage a few months ago as part of our Stewardship focus, I don't want to repeat too much of what I said then. Rather I want to focus on what those words do more than on what they say. And the love that we learn about in I Corinthians, it is this that sets us apart as Jesus' followers, it is what defines us as his church. Having this love, living this love, and giving this love is what makes us who we are and it is how the world knows Jesus and knows what he does. This is what our love does.

Jesus said it like this: *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* What Jesus is

saying with these words, which were among the last he spoke to his disciples before he was crucified, is that love is what will complete his ministry. Love is what will make them whole and fulfill his promises. Love is what will make us all one.

So as his followers, in order to bring about the fulfillment of the Scriptures, in order to do it today, we have to have love. We have to have love for each other and have love for all. We have to live love for each other and live love for all. We have to give love to each other and give love to all. And as with the Good News of Jesus, love isn't just words, but love is action.

We have the love of Jesus more in what we do than in what we say. We live the love of Jesus more by what we do than by what we say. We give the love of Jesus more by what we do than by what we say. I believe that we have the love of Jesus here in this church. I believe that New Philadelphia Moravian is a place where the love of Jesus can be seen and heard and experienced. I have seen it in the actions of you all towards each other and towards me. We have the love of Jesus and we show the love of Jesus. It is why we all come here and it is why we all come together.

I believe that we live the love of Jesus here in this church. Everytime we forgive each other for wrongs that we have done, for good that we have not done, we live the love of Jesus. Everytime we are patient and kind, we live the love of Jesus. When we are not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, we are living the love of Jesus. The love of Jesus is being lived when we do not insist on our own way, when we are not irritable or resentful. When we do not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth, we are living the love of Jesus. The love of Jesus that lives among us, that lives HERE, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

I believe that we give the love of Jesus here in this church. New Philadelphia Moravian gives the love of Jesus every time we go beyond these walls and out into this

world to share the love that we have for each other with our neighbors, with our community, with our world, as we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. We give the love of Jesus every time we put the needs of the least of these who are also God's children, ahead of our own needs.

We can look around our world, we can look around our nation, we can look around our community, we can even look around our church and see things that we don't like, see things that we disagree with, see things that make us angry. We can even be filled with rage over what we see. But rage, while it may be something that fills us, it is something that will never fulfill us. For being filled is temporary and fleeting, we can be filled but soon we will be empty. But being fulfilled is permanent and complete. And love is the only thing that can make us complete. Love is the only thing that can fulfill us. *Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.*

Let us stop being filled with rage, with anger, with envy, arrogance, rudeness, with irritability and resentment. Let us stop being filled with nothing, so that we can be fulfilled by faith, by hope, and by love. Today let the Good News of Jesus be fulfilled through us. Today let the love of Jesus be fulfilled by us as we have it, as we live it, and as we give it.

Amen.