

“The Rest of the Story”

I flirted with entitling this sermon, “From Marx to Lennon.” But I didn’t want to raise folks’ hackles... or their hopes. There is a philosophical continuum marked by subtle but substantial differences in thinking between Marx and Lennon. We don’t talk about them very much in the church. Forty years ago we really *couldn’t* talk about them in the church. But whether we like it or not they have done a great deal to shape the conversation about religion; and these seminal social thinkers help us illuminate key issues in the life of faith.

So at one end of the continuum is Groucho Marx, who is credited with saying, in response to an invitation to join the Friar’s Club, “I would never belong to any club that would admit members like me.” That’s a great line, but it also really makes us think. We could call this the “Amazing Grace” view of faith. Many of us begin with the inner conviction that any God who could love the likes of us must somehow be lacking in judgment, and therefore unworthy of really being called God. Expressing this personally we might say, “If God truly knew the darkness of my soul, God could never love me.” Been there?

And then, often through some dramatic and heart-warming experience of spiritual transformation, some flash of awareness—or maybe even a slow and gradual melting of a spiritual glacier—we come to the conviction that God *does* love us; that the circle of God’s love *does* include even me... perhaps just barely. Our heart sings with the affirmation of that old reprobate slave trader, John Newton, who wrote, “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!” Sanitized and softened versions of the hymn—sadly, like the version included in our own *Hymns of Truth and Light*—say, “that saved and set me free;” but that misses the point. An awareness of our *wretchedness* is precisely what makes God’s grace so utterly amazing, as opposed to “nice” or “kind of neat.” Groucho Marx.

At the other end of the continuum is John Lennon with his song, *Imagine*: “Imagine all the people sharing all the world.” Now that’s a great big circle! “Nothing to kill and die for”: there’s a vision to get behind! What does it take to have a world like that? To begin with: there’s no religion. Hmmm. Well, maybe I could be OK with that... at least no *organized*

religion: just the kind we have in the United Church of Christ. After all, religion has a lot of hypocrisy about it (which in no way distinguishes it from any other human activity, but that's another sermon). Lennon's vision includes no heaven or hell—I could maybe live with that, too, but we'd need to define terms carefully. No countries: would that be a good thing? “You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope some day you'll join us, and the world will live as one.” And just exactly who is this “us” we have to join for the world to live as one?

Well, it sort of sounds pretty good. Makes me think of that little ditty from Edwin Markham: “He drew a circle that shut me out—heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: we drew a circle that took him in.” Great: but to draw somebody in like that, don't we really end up having to make them—and really ourselves as well—into something we're not to begin with? And if so, are we really capable of transforming ourselves in that way? This is complicated.

All right, I'm ready to draw my circle, as long as it doesn't have to include Rush Limbaugh. (Did I really say that out loud?) As long as it doesn't include... well, you fill in the blank. Almost any of us can come up with somebody who gives us pause, who makes this circle thing a lot more difficult: “Outrageous grace, that bitter pill, that welcomes even you! I'd rather keep the circle closed and stick with what is true!”

Who's in and who's out: there's a continuum that runs from Groucho Marx to John Lennon, keeps going and runs right off a cliff. And that cliff is in Nazareth.

Today's scripture lesson is a sequel. Last week we read the beginning of the story of Jesus' return to his hometown. That first half of the story was all good news. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, preached in synagogues and was acclaimed by all who heard him. Evidently he even healed some folks or worked some miracles at Capernaum. His reputation preceded him when he returned home. They had raised him from a pup there, and they were eager to hear him preach on his home turf.

He read to them from the prophet Isaiah, sharing a message of hope and restoration to exiles. This pointed and impassioned call for social and economic justice resonated with these Israelites living under Roman military occupation. They were eager for this message of the world turned upside down. The people were amazed at his “gracious words.”

Last week I hinted that Jesus would get into trouble in Nazareth, but that the nature of the trouble would be surprising. We're used to preachers getting into trouble when they start talking about economics and saying that the Gospel calls for a redistribution of wealth... which it does. We get into trouble when we suggest that the "necessities of the many" should not be sacrificed to provide "luxuries for the few"... those words are from Martin Luther King.¹ As people of privilege, such a message tends to make us uncomfortable, along with the call to, "... live more gently upon the earth, more justly in the world, more generously in our dealings with others, more hopefully in our politics." Those words are from last week's sermon here at Plymouth. Preachers try to say such things gently, but firmly.

But the folks in Galilee would have loved all of that, because they identified with the poor and the exiles. In Nazareth, that message would *preach!* That's not what made them mad.

They were thrilled to think that the Messiah was from their home town, no doubt imagining the privilege and priority that would come from proximity. In Jerusalem there is a cemetery on the slope of the Mount of Olives, which stands over against the city. Tradition has it that it is there that the Messiah will appear; and when he does, the resurrection of the dead will begin, and the folks buried there figure they're first in line! Same deal in Nazareth: if Jesus performed miracles for strangers and Gentiles in Capernaum, imagine what he will do for *us!* How great is this?

But Jesus proceeds immediately to poke them in the eye, suggesting that he knows what they're thinking: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!'" I'm not entirely sure what this means, but I think it means something like, "Charity begins at home!" "If you're going to do really great things, do them for the home folks!" Jesus goes on to say, "And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" After all, Nazareth nurtured the Messiah. Surely that is worthy of a place of privilege—look at how folks still fawn over Bethlehem, where King David was born all those years ago! Can't you see the sign out by the interstate:

Nazareth: Home Town of the Messiah

¹ Find them at a website called "Wisdom Quotes":
http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_justice.html.

But Jesus proceeds to suggest to the Nazarenes that God is not especially interested in them—or at least not exclusively interested in them. He reminds them of a story from the time of Elijah, when everybody is starving in the midst of a drought, but the prophet of God is sent not to a poor widow in Israel (though, Lord knows, there were plenty of them) but to a widow in Zarephath in Sidon, far to the north!² And in the time of Elisha there were plenty of lepers in Israel, but Elisha didn't cure any of them. He cured Naaman, a general in the army of Aram!³ The prophet told him to wash seven times in the Jordan River, and the foreigner was cured! The folks in Nazareth know these stories, all right. They are stories of God's outrageous generosity to the heathen... and the Nazarenes are still mad about it!

Jesus doesn't get in trouble for preaching about social justice. He gets in trouble for preaching about God's love... for other people! The townsfolk are enraged. They drive Jesus out of town and drag him out to the edge of a cliff. This is an energy efficient method of stoning: instead of gathering stones to throw at the victim, they throw the victim at the stones: same intended result.

Perhaps their rage so blinds them that they lose track of Jesus altogether. Perhaps cooler heads prevail in the end. In any event, the passage ends mysteriously: "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." So much for the triumphant homecoming!

Luke loves foreshadowing. Placing this story at the beginning of his account of Jesus' public ministry warns us of two things: Jesus will continue to meet resistance and enrage would-be followers whenever he reaches out to outcasts: Gentiles, tax collectors, women, sinners. And the early church will also endure persecution when it takes the message of God's love in Jesus to the same groups. With all the highly exclusive forms of Christianity that have emerged over the years, this may be hard to believe; but Christianity has always been getting into trouble for being too inclusive. In that sense, unanimously passing a Policy Statement on Marriage Equality last Tuesday put the Church Council and Plymouth Church in good company... with Jesus!

² See I Kings 17. A sermon on this text may be found in the website archives on June 10, 2007: <http://plymouthchurch.com/worship/sermons.php>.

³ 2 Kings 5. A sermon on this wonderful story can be found in the archives on July 8, 2007: <http://plymouthchurch.com/worship/sermons.php>

But I don't think this passage is really an invitation to self-congratulation. Instead, I think it calls us to see ourselves in the fine, upstanding folk of Nazareth—and then to get over ourselves and get out of ourselves. A God we think we have figured out has a tendency to get smaller, and smaller, and smaller—until that God ends up looking remarkably like us. God's grace embraces us, to be sure; but God is also Holy, and Other. And God tends mostly to show up in places where the circle of love and understanding is expanding; places, in other words, where we are likely to be just a bit uncomfortable.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus will highlight this point again and again: when a foreigner is the only one to help a robbed and beaten man by the side of the road; when an obedient older brother struggles to forgive and welcome home his prodigal sibling; when a rich man is oblivious to the plight of a poor man lying at his gate; when a dying Christ will pray from the cross for forgiveness for those who have murdered him. God's grace is amazing when it just barely includes us, and outrageous when it includes those of whom we disapprove.

Jesus' visit to Nazareth foreshadows the opposition he will receive, and reveals that all of us are in need of the ever-widening circle of welcome Jesus draws. Marx and Lennon, Nazareth and Capernaum, you and me: we're all in there. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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