

Sermon 7th Sunday after Epiphany Year C 2025; Luke 6:27-38 (All Saints)
In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Living the Gospel

I like the church year, the calendar, how we move through the different seasons: the darkness of Advent leading up to the light of Christmas, followed by Epiphany, then Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost. We are now in the season after Epiphany. It is the season of light, the light of Christ having now entered the world. With all that is happening in our country and in the world today, it is important that we remember that: that the light is still here. This is also the season of manifestation or revelation of just exactly who this man Jesus is. We have seen several revelations or epiphanies of Jesus as the Christ over the past few weeks in this season. We saw him baptized by John in the River Jordan, when we heard the voice from heaven say “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” We shared in the amazement of the guests at the wedding at Cana, where with Jesus’ first miracle he turns water into wine, when in the words of John he “revealed his glory.” Last week we listened to his Sermon on the Plain, beginning with the Beatitudes, when he says “Blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, when people hate you and exclude you and defame you.” Jesus is describing the Kingdom of God he talks so much about, in essence what this Kingdom can look like for us today. Today we hear him telling us how to make that Kingdom a reality, his “rules of the road,” so to speak. Challenging rules don’t you think? “Love your enemies..do good to those who hate you..pray for those who abuse you..do to others as you would have them do to you,” the “golden rule.” And next week, the last Sunday after the Epiphany, we will see him transfigured into an even brighter light!

What I want to do this morning is to go back to another of the stories we read a few weeks ago in this season after Epiphany. I do this because what happened there has special relevance to the situation we face in our lives here

today. It is about what happened to Jesus when he returned to his hometown Nazareth to preach in the synagogue, when he was rejected by his own people. Why? Because he told them something they didn't want to hear. What a morning that must have been!

One of the major subjects we study during seminary is homiletics, that is how to preach. One question I had as a student was how careful should we be to not offend or anger the congregation with a message they might not want to hear. How do we make sure the congregation won't get mad and run us out of town on the proverbial rail? Well, judging by what happened to Jesus in that story, I would be in good company if that very thing happened. But I am going to tell it, because it is the gospel. When the people of Jesus' own synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth heard his message that day, they got so mad they not only grabbed him and pulled him out of the temple and through the streets and out of town, but also literally tried to kill him by throwing him off a cliff. Here is the scene: It is Jesus' first sermon in his hometown synagogue. Word has spread of all the amazing things he had been doing all over Galilee, and now he is back home. We can imagine the talk, the excitement, and see the pride that fills their eyes when he unrolls the scroll and begins to read. *He is one of us! Our own Jesus!* At first as he begins to talk "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But then things change, and get ugly quickly. They change because he tells them things they don't want to hear. Jesus the hometown boy of Nazareth becomes a pariah, an agitator, an outsider, when he says the people of Israel have failed God, that God has a new narrative, and that God will not be shut in, confined or limited to their synagogues and temples. God will not stand for complacency and comfort when God sees his people oppressed, homeless and hungry, mothers struggling to feed their children, aliens—the foreigners—hated and excluded. He tells them that everybody is included in God's kingdom. Listen to your own stories, he says. God's power is often focused on strangers, even enemies, far outside the

friendly confines of this cozy little community of faith. He reminds them that during the famine Elijah was sent not to the widows of Israel but to a foreign widow at Zarephath in Sidon; that Elisha cleansed the leper Naaman, a dreaded Syrian, the enemy of Israel. *A Syrian! We hate those Syrians! There were people in need right here in our own community, and God chooses to help a pagan foreign woman and a Syrian general?* Yes, he reminds them, God has always looked out for those in need beyond this community of faith, beyond the boundaries of our towns, our countries. God is bigger than all that, bigger than just us. Everyone is included. God is creating a new narrative through Jesus. But those listening to Jesus don't want to hear it. *We don't need this. We don't want to be reminded of those stories in the Bible. We don't want to share God or God's care with just anybody, with in the words of Isaiah "all." God cares for us! We don't want to hear about a God who cares about Syrians and widows in Zarephath and all those foreigners. We want God's power and care right here in Israel and in Israel only. Who is this upstart Jesus anyway? Who does he think he is telling us how to live our lives?* So they turn into an angry mob and run him out of town. They want to kill him, and leave him for dead at the bottom of a pit. They want to hurl Jesus over a cliff, into the garbage dump smoldering with fire and ashes that are always burning down there, and be done with him. Yet somehow he escapes and gets away, away from the murderous people of his own home town.

What happened here? How did the mood change so quickly, from adoration and pride to murderous anger? It is because he told them something they didn't want to hear. His message—what today we call the gospel—was too much. And what was his message from Isaiah? "Bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." This is the life that you the faithful are called in covenant by God to live. Our God is not a God who lives only in Israel—or today in these United States—not a God who lives only in our Christian tradition, our

denomination, our parish, or whatever boundaries we wish to set. We don't own the Christ! And, if scripture is to be fulfilled, it must be in our hearing of it, our embodying it, our acting upon it—literally our being it. One of the strongest messages in all of scripture—both the Jewish Bible and the New Testament—is our call to care for the alien, the stranger, the foreigner among us. We read it over and over again. We are to treat and care for and love the alien—what today we call the migrant and the refugee—as one of our family. Jesus was telling his hometown Nazarenes just that, but that is not what they want to hear, and not how they really want to live.

What Jesus said that day in Nazareth is just as true today. And how are we responding to it? Are we ready to “bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recover sight for the blind, let the oppressed go free”? How are we caring for the aliens—the immigrants—among us? Are we ready to live out these words of Jesus? That there are no boundaries for God's love? That literally everyone is included? Or will we refuse to listen, get angry, and run him out of the church and out of our lives, and throw him over the cliff to burn at the bottom of that pit? Think about this: What would we do if Jesus came right here into our church today, stood at this pulpit, and told us that God is currently across town at the mosque taking care of the Muslims, or attending to the general of the Russian army who is in need of healing? Would any among us run him out of our church?

The 1968 Poor People's Campaign, which Martin Luther King Jr. organized right before his death, led a caravan of mules to carry people to the nation's capital to draw attention to the plight of poverty. They proclaimed “Jesus was a poor man!” In the time and place where Jesus lived, most people were poor and lived under the subjugation of the Roman Empire, and were considered worthless to society. Elite rulers stole wealth from all the lands they conquered, pushing people to hunger, homelessness, and the brink of starvation—and sometimes over the edge into slavery and death. To them these people

had no value. They were expendable. The Bible tells us that Jesus had no place to lay his head, which is another way to say that he had no home. He relied on the hospitality of friends, mostly also poor, to share meals and lodging with him. Jesus, the disciples, and those to whom they ministered were poor and oppressed. Jesus did not just care about the poor, he was poor! In his discourse in Matthew about separating the sheep from the goats Jesus says: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the “least of these” who are members of my family, you did it to me.” The Greek word translated as “least of these” is *elachistos* (el-akh’-is-tos) literally means “the smallest or most insignificant ones, the smallest in amount or dignity,” in the eyes of the rulers lacking any value to society. The homeless, the poor, the prisoners, the aliens. The Roman Empire considered them and him to be expendable. They ran him out of their world, through the streets of Jerusalem amidst an angry mob shouting “crucify him”, and killed him on a cross.

One of the most foundational messages in both the Old and New Testaments is to take care of the aliens, those foreign to our homes, the migrant neighbors among us. Scripture repeats it over and over again. Are not these people right here in our communities today the very people Jesus was talking about over two thousand years ago? The “expendables” like Jesus himself? Father Richard Rohr says that the Christ is present in every created thing, and that the definition of a Christian is “someone who sees Christ in everybody and in everything.” This means that how you treat other human beings is how you treat the Christ Jesus. Imagine a world in which people truly believed that and lived that. There would be no greed, no selfishness, no racism, no walls to keep them out—so many of the things that keep us from realizing this Kingdom, this Reign of God that Jesus says is possible right here with us today.

In this text Luke through the words of Jesus is providing a message of hope to the disadvantaged of the world, to the refugees and immigrants in search of a better life, and is also giving us the opportunity to respond. We can listen but not hear. We can hear but not respond. We can be quietly indifferent. Or we can follow, and by following contribute to the building of that Kingdom of God, where everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions. Our hope here is that we as the body of Christ in the world, as the community of the faithful, will act to do all we can to strive for justice, kindness, and love—yes, even as Jesus says today, love of our enemies! What a challenge! But that’s what he says. We have to remember that this is an all inclusive love, meaning love for people who do not look like us, talk like us, worship like us, and, yes—who don’t vote like us. Jesus says we are to love everyone. The gospel is perfectly clear about this. And how do we do this? I think it is only “with God’s help!” Imagine a world where that is actually true!

Hang in there with me for just another minute. I’ve always wanted to preach about the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and figured out a way to work it into today’s message. It’s one of the several Christmas movies our family watches every year, and it is my personal favorite. Unfortunately, considering our current state of affairs, it reminds me that some things seem to never change. The story has close parallels to what we are witnessing today, that is the unjust use of power to rule over the powerless. Yet it does offer hope. Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a talented young man living in the small town of Bedford Falls, a tiny town he wants so badly to leave to go “see the world.” He keeps planning on leaving, but events like the depression and the world war tie him down. In his eyes the town has imprisoned him and kept him from experiencing the opportunity and the beauty that the world outside has to offer. His job is running a small building and loan business. The anti-hero in the story is Mr. Potter, a lonely rich and selfish old man who has no family, and who hates pretty much everybody and everything, and who wants control of the Bailey business

and loan, because it's the only business in town he can't wrap his hands around. He wants it so he can extract even more work and money from the people of the town, in the process becoming even richer and more powerful. George and his wife Mary, played by Donna Reid, spend their whole lives serving the people of the town, tirelessly fending off Potter. But Potter persists, and when all hope seems gone, George finds himself powerless, his options for resisting Potter gone, and he decides to take his own life, to cash in the \$500 of equity he has on his life insurance policy so his family will at least have something to live on. This is where God through the angel Clarence intervenes. He saves George by giving him a chance to see what the world would have been like if he had never lived. In that imaginary world without George Potter would have controlled everything. The town would have been called Pottersville. The people of Pottersville were poor, unhappy and desperate, and without hope. In the end, in the real life of Bedford Falls, George's friends and family come together as a community to save George, who comes to discover that indeed he has had "a wonderful life."

I tell this story because in it is a message of hope, hope realized through a community coming together to resist and to defeat the intentions of a selfish, merciless, powerful man whose only goal is power and wealth. It took those people a long time, but in the end they did indeed find mercy and justice, obtained through their own and George Bailey's actions to resist the pitiful but powerful Mr. Potter. And we still have that hope today, a hope brought to life through our actions as the body of Christ in the world.

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