

“Bad News and Good News”

Luke 4:16-30

January 27, 2019

I was speaking with a doctor several years ago about the challenges he faced in trying to get people to take their physical health seriously and he was asking me about the challenges I faced in trying to get people to take their spiritual health seriously. He told me about a man whose wife had been urging him to see a doctor about some pain he had been having in his stomach. The man insisted it was nothing serious, but finally agreed to see a doctor in order to get his wife to stop bugging him about it. This doctor put the man through a series of tests and a few days later he met with the man to discuss the test results. The doctor told me that he explained to the man that the tests showed he had cancer. Fortunately, it was a kind that the doctor believed could be treated and if he started his treatments right away the chances of recovery were very good. Unfortunately, the man didn't believe the doctor. He didn't think he had cancer and refused treatments. The doctor said he learned about a year later that the man had died.

I think most of us would view the man's belief that he didn't have cancer and his refusal to go through cancer treatments to be rather foolish. I realize that many people resist going to the doctor and no one wants to hear bad news, but to not believe the doctor or to refuse a successful course of treatment just doesn't seem to make sense.

The doctor then asked me if I had ever experienced anything like that as a pastor working with the spiritual health of people. I told him that I had met a couple many years ago who visited our church one time, but never came back. The couple was looking for a church home and the man had been raised Catholic, but his wife didn't really have much of a church background. They tried different churches when they were first married, but eventually she stopped attending church with him. They finally tried our church one Sunday and when I emailed the couple to welcome them to Holy Cross and to encourage them to worship with us again, the man replied that he enjoyed the worship service, but his wife did not like it and they would not be returning. He explained that his wife did not like the words of confession that everyone spoke together early in the service, namely, “We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” She thought those words were too harsh. I never saw the couple again and I had no idea if they were still living a year later, but I was surprised that she found those words to be too harsh. Maybe she was paying more attention to those words than many people do.

When it comes to physical healing, you won't be willing to undergo treatments or to take medicine unless you admit that you are sick. And when it comes to spiritual healing, you won't be forgiven unless you recognize that you are a sinner.

Case in point is seen with the people of Nazareth, Jesus' home town, in our Gospel lesson for today from Luke. While Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He grew up in Nazareth. Jesus is now 30 years old and prior to returning to His hometown, He went to a variety of village synagogues to teach people. And in verse 15, the verse right before the start of our Gospel lesson, it says that “everywhere Jesus went everyone praised Him.” News of His first miracle – changing water into wine at a wedding that we looked at last week – may have spread throughout the area. While most, if not all, of the people who gathered at the synagogues to hear His teaching had not seen Him perform that miracle, they were impressed by the power of His preaching and some realized that He had been sent by God on a mission. Therefore, one would think that by teaching in the synagogue of His hometown, He would certainly receive the same treatment, if not better. After all, just imagine if one of our high school students were to become a Lutheran pastor or missionary. Certainly if they came back here to preach or to tell us about how the Gospel was impacting people in other countries, we would be very excited.

So as Jesus returns to His hometown, He goes to the synagogue and He reads Scripture, just as He had done in other places. Initially I'm sure the people were very proud as they heard Him read from the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah 61:1-2, Isaiah prophesied that someday God would send a Savior, a Messiah, who would proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, He would give sight to the blind, He would give liberty to the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. After Jesus read those two verses, He said to everyone

gathered there, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Meaning, “This Scripture has been fulfilled in me. I am the promised Messiah and I have come to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor to all.”

The people of Nazareth were certainly amazed at what Jesus said, but they were also confused as they wondered, “This Scripture has been fulfilled in Him? Who does He think He is? After all, isn’t this Joe’s son?” As a result the people got angry, and our text tells us that they got angry to the point that they wanted to kill Jesus. Why would they get that angry? If we look at it from their viewpoint, we might understand.

The verses from Isaiah that Jesus read talk about the poor hearing good news, blind eyes being opened, and prisoners being set free. But when Jesus said in verse 21 that, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” I’m sure they thought, “We’re not poor and blind. We’re not prisoners. We are God’s chosen people. Eternal life in heaven is ours, because we are Israelites, descendants of the ones God freed from slavery in Egypt.”

Recognizing their doubt and anger, Jesus refuses to do any kind healing or miracle to validate His ministry. Instead He declares that His ministry is one much greater than simply to impress people back home. And He cites two well-known Old Testament stories about prophets sent by God to help non-Israelite people in the midst of Israelites who were hurting. While the people could see what Jesus was saying, they were not willing to break out of their narrow view of a Messiah who was coming only to establish an earthly kingdom just for the Israelites. The people were expecting Jesus to do what they wanted Him to do and to give them miraculous signs of His authority, but He refused, because He wanted them to believe in Scripture alone. As a result, they became angry and tried to kill their native son.

Jesus had come to bring “good news,” but it struck the people of Nazareth as “bad news,” because it said something about their condition. You can only be healed if you’re sick, and you can only be freed if you are a prisoner. The words, “You are forgiven” imply that you’ve done something wrong and we don’t like to admit that there’s anything fundamentally wrong with us. The people of Nazareth reacted just like we often do today, refusing to admit their sinfulness.

As Christians we need to be willing to admit that we come up short to what God wants us to be, “by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.” And when we do that, the words of forgiveness for Jesus’ sake will truly mean something to us. We can receive the healing treatment (of forgiveness), because we’ve accepted the diagnosis (we are all sick with sin.)

When we see that God’s care for those who are different from us, who may try to hurt us or mock us because of our faith, doesn’t at all diminish God’s love and acceptance of us, we will be able to see, as well, that God calls us to be the means by which that work of forgiveness is carried out, as we seek to forgive each other and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Many times when a doctor tells a patient, “I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” usually the bad news always seems to cancel out the good news. Jesus’ message to the people of Nazareth and to all of us is, “I’m got some bad news – you are a sinner, you have failed to live as God wants you to live; but I also have some good news – through no work of your own, you are forgiven.” And that good news of God’s unconditional forgiveness far outweighs the bad news of human sin. Let us take that good news of forgiveness out into our community and share it freely with a hurting world sick with sin.