

A Sermon in the series,
Following Christ's Call:
A Journey of Transformation – Face the challenge
Luke 4:21-30
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
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Face the Challenge

The Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of attending a seminar where everyone was invited to “share a story about someone who had been Christ to them.” This invitation got the typical responses: stories about a friend who had stayed close by during a long illness while others deserted, or the story of a mentor who had helped navigate the journey into faithfulness and wholeness. Other similar stories followed until one woman said, **“Well, the first thing I thought of, when I tried to think of who had been Christ to me, was who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it!”** (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998.)

Now *that's* a challenge. Facing the truth when it unsettles us. Facing the words of Christ when they shake us out of our comfort zones.

I think that's exactly what we have here in our story from Luke. Jesus speaks a truth so outrageous, so unsettling, that his hometown friends and neighbors want to throw him off a cliff!

It didn't start out that way. No, it didn't start that way. At first, there was good news. Jesus, the hometown boy, takes the seat of honor in the local neighborhood synagogue, reads from the prophet Isaiah, and announces that this scripture has just been fulfilled—the scripture about the Spirit of the Lord coming and anointing someone to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. Jesus declares, **“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”** He's the Anointed One!

It's all good up to this point. But then the crowd starts to wonder. This is Jesus, the hometown boy! They think they know him, know his family, know all about him. **Can he really be the One?** It sounds too good to be true, but they're willing to let Jesus prove himself. They love his “gracious words,” but they've also heard rumors of the incredible acts and miraculous deeds he's done elsewhere. And so they think, **now it's our turn!**

And this is where the good news turns into a challenge.

Jesus knows what they're thinking. He knows they want to see miracles, to witness the spectacular. But instead of playing into their expectations, he reminds them of two stories from their own Scriptures:

- **The prophet Elijah**—during a time of famine, God sent Elijah not to an Israelite widow, but to a **Gentile** widow in Zarephath (1 Kings 17).
- **The prophet Elisha**—though many lepers lived in Israel, God sent Elisha not to them, but to heal **Naaman, a Syrian** (2 Kings 5).

The message is clear. God's blessings, God's healing, God's grace are **not limited to Israel alone**. The love of God extends beyond their boundaries, beyond their expectations.

Face the challenge.

The challenge of hearing the truth when it doesn't fit our assumptions. The challenge of realizing that God's love reaches those we might think undeserving. The challenge of accepting that Jesus has come not just for *us*—but for *them*.

And that's when the crowd loses it. They don't reject Jesus because they don't understand him. They reject him **because they do**. He is telling them something they do not want to hear.

Fred Craddock puts it this way:

Jesus does not go elsewhere
because he is rejected by his hometown friends and neighbors;
no,
Jesus is rejected by his hometown friends and neighbors
because he goes elsewhere.

Face the challenge.

Flannery O'Connor captures this moment of revelation in her short story *Revelation*. Ruby Turpin, a woman full of self-righteousness, sits in a doctor's office quietly judging herself to be superior to everyone else there—especially a poor, unkempt teenager named Mary Grace. At first, Ruby keeps her judgments to herself, but then she decides to speak them aloud. She tells Mary Grace that she is nothing but “white trash” and the lowest of the low.

And in the blink of an eye, Mary Grace slams her book shut and hurls it across the room, hitting Ruby **square between the eyes**.

“This,” writes O'Connor, “was the beginning of Ruby's road to redemption.”

Revelation, it appears, often begins **when a large book hits you in the head**.

And isn't that what Jesus did with his hometown friends and neighbors?

He didn't just throw *any* book at them. He threw **The Book**—Isaiah, First Kings, Second Kings—right between their eyes! **And they could not handle it.**

And now, it all comes home to us.

On the one hand, we're called to love patiently and kindly, to bear all things, endure all things (1 Corinthians 13). Love saves us from being wounded.

But on the other hand, sometimes **love wounds**—because sometimes **love tells us the truth so clearly we want to kill it for it**. Sometimes **love slams a book into our heads** so we wake up and see what we've been blind to.

Face the challenge.

Jesus' inclusive ministry remains something we struggle with. If we're honest, we still sit quietly judging the worth of others. We still like the idea that God's blessings are meant for us but not for them. We still try to constrain the ways of Christ, keeping him obedient to our own rules, our own boundaries.

We still have our lists of the unwelcome.

Liberals. Conservatives. The unhoused. The addicted. The immigrant. The ex-convict. The non-Christian. The list goes on.

And yet, the Good News remains both a **healing balm** and a **blow to the head**—

The Good News that
the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ
is for **all people**.

Face the challenge.

Alleluia. Amen.