

Jeremiah 1: 4-11
Luke 4: 20-30
January 31, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

I want you to imagine that the child of well-liked parents of this congregation has grown up in the congregation, and gone to seminary. He has been a star student and everywhere we go it seems we hear stories of his great gifts. Emails come to the parents telling them how their son's great preaching and prayers have changed their lives. "How can one so young know so much and be so wise?" On a visit home the pastor invites this exceptional youth to preach on a Sunday. The congregation gathers. The parents arrive early. One after another people approach them saying, "You must be so proud!" The sanctuary is full of pride and memories. "I remember when he was only four; he used to say the most amazing things! Even then I knew God had big plans for him!" A special fellowship time is planned.

The time comes for the reading of scripture and the sermon. The young man rises. As he prepares to read he seems somehow different. He seems older than his years. There is something in his manner which sends a whisper of uneasiness through the congregation that is quickly shoved aside. Something is up. There is a possibility that something is happening which is unfamiliar and a bit disquieting.

Arriving at the pulpit the young man smiles briefly; but it is as if he too is aware that something is going on which is beyond his power to understand or control. His lip trembles just a bit as he begins to read. Yet soon his clear and remembered voice conveys the powerful words of the scripture from Isaiah. It is said of this extraordinary young man that when he reads

it is not he who reads so much as it is God who speaks. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me....”

Yes it certainly is! Haven’t we always said so?

After the reading he pauses. There is no printed sermon to take home. The pause lasts until the congregation starts to feel uncomfortable. Then he begins. He expresses no gratitude to the wonderful group of people who have raised him in the faith and how honored he is to be asked to preach at his home congregation. Instead what comes from his mouth sounds like a word of judgment *on them!* They hear him criticize their desire to inspire and amaze them as he has done in other places. This he clearly will not do! Instead they feel that they are a bunch of self-satisfied, puffed up people who think they are somehow special in God’s sight. They are first confused. Then a wave of anger builds. The ungrateful child! Who is he to say these things to us! Is this the way to repay all the love and financial support he has received! Some people get up and leave in anger. Others look at him, red faced and furious. Still others sit with tears streaming down their faces, hurt beyond words. What the parents feel cannot be articulated.

As for the young man, he is as confused as everyone else. This was not what he imagined. Like everyone else he had wanted to speak *good news!* He wanted his family of faith to be uplifted and affirmed. As he witnesses the growing dismay, hurt and anger, he wants to stop and apologize and explain that this is not personal. He loves them and will always be profoundly grateful for their love and support. *But the Spirit of the Lord is upon him! He must speak the message he is given no matter what the cost—even and maybe especially to those he loves the most!*

Unlike the story about a young preacher returned home long ago, the congregation does not rush to do him harm. It is the silence that is as deadly as any act of physical violence-

the hurt in the eyes of those who he most wanted to please. Somehow he cannot go to the fellowship hall. The cake will go uncut.

I spin this imaginary recreation of the story from Luke for three reasons. First, the way it is told has always felt one dimensional to me. On the one hand the congregation in Nazareth is portrayed as complacent and shallow souls who are self-indulgent and self-congratulating. “Aren’t we wonderful for having produced such a spiritual prodigy!”

On the other hand, Jesus seems like an arrogant, insensitive and ungrateful adolescent who is feeding his ego by beating up on his spiritual family. Truthfully, if I had been in the congregation that day I would have wanted to run him out of town. “Who the *#%@!^\$! does he think he is! What does he know of my life—or of any life?”

I cannot help but believe that the encounter was much deeper than that.

The second reason I have attempted to recreate the story in a more contemporary setting is that I believe we are meant to identify with the episode. We are not meant to distance ourselves from the congregation of Nazareth as if they were uniquely unreceptive to Jesus’ message. We are meant to reflect on the fact that good people can misinterpret what God wants them to hear. Good people can react against the message by attacking the messenger. It is natural to react strongly to words that touch us in an upsetting way and to personalize them. We feel judged, criticized and condemned. We feel as if none of our good intentions matter and all our good deeds are worthless in the sight of God. Of course we react! Any message that unilaterally paints us with a brush of condemnation rightly causes a swell of self-defense. The problem is that it goes on to attack the messenger. This leads to conflict and broken relationships that can haunt congregations for years.

But the third reason for re-telling the story is that it brings me to a question? *What if this was not the end of the story?* What if a few days later the elders called the congregation together for a time of reflection? What is at the same time Jesus on a quiet mountainside felt the ache of what had happened and yearned to go to Nazareth and meet with his beloved community? What if the elders sent a message to Jesus inviting him to come back and meet with them? What if the messenger met Jesus coming back to Nazareth coming to do just that?

What would that conversation be like? Would there be tears on all sides? Would the congregation hear just how much Jesus loved and appreciated them? Would they listen to one another about what had sparked the flames of hurt, anger and recrimination? Would there be an ownership that the congregation of Nazareth indeed needed to be shaken up out of their complacency and get on with the business of being God's people? Would Jesus rejoice with them and say, "The Kingdom is now fulfilled not only in your hearing—but in and among you!"

If that is so the congregation in Nazareth would have discovered a blessing far beyond that received anywhere else.

What about us? Can we practice that kind of openness to Jesus—even and especially when he speaks words we do not want to hear?

Amen.