

The 4th Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

A lot of folks will be watching the Super Bowl later today. (Some of those tuning in will be watching for something more than the commercials.)



Some of you are rooting for the Patriots. Some of you are rooting for the Rams. Some of you just want to watch a good game. If you watched the AFC and NFC playoff games a couple of weeks ago, both of which went into overtime, maybe you're hoping for an exciting game today; based on what's come before, maybe you're hoping the Super Bowl will pick up where those games left off! (If not, well ... well, there's always the commercials.)

Would I be wrong to hope that some of you may have returned here this morning in the hopes that we might pick up where we left off last week? (Yeah, probably too much to hope for on my part.)

For my part, I'd love for us to pick up some of the loose ends from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. The past couple of Sundays he's been admonishing a divided congregation, saying that no one is better than anyone else, that nobody's gifts are more important than anybody else's. And then, last week, he encouraged them, saying: "But strive for the greater gifts." (But if no gifts are greater than other gifts ... well, it seems a strange place to leave off.)

We pick up from there this morning. Clearly, love is the greater gift, the greatest of all gifts.

And I'd love to say more about love, but this morning's gospel is ultimately even more compelling for me.

Given the opening words we hear this morning, it clear that we're coming in at the middle of something. Jesus is speaking, but it's not immediately self-evident who he's speaking to nor what he's speaking about.

Before we pick up where we left off last week, let's remember where that was. After his baptism, Jesus returned to Nazareth, the town where he'd been brought up.

That's where we began last week. Jesus returned home, his reputation already preceding him. He'd started to become famous all through the surrounding area. Back home, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. And he read from Isaiah. Jesus selected the words he would read. In Isaiah, he found words of God's longing to bring good news to the poor, of God's intention to give release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for those beaten down. Jesus read words that proclaimed God's good favor.

And when he was done reading, Jesus rolled up the scroll, and said to those whose eyes were fixed on him: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's where we left off last week. And that's precisely where we pick up again this week, hearing Jesus say: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." We weren't told how the folks back home understood Jesus' meaning, how they "heard" those words that spoke of scripture being fulfilled in their "hearing." No hint was given last week as to what sense they made of what Jesus was saying to them. That's what we discover today.

And, at least at the start, they're thrilled. (Which is a pretty good hint that they weren't really listening at all. But let's wait for that.) ALL of them spoke well of Jesus. They were ALL amazed.

And I can see why, though it depends on what you think being "fulfilled in your hearing" means. You see, I get how they might have thought Jesus is saying that he himself is the one promised by God, the one who "fulfills" God's desires and intentions for God's people. In John's gospel, Jesus is the Word from the beginning of time – that was with God and was God – the Word made flesh who dwells among us. In Matthew, Jesus is "Emmanuel – God-with-us." Maybe this is Luke's way of saying the same sort of thing.ⁱ

And if that's how they hear Jesus' words ... well, that sounds pretty awesome to them.

When I lived in the Rogue Valley, Kyle Singler played basketball for South Medford High School. They won the state championship his senior year. Kyle went on to become a four-year starter at Duke. And a lot of us became big fans of Duke Basketball as a result. Kyle helped Coach K win a national title there, before going on to play in the NBA. And Kyle was one of ours. And we basked a little in his reflected glory.

If we could get excited about a local kid making it big in college basketball, it's easy for me to see how the folks Jesus grew up with could get excited about hearing how Jesus, "Joseph's son," one of their own, might just be the answer to everyone's prayers. That's a lot of reflected glory.

And more than that, if they hear Jesus to be saying that he really is the answer to all their prayers, the one who can fulfill all God's desires and intentions for those whom God favors, they might (reasonably) expect Jesus to show them some moves, to give them an extra measure of his attention and his favors. After all, they helped raise him. They're all like family. They might easily believe they deserve no less.

Is this how they “heard” Jesus when he said it was all being fulfilled in their “hearing”? I think it must have been.

And, in fact, I think that’s how these words are still being heard ... that Jesus has come to US, to set US free, to proclaim the good news of God’s favor special towards US.

Well, it’s pretty clear, of course, that Jesus must be saying something more than what they first imagined. Jesus isn’t merely telling them what they want to hear, he’s telling them what God wants them to hear. Jesus is insisting that God isn’t showering special favors on members of our family. No, God’s concern is for all who are vulnerable.

For the gospel isn’t good news if it’s only good news for some and not for all.

Jesus makes that point clearly enough, reminding them of ancient stories of their faith, of times when God’s concern stretched far beyond the lines some folks drew in the sand to declare who was in and who was out, God favor extends beyond any attempts to build fences, walls even, that keep us safe on this side and leave outside others to fend for themselves.

Jesus makes the point clearly. And when they hear this – when they really manage to hear what Jesus had been trying to tell them from the start – well, then they’re filled with rage. ALL of them.

But Jesus was really trying to tell them something even more. It’s a point easily lost in translation.

When Jesus speaks of Isaiah’s promises being “fulfilled in your hearing” – which, of course, means, “in *our* hearing,” as well – I think Jesus means for us to listen carefully ... because he is trying to tell us of God’s unfulfilled desire for our world.

After all, anyone looking around that day Jesus returned to Nazareth would have been hard-pressed to see how the world was better than it had been the day before Jesus returned to his hometown. And by all outward and obvious appearances, at least, those promises seem unfulfilled in our world still.

Jesus is trying to say that God’s hopes and dreams and intentions for all the people of this world will remain unfulfilled so long as we fail to hear, to listen, to take into ourselves.

As it turns out, the verb tense is very specific and precise – and apparently a bit hard to translate. It’s not the present tense, nor a single past tense. It translates more like, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled and is being fulfilled and will continue to be fulfilled as we take it on and make it so.”ⁱⁱ

All of which is to say, again, that Jesus did not come merely to tell folks in his hometown – or ours – that he’s come to wave a magic wand and make all of our problems go away. Jesus has come to ask us to pay attention to the needs of the world all around us – especially to notice those most in need of our noticing of them: the poor, captives, the blind, and those beaten down. Jesus has come in the hopes that we hear this all so deeply that we will be moved to help fulfill all the unfulfilled promises of God.

So I guess St. Paul was right after all: “the greatest of these is love.” But this isn’t merely love as something that makes us feel all warm inside. This is love that gives of itself to mend the fabric of community, love that motivates us to give of ourselves for the common life of this planet.

Surely we know that God isn’t cheering for “our team” – be they the Patriots or the Rams – to win the Super Bowl later today. Inevitably, some player or coach will give thanks to God for helping them win today, but God doesn’t favor one team over another. God gives each person – players on the field and each of us – the gift of being able to choose love of neighbor, the ability to love in order to help mend the fabric of all life and creation.

Jesus is saying, I think, that God has no concern for big men beating up on each other the playing field this afternoon. Rather, I think his point would be that God’s concern in Atlanta this weekend has far more to do with the sex trafficking of women than with a football game, that God’s concern is always to pull for the underdog, the beaten down and the oppressed, the poor and the stranger.

And Jesus is cheering for us to do the same, to reach out in the name of all that is sacred, to take our part in fulfilling all the unfulfilled promises of God.

ⁱ David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-3-c-declaration-promise-and-invitation/>.

ⁱⁱ David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-3-c-declaration-promise-and-invitation/> and Karoline Lewis @ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5277>.