

4th Sunday after the Epiphany – January 28, 2007

Church of the Resurrection – 10:00 AM Service at RVMS only

(Celebration of Holy Baptism for Jethro Wilson)

Luke 4:21-30 – A Disturbing word

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Lord, What we have not, give us.

What we know not, teach us.

What we are not, make us.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

Today the church gathers – for a rich banquet – around God’s Word (albeit a disturbing word) and the sacraments of New beginning and of bread & wine for the journey.

We gather as God’s people – to find strength in Christ and with each other for the journey set before us – **and to invite Jethro to join us on the journey.** God has set a rich feast for us today – in Word, in water, and in his Body and Blood.

In Word: we have Jesus – arriving in his home town of Nazareth. Now a grown man, with his disciples, arrives as ‘**local boy made good.**’ There is joy at his declaration in the synagogue that this is the day of God’s deliverance – that Messiah is here and with him the promised freedom and joy. It is a mixed message – at first well received.

God’s beautiful future – the possibility is now.

But then their joy turns to rage in a couple small steps. **The good people of Nazareth begin to do what humans always and everywhere have done. Draw circles – circles that describe who is in and who is out.** Who is good and who is bad. Who is living in God’s favour and who does not deserve it.

Funny how that works – for whenever humans draw such circles, the one holding the chalk manages to draw it so that they are on the inside – and some others are out.

For the good folk of Nazareth it was their **pure bloodlines by comparison to the gentiles and the half-breed folk of Capernaum** that causes them to draw some circles¹. “*Jesus – we hear you have been doing great things down country at Capernaum – among those lesser folk². How come you didn’t begin here – among your purebred kith and kin?*” Circles. We are in and they are out. “*And Jesus – some rabbi you are – you don’t even know enough to hang out with the right people.*” **Do we draw any circles like that?** Circles of exclusion based on wealth, education, pedigree, ethnicity, social class, past sins, perceived difference?

¹ Developed from the exegetical notes in SermonWriter, Vol.11, No. 5, p. 4 © Richard Donovan. .

² Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Lk 4:23). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Jesus tells a couple stories – kind of sticks his finger in their collective eye. Tells of **Elijah and the widow of Zarapeth** and of **Elisha and Namaan – leprous commander of the army of Syria**. Both Gentiles – **both outsiders – that get God’s blessing not because they deserve it but because they need, want it, hunger for it, delight in it.**

Yeah, Jesus tells a couple hard to hear stories to some people with hard hearts: Why? Because **God’s love and mercy refuses to be confined by circles drawn by sinners who think that everyone else is not good enough** for God’s love.

We draw circles too. Some in, some out. Can you think of any that trouble you? I can. **Given that this happened in Jesus hometown – I suppose we should not be surprised that some draw hard unforgiving circles in our community.** Even so it is heartbreaking when some of the baptized make harsh judgement of fellow forgiven sinners. To be sure, most of us are deeply aware that we have been on the receiving end of God’s unlimited grace and forgiveness. And I rejoice in the many signs that so many have caught the gospel and are living and celebrating God’s limitless grace.

Jesus named it for the good synagogue going crowd at Nazareth – and in their rage the mob tried to throw Jesus off a cliff – but it was not his time. Killing Jesus was to be left for another crowd on another day. And when it was the right time to give up his life on a cross – our Saviour walked steadily toward it - embracing his life-giving death so that you and I could be brought into the Father’s embrace.

So we gather around God’s good words – disturbing words that call our shabby, shameful, judgemental lives into the judgement of the one who loves us so much that he is willing to die in our place.

And then we gather around the waters of baptism – where all our sins are washed away. Where Jesus himself presides – at the sacrament of new birth, issuing the invitation to all who are here to the life that is really life.

Here Jethro begins his life – ‘in Christ’. He has a wonderful name – **the name of the wise father-in-law of Moses. Jethro saw in Moses, the foreign refugee, the reflection of the God that he had sought to know from afar. Jethro the Midianite, saw in Moses – the Hebrew Slave raised by the Egyptians, the man who would be the perfect husband for his beloved daughter Zipporah. Jethro, a man who refused to draw small circles – refused to limit the scope of God’s love and embrace.** A perfect name for this little man that the Wilsons and this community love so much. *O God, make Jethro a sacrament to us – a sign that says that the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, refuses to be boxed in by prejudice, by unforgiveness, by irrational fear.*

And then God takes us to his table where he feeds us – not with what we deserve but with Manna. The bread of heaven. The gift of food for the journey and love for the loveless. Lord gather this community around your table and give us generous and soft hearts. Make us the kind of people who, receiving your abundance, live abundant lives. Make us – the ‘B team’ into agents of your love and transformation for the whole world – so that the world would know that things that had been cast down are being made new.

I have for many years tried to tell that this table is the place where time & space collapse – and the Angels and Archangels, together with the church in every age – share in one holy meal. The past, present, and future come together. **This is the table where saint and sinner dine together on bended knee.** There is an

old theological statement that compares the infinite God to a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere³. **In his powerful book, “Simply Christian”, Bishop Tom Wright** expanded my thinking of the miracle that takes place around this table.

Tom Wright adds to that – he says it is the place where God’s future meets our today. He says that what happens around this table is the Kingdom being made visible. The kingdom that Jesus says is in our presence – this table points to it. **The story of the the spies that Moses sent into the promised land – who brought back grapes and fruit and the promise of hope in the God’s future. This table is like that – here we glimpse, as we share in the body and blood of Jesus, the hope of our future. Here we taste and see that the Kingdom Jesus invites us into through water – is a kingdom we can enter into here and now – if we will trust him and refuse to draw circles of exclusion.**

So – my sisters and brothers in Christ. Today is a feast of God’s love and mercy. His disturbing Word – putting us on notice that God refuses to let us humans confine his love and mercy. And his sacraments of new life.

A feast around his font – the place where any and all are welcome. Inviting us into personal friendship with Jesus himself – where all our sins are washed away and we stand new and fresh and forgiven.

And it is **a feast around our Lord’s table – tasting the bread and wine that promise a feast to come – and the possibility of living in Christ’s kingdom – starting this morning.**

It is a feast, come let us draw circles that are wide enough to include all that Christ invites to his banquet. All whom our saviour loves. All to whom he says:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I have said these things to you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

³ From Charles Hoffacker in the issue SermonWriter V.11, No.5