

A Larger God

Luke 4:21-30

Sermon by Dan Schrock

February 3, 2013

Communion

²¹Then Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"²³He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (NRSV)

I

One Sunday morning last summer while on vacation, I visited another church not far from here. This isn't a Mennonite church, but a church that belongs to another denomination. I had never been to this church before, so my first decision was how to dress—in particular, whether or not to wear a tie. I decided to lean toward the side of slightly dressed up. I put on a tie.

I arrived about 15 minutes before the worship service began and found my way to the foyer, just outside the sanctuary. The church looked like it was about the same size as Berkey. Lots of people were milling about, most of them talking excitedly to each other, warm smiles on their faces, shaking each other's hands, giving each other hugs. Clearly they enjoyed being with each other.

After picking up a bulletin on a display table, I stood to one side of the foyer, waiting to see if anyone would come over to greet me, introduce themselves to me. I waited . . . and waited . . . and wait some more. While waiting to see what would happen, I glanced around the foyer looking for clues about what kind of church this was, what sort of theology it proclaimed. A banner hung above the entrance to the sanctuary which said, "To evangelize and make disciples of Jesus Christ." On a bulletin board mounted on the wall near me, a large display featured the local and international mission work of the

congregation. Based on this I gathered that a primary emphasis of this church was converting people to Jesus.

Finally one older man noticed me standing all by myself. He shuffled over to me, nervously. Since this was his church and since his church believed in saving the lost, I decided to let him lead the conversation. I wanted to learn how people at this church worked with guests who were obviously not one of them, guests who, for all they knew, were not even Christian.

He stuck out his hand. “Hi, you from around here?”

“Yes,” I replied, as I shook his hand.

He looked nervously from side to side, his eyes never engaging mine for more than a fleeting moment. There was an awkward pause, as if he didn’t know what to do next. “Well, welcome to our church,” he said—and then he went back to talk with his friends.

I was stunned. He never told me his name or asked me for mine. He didn’t engage me in conversation about the weather or what I did for a living or what brought me to their church that morning or anything else. I had just showered and shaved, so I don’t think I gave off a distasteful smell. I wore a dress shirt and tie, neatly pressed dress slacks, and dress shoes, so I don’t think I looked scruffy. Maybe I had bad breath, but given how quickly he retreated after shaking my hand, I doubt he stood close enough for long enough to even tell whether my breath was raw or sweet.

I stood in the foyer for 10 minutes and waited for someone else to make contact, but no one did. Except for the nervous man who didn’t know what to do with me, no one greeted me, much less talked with me. No one caught my eye or in any way paid attention to me. It wasn’t that they had lots of guests that day. As far as I could tell, I was the only one.

During my lonely sojourn in the foyer, I pondered the gap between what this church said they believed and what they actually practiced. They said evangelism was high priority. They claimed their special work was to reach the lost, the unchurched. Well, there I was. You and I know that I’m a Mennonite pastor, that I profess to be a Christian—but none of them knew that. For all they knew, I was a seeker, struggling

toward faith, looking for a church, ripe for evangelism. Yet except for the well-meaning but abrupt man, they ignored me.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to worship there after all. Maybe if I moved, walked around, someone would engage me. I sauntered over to the stairs leading to the basement, passing 12-15 people. Still no one paid any attention. I might as well have been invisible.

By now I was frustrated. I walked down to the basement to look around and perhaps meet someone who lived what the church proclaimed. Not a soul was in the basement; but I did notice a few plaques hanging on the walls outside of the Sunday school classrooms. One plaque said: "Our mission: reaching out, befriending the sinner, saving the lost." Another further down the hallway announced: "Evangelizing near and far, at home and around the world."

It was now 11:00, time for worship to begin, but I could not bring myself to worship with this group of people. Their disjuncture was too pronounced, their contradiction too obvious. So I slipped out a side door, walked to my car, and drove home.

On the way home, I wondered: how do visitors experience BAMF, especially ones who don't know anybody here?

II

In Luke 4, Jesus fingers a contradiction among his fellow Jews. Early in Jewish salvation history, God had called them to be a light to the nations, a blessing to peoples of the earth. Their own scriptures articulated this theme in various ways. It appeared in Genesis 22:18, in Isaiah 42:1 & 6, again in Isaiah 49:6, and in other passages sprinkled through the Old Testament. Whole books turn on this theme, such as Ruth and Jonah. The theme is implicit in the call and ministry of the prophets.

But too often the summons to bless others, to live as a light to the nations, went unheeded. Too often Jewish faith had turned in on itself, curled up like a fetus in a womb. Too often it devolved into tribalism, acting as if God was on their side, thinking God's job was to bless them and only them. God was for them, not anyone else.

That Sabbath day in the synagogue, Jesus named the contradiction. He pointed out that during a famine, the great prophet Elijah fed no Israelites, but instead fed a Canaanite widow and her son. Jesus pointed out that Elisha never healed an Israelite from leprosy, though there were many Israelites with leprosy, but Elisha only healed one of Israel's enemies, the Syrian general, Naaman.

That Sabbath day people got mad at Jesus. Wouldn't we too, if someone pointed out a gap between the faith we espouse and the life we live?

III

In this story, Jesus merely fingers the gap. He levies no judgments and issues no condemnations. He merely says: there it is. What your faith professes and your communal life expresses aren't the same. I, Jesus, the Anointed of God, am here to stir up the mission of blessing others, to renew the old, historic purpose of living for the nations.

Implicitly, Jesus offered a choice that day to the people in that synagogue. Will you remain curled inward toward your own tribe; or will you follow me to the nations, to bless and renew and prosper? What sort of God do you want to worship—a God only for you; or a God who is also for Canaanites and Syrians, for anonymous widows and your most feared, most powerful enemy? Will you reject me or join me?

That day, the people in that synagogue chose the first option. They ran him out of town and tried to toss him off the cliff.

However, Jesus' question still lingers. Will we choose a small God or big God? Will we curl in on ourselves; or will we follow him to the houses of hungry Canaanite widows and leprous Syrian generals? Will we engage the stranger?