

Luke 4:20-32
How To Share God's Truth With Those Close to You
January 31, 2016

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

"I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian."

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. (NIV)

I don't get nervous before I preach. Not even a little. Eager, yes. But not nervous.

So it surprised me about 15 years when I went back to Illinois to preach for the 25th anniversary of the congregation in which I grew up. I went over to the church on Saturday afternoon to practice the sermon, entered the building which had always been very familiar and comfortable to me, and got up into the pulpit. What surprised me is that as I began to speak, even in an empty church, I felt a little different--one might even say "nervous."

I think I know why. I realized that I wasn't going to be preaching to people whom I had only known as members of my congregation, to people who only knew me as "Pastor", to people whom I had only known for a few years--and vice versa. I was going to be preaching to people who knew me as "Paul", people who had babysat me, people who remembered me when I was a kid--both the good and the bad. I was preaching to people like Mr. and Mrs. Barnas--people that I just couldn't suddenly bring myself to call "Dan and Dede"--even though I had reached the age of 30 myself.

Preaching to those close to you, preaching to those who knew you when you were a kid, preaching at "home" can be a difficult, intimidating nerve-wracking experience.

And not just for pastors. If some stranger were to notice you reading your Bible or your Meditations booklet on an airplane, and then strike up a conversation with you about it, many of you wouldn't be real intimidated by the opportunity to share God's Word with that person. But when the opportunity comes to do the same thing with those close to us, to speak God's truth to a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a lifelong friend--well, then our palms start to sweat, our mouth gets dry, and our eyes dart around nervously.

I wonder if Jesus felt that way as he entered the familiar synagogue at Nazareth, but this time, instead of facing the front, faced the back, faced the congregation.

You might recall from last Sunday's gospel lesson that Jesus began by reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It would seem to go without saying that if we are going to preach to those close to us, we ought to be sure that we are preaching God's Word. And yet how often don't we use phrases like, "Well, I think" or "the way I see it" or "I've always understood that", almost as though we're just discussing personal philosophies with the person--when what we should be saying is "God says."

The passage which Jesus read was a passage prophesying about the coming Messiah. He read, *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Luke 4:18-19).

At this point Jesus sat down and said, *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* In other words, "The one about whom Isaiah was talking--the promised Messiah? I am he."

Jesus spoke very clearly so that would no one would misunderstand (or miss entirely!) his claim. The people's reaction showed that they understood exactly what he was claiming. (They didn't necessarily believe it--but they understood it.)

Jesus could have sat down and said, "Hmm, interesting reading. Sound like anyone you know?" Jesus could have said, "You know, God could make an extraordinary Messiah come from a little town." Jesus could have said, "I hope that whenever this Messiah comes, you'll recognize him."

If Jesus had approached it this way, wouldn't some have understood, wouldn't some have made the connection between the prophecy and Jesus? Yes, some would have.

But some wouldn't.

When you preach to those close to you, tell them exactly what you want to know--simply and clearly. I don't believe we always do that. Instead of preaching the law and gospel, we more "preach about" those things. We dance around them like someone might dance around a campfire, getting kind of close to it and then backing off.

Maybe we do that because we sort of assume they know what we're going to say, that they've heard it before, and that therefore hinting at and alluding to the truth will be sufficient.

It's not. Many, many people that you know have never really heard either the law or the gospel! So tell them exactly what you want them to know!

What is it that you most want your family and those close to you to know? Do you want them to know that if they stop living with their boyfriend, then their relationship will be better? Do you want them to know that if they stop feeding their addiction, their life will be better? I hope not--because neither of those things is necessarily true! More than that, neither of those things is really a speaking of God's law, nor of God's gospel.

Don't you want them to know that their sins condemn them to Hell and that they need to repent of them? Then that's what you should tell them. Don't merely "wonder" out loud if God is really pleased with the things they've been doing. You don't have to "wonder" that! And you shouldn't make **them** "wonder" that! So say it plainly.

And if you want them to know that God promised to send a Savior to make a payment for their sins by actually suffering the pains of hell and actually dying for them on a cross, tell them that. Don't just mention in passing that Jesus came "to save" them. That doesn't mean anything to people. They don't know what it means, how it took place, or how it affects them.

Tell them that Jesus, the Son of God, came down to this earth to live a perfect life in their place, to suffer and die in their place as a payment for sins, and to rise from the dead in order to assure them that they too will rise from the dead and enter heaven. Tell them the good news!

Sadly, the people at Nazareth didn't accept the good news that Jesus preached to them. They were amazed at his speaking, they were impressed by the words of grace and hope that came from him--but they just couldn't get past the fact that this was the carpenter's son. The kid who had been in the shop playing at his own toy workbench when they had picked up their kitchen table from Joseph was now coming back to town and claiming to be the Messiah? It was all just a bit too much to believe that someone seemingly so ordinary was making claims to be someone so great.

And there may have been another reason for their skepticism--oh, let's call it what it was--unbelief. That may have been that they didn't want to admit their sin to this person they had known for so many years. They didn't like the fact that in claiming to be their Savior and in calling on them to believe in him, he was also calling on them to confess their sins, to humble themselves in his presence.

No one likes to hear that they are sinful--and they especially don't like to hear it from the daughter from whom they've demanded respect throughout the years or from the big brother who picked on them constantly.

You and I know this, and we're a bit hesitant to tell people that they are sinful because it opens us up to being asked, "Aren't you the daughter who went about 3 years in junior high without saying much more to me than 'I hate you, Mom!'"? Or "Aren't you the brother who beat me up when I told Mom and Dad what you did at that party in high school?" Or just simply, "Well, let me tell you something--I know you're not perfect!" In fact, you can expect to hear just these sorts of things.

If you do, that's OK. In fact, it's an opportunity, isn't it? It's an opportunity not only to continue the conversation, but to very specifically apply the message of God's forgiveness--to yourself. It's an opportunity for you to do exactly what you are calling on them to do--confess your sin openly, repent of your sin, and trust in Jesus for forgiveness of that sin. What a great opportunity to demonstrate and model for that person what it means to live in the grace of Christ!

And yet don't be surprised if they continue to reject what you have to say. After all, it happened to the Son of God when he preached. The Devil is powerful and he will work against what you are saying. He did so in Nazareth by convincing them that since Jesus didn't fit THEIR preconceived notions of what the Son of God would look like, then both he and his message could be disregarded. He kept them from asking themselves whether they were being somewhat foolish and presumptuous to tell God what HIS son ought to look like.

The Devil is still active today, and he will be especially active when he sees one of his subjects exposed to the Word of God. He will fight tooth and nail and he will throw up the most irrational, the most angry of roadblocks in order to keep that person from falling into the hands of their Savior. Expect it.

How did Jesus deal with that when it occurred? He told them, *"I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian."* Depending on your knowledge of Old Testament history, it may appear that Jesus was not speaking real clearly here. But the response of the people indicated that they had understood exactly what he was saying. By telling them of times when God took his love and gracious promises to foreigners, to Gentiles, Jesus was warning them that a continued failure to repent would result in God taking his grace and blessing elsewhere, to those who would receive it.

We also need to lovingly make it very clear to the people we know what the result of continued impenitence and rejection of Jesus will be. But sometimes we kind of drop the subject and give the impression that while it would be nice if they shared our faith, it is in fact of minimal import because, after all, they're still decent people.

I know why we are inclined to do that. Because we know that if we do what Jesus did, they might do to us what they did to Jesus. Oh, they probably won't try to throw us off a cliff, but they may become pretty angry with us--maybe even for quite a while.

Jesus knew this, but he still spoke a loving warning to them. May he grant us the love (and the strength!) to do the same.

We read that after Jesus used his almighty power to escape the crowd, he left Nazareth to go preach in Capernaum, where the people actually listened to and accepted his message.

But that does not mean that Jesus did not return. The gospels of Matthew and Mark record a second time when Jesus preached in Nazareth. He didn't simply say, "Well, I told them once, and if they change their minds, they know where to find me." No, he kept trying.

Depending on you and your personality and your family's situation, it might be easy to quit on people. No one likes to set themselves up for repeated heartbreak and repeated rejection. But don't overestimate the power of the Devil. Or perhaps I should say don't underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit. Give the Holy Spirit another chance to convict them of their sin and their need for a Savior. Give the Holy Spirit another chance to lead them to look past the messenger and see the gospel message.

How did it all end in Nazareth? I don't really know. It appears that Jesus received much the same sort of rejection the next time he went to Nazareth. He may not have gone back a third time, but then again he might have--or even a 4th and 5th time. I'd like to think that he did, and I'd like to think that one of those times was the time when his brother James, who had not believed in him, finally came to believe in him, and then later became a "pillar" (Galatians 2:9) in the church in Jerusalem.

How will it all end for you in your preaching to those close to you? I don't know--and neither do you. But I know what could happen the next time you share God's truth with them and leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit. So make sure that there is a "next time."

When that "next time" comes (or when you make it come), don't be nervous. Be eager. Be excited. Because, like Jesus that day in Nazareth, you have the words of eternal life! Amen.