

5th Sunday after Epiphany – Year C
February 7, 2010
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Luke 4:20-32
Pastor Paul Horn

Worthless Sinners become Worthy Witnesses

²⁰ 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, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*

²² 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.

²³ 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.’”*

²⁴ “I tell you the truth,” he continued, *“no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ 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.”*

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. ³¹ Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people.

³² They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.

I love this story. Jesus returns to his hometown, and as was his habit, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. The place packed, standing room only. The young, new rabbi stands in the front of the assembly and is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. We don’t know if that lesson was assigned for that particular day or if Jesus picked it... but he reads this lesson, hands the scroll to the attendant and sits down. Jewish rabbis sat when they taught. Every eye is fixed on him. They had heard the rumors, the healings in Capernaum, how he changed water into wine at Cana, how he taught with authority. What will he say? What will he do? Jesus begins by teaching them, “This prophecy, 700 years old, is now fulfilled. I am the fulfillment of all the prophecies. I am the Messiah, promised from the time of your first parents. I have come to do what is necessary for unworthy sinners.”

Wow! At first the people seemed delighted. They spoke well of him, because he spoke gracious words, literally, “words of grace.” Jesus spoke words of God’s undeserved love, how the Father was showing that love through his Son, Jesus. Unlike a televangelist with a smooth talk charismatic message and no substance, Jesus’ message had substance. The people recognized that, but something stood in the way of their believing it; their human reason. The man and the message didn’t gel. They couldn’t reconcile “Jesus the Messiah” with “Jesus the son of Joseph,” because they knew him. They knew that he had grown up among them. They would not receive him for who he truly was because they were too familiar with him.

Jesus knew their hearts and he said, “**Surly you will quote this proverb, ‘Physician heal yourself.’** A true, certified physician should be able to diagnose his own ailment and heal himself, thus proving his claim. They expected Jesus to do the same. If he was Joseph’s son and claims to be the Messiah, then he must prove it. Do what you did in Capernaum, after all, this is your hometown.

Jesus wasn’t some dog and pony show. He had already given proof. John the Baptist’s witness of “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The events at Jesus’ own baptism proved he was the Messiah. His teaching was enough. They refused to believe the proof. If they weren’t going to listen, he’d go to somewhere else where people would listen and believe. He tells two stories from Israelite history to prove his point.

Elijah the prophet, during the time of a three-and-a-half year famine, was sent not to the many widows of Israel to provide for them. Instead Elijah was sent to two unbelievers, a widow and her son, who lived in Zarephath (a coastal city on the Mediterranean Sea, between Tyre and Sidon). That’s the story where the jug of oil and jar of flour did not run out. In the second story, there were many in Israel who had leprosy at the time of Elisha the prophet, yet none of them were cleansed of their disease. But a pagan, a man by the name of Naaman, who came from a nation that often waged war against Israel, he was told to dip seven times in the Jordan, and he was cleansed. If one people reject God’s gracious invitation, he offers it to another.

With these words Jesus had thrown a bucket of ice cold water in their faces. It was insulting to tell them that others, non-Jews, were just as deserving of God’s grace as they were. With fury and rage this assembly of worshipers quickly turned into a mob. They drove Jesus to the edge of a precipice outside of the city in order to kill him. But Jesus demonstrates his divine power, walking right through the crowd, untouched. Now was neither the time nor the place.

As we listen to this story we might question, “Why did Jesus even share gospel with those people to begin with? How ungrateful! How undeserving!” We could make the case for the widow of Zarephath. Sure, she and her son were starving to death, but she was a pagan! Naaman was commander of the army that attacked Israel, and he deserved to receive God’s mercy? But are we any more deserving of God’s grace?

Today’s service theme is: “Jesus calls us to serve as his messengers.” The command goes to all of us, young and old alike, to “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” Each one has different ways of carrying out this mission. Some are not comfortable going door-to-door canvassing, but would rather put money in the offering plate to support that area of ministry or they would rather publish flyers, and fold and stuff the doorhangers that canvassers take with them. That’s ok. God’s mission is being carried out. Some have a natural gift of striking up a conversation with just about anyone, even steering the conversation to a discussion about Jesus. Others are more comfortable with offering a simple invitation to a friend or neighbor to “come and see.” They would rather let someone else do the instructing. That’s ok. The fact remains, all of us are called to share Jesus with those who do not know Him as Savior..

But are we doing what is God-pleasing by making the excuse, “Outreach isn’t my thing, so I’m

not going to do anything at all.” Are we carrying out God’s command by making the argument, “It’s not my job. It’s the pastor’s job.” Are we doing what God commands of us when we turn others away from church? A few months ago I spoke with a guest who had come to our church. This individual said she wouldn’t come back again because one of our members had said to them, “Aren’t you Catholic? What are you doing here?” Have we carried out God’s command by having this attitude? I made a phone call to an inactive member this week. The last time they were here was a year and half ago. They said that the last time they came to church, after the service, a member said to them, “When will we see you again? Next week or next Christmas like we usually do?” That’s why they haven’t been back. Have we carried out God’s command with these shenanigans?

Jesus has made all of us his ambassadors, his messengers, and has made it our responsibility to share his grace with others. When we choose to opt out and drive souls away from God’s Word, we are failing to do something God commands us to do. We sin. Then we have become just as cold and unreceptive to God’s message as the people of Nazareth.

You and I are not alone in our guilt. Remember Peter, the Lord’s apostle? He verbally denied his Lord and Savior in the courtyard as Jesus was on trial. But remember also that about two weeks later, Peter found himself sitting on the shores of the Sea of Galilee enjoying a breakfast of fish and bread around a fire, there Christ forgave Peter of his sin. You and I are not alone in our guilt of failing to carry out God’s command. Remember Elijah, who ran away from his duties as prophet, because of self pity and fear? God caught up with him in the cave he was hiding out in and spoke words of grace.

Isn’t that exactly why Jesus came to earth, to speak words of grace to us, we who are not worthy of his love? Jesus comes to us through Word and Sacrament to speak words of grace; God’s undeserved love.. The Father’s love for his children is not based on how they act. If I were to base my love for my children on their behavior, there would not be much love in the Horn house. If my wife were to base her love for me on the affection and quality time I spend with her, I’d be sleeping on the couch most nights. God’s love is not based on our worthiness, not on our merits, because we have none. His love is based on Jesus who was worthy for us. God exercises his grace freely upon those whom he chooses to save, and he showed it through his Son Jesus.

One of the hymns from our Christian Worship Supplement says, “What grace is this! Once wrapped in cloths and gently laid in manger trough, he’s taken, dead, from wretched cross and wrapped again for me..” (CWS 715:5) As we make the transition between Christmas and Lent, we are reminded why God sent his Son Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes: so that he could be wrapped in burial clothes for us. He came to do all that was necessary, and accomplish all that was prophesied for our salvation, “**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,**” Jesus came to do what God demands from all human beings: to obey his commands to the letter. Christ came and proclaimed the good news, obeying his Father’s will perfectly, since we could not. Jesus came to do what God demands from all human beings. Since we are unworthy sinners, God would have us die as punishment. What amazing grace! That God would subject his own Son to our punishment, so that we might stand before his throne forgiven and worthy no longer of hell, but of heaven. As we approach the Lord’s Table this morning, we acknowledge that we are unworthy sinners. But we know that Jesus is the friend of sinners and will not cast us

out. We come rejoicing! Here are body and blood, offered and shed for me, a worthy price to change my unworthy status – amazing grace!

What amazing grace, that God again called those who neglected their duties and responsibilities. After announcing forgiveness to Peter, Jesus told him, “Go and feed my lambs!” To Elijah the prophet, who ran away, the LORD said, “Go back the way you came. Do your work as my prophet.” Forgiven we are restored. Unworthy sinners, Christ makes us worthy witnesses. And when he asks, “Who will go for us and whom shall we send?” We immediately reply like the prophet Isaiah, “Here am I, send me!” (from the First Lesson today Isaiah 6:1-8)

The amazing grace of God through Jesus empowers us to show that same grace to others. In your service folder I’ve included a guide for you to identify those who are unchurched among your family, coworkers, acquaintances, friends and neighbors. I want you to go home today and write down the names of those people.. And pray for them. Then, keep this paper with you all week. My challenge to you, (and your challenge to me) is to invite one of those people to church this week. Just one. If you don’t feel confident talking to them about the deep doctrinal truths of the Lutheran faith, that’s ok. Just invite them. I will pray this week that every one of those people comes to church next Sunday. You might say, “If they all come, where will they sit?” We’ll worry about that next Sunday. In the meantime, you, unworthy sinners who have been made worthy witnesses, go! And preach the good news to all creation. Amen.