

Recently, I watched a movie with my daughter, Grace, called *Encanto*. It tells the story of a family who each have magical gifts. The family though, like most families, has some issues.

Pause

Watching the family was a bit like listening to this scripture: the problem was that the family was not willing to accept each other for their whole selves. This crowd was not willing to accept Jesus for who his whole self.

This is a quintessential Jesus scriptures: it iabout true love. Love means being authentic to ourselves and listening to hard truths. Looking at this scripture, the people of Nazareth could not give him honest feedback. Their hearts were closed off from love. They were skeptical and petty.¹ They could not acknowledge that they were truly in the presence of God's anointed one. The crowd made Jesus into an outsider.

Frankly, I understand why this is the case: Jesus had a hard message. In fact, if you look at it from the perspective of the crowd, he sounds quite arrogant, Jesus proclaims, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Can you imagine if I ended my sermon by saying that I just fulfilled what the scripture authors spoke of long ago?

¹ Stone, M. (2020). *Living on the Plain*. New York: Church Publishing. This quote really epitomizes what I am thinking here, "We need to rise above revenge. Instead, we need to seek forgiveness as the path to justice. This does not mean there are no times in secular culture when people can and should be killed, rather, it means that as Christian our full restoration comes when we forgive the most people. Holding on to grudges makes anyones relationships fraught with disaster. Jesus is inviting the crowd to re-read Isaiah as a way of restoring the poor rather than destroying the powerful.

Pause

I might be put in a straight jacket and brought to the hospital!

My husband, David, is also a priest. He wrote a book about this topic titled *Why I Would have Killed Jesus And You Might Have Too*. One chapter follows Sara of Nazareth, a grandmotherly figure, who sees Jesus as a wolf in sheep's clothing. A traitor to their faith.² A reasonable outsider. She uses the Gospel we heard today as a reason for making him separate from the crowd.

The truth he told them was hard to hear, last week, Jesus told them that,

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.

These are quite the lists of demands. It is unimaginable that they could have been fulfilled by someone that grew up in their *obscure* hometown.

² Nelson, D. (2021). *Why I Would Have Killed Jesus and You Might Have Too*. p.45

This is why priests are rarely sent back to their sending parishes after ordination. It is hard to imagine little Suzy or Johnny as a priest after seeing them run through the halls as a youth (only an extraordinarily mature priest and parish for this to work).³

God takes us where we are and uses our gifts accordingly. The Father knows how to direct ministry and gifts. God knows how to make our community whole.

Now, I am going to tell you a bias.

I believe that each of you is called to this moment, at this time, to be a full minister of God. Whether you are a visitor and this is your first time at St. Dunstan's or if you have been here for 50 years. God is calling you. God wants you here, just as you are to do the work of the church.

Consider the words from Jeremiah read just shortly before this,

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord.

³ Yet, those same people might make the best priests for that parish. And on occasion, if they have the right gifts, permission is granted. This happened at The Cathedral recently when the specific gifts were realized in the ordinand.

All of us are valued in Christ's sight. Do not be afraid of Jesus' words. Our heavenly father will deliver us from the ways of the wicked. He will deliver us from trouble. Jesus offers his message: God is the one who governs our lives, who governs all things. He craves a relationship with us. This is excellent news! It means that just as we are beloved in God's sight. What does Jeremiah tell us about our relationship with this Divine Creator? We are to be ourselves and to be loved. We are all capable of being insiders in The Father's circle.

Now, you might be thinking, well, "you can't have it both ways – the hard truth and comforting words." Oh yes I can.⁴We are Episcopalians. The the church of the both/and. The Church of the via media, which means middle way.⁵

When my ministry at St. Dunstan's began, I got to know many of you. Fr. Roman took me on several home visits. We shared stories over glasses of iced tea and coffee.

⁴ For more on this, I referred to the quote, from Schnasa Jacobsen D. (2019). "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany Year C." *Working Preacher*. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-421-30-4> "Gracious? Yes, though the word is not mine, but comes from Luke's own narration of the synagogue hearers in Nazareth: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Some scholars argue that the word gracious here is really understood more from the perspective of eloquent wisdom, hence "from his mouth." Others note, as I do, that we see in Luke 4:14-30 a broader, preceding announcement that rings with the words of the prophet Isaiah, a strange grace¹ perhaps even in the sense of divine favor. It may sound strange, but Luke has Jesus preach his first sermon in the mode of prophetic grace.

⁵ Jennings, N. (2021). Liturgy II. Via Media.

The next part of my ministry has focused on evangelism: MOPS and invite, welcome, connect. In fact, yesterday, we had a Invite, Welcome, Connect training. Fr. Roman told us about changing the culture at St. Dunstan's to be one where we were always thinking about being hospitable.

Does this mean Fr. Roman thinks we are inhospitable? Of course, not. Neither do I.

Yet we can always grow. And growth requires change. For example, as a preacher, after every sermon I consider ways I can grow or improve. It can be my choice of words, length of the sermon, or perhaps a story I shared. The best way to grow is to strive to improve.

Today, Fr. Roman is taking notes.

The same applies to our church: We revamped our Parish Hall and are going to have a grand opening.

We were more intentional about inviting guests to programs such as The Blessing of the Animals, to God's megaphone, to Breakfast with St. Nicholas.

We want to bring more people into our church family. We also want to keep all of the wonderful people who are already members here at St. Dunstan's.

God loves us as the people we are and God hopes that we can turn into better versions of ourselves so that we can grow in spirit and church body. This takes courage. This takes love.

That is why we have the passage from Corinthians paired with Jesus' reading in the temple, "We need to be Open to the Holy Spirit, who guided Zechariah, John, Elizabeth, Mary, and Simeon." This requires change while treasuring the core of who we are. We are rooted in faith, growing in community, our core values reflect our mission to unite all people with the love of God.⁶ We cannot show favoritism.⁷ Not for the new. And not for the existing members.⁸ One strengthens the others.⁹

In a world where we all rely on groups of insiders and outsiders; it can be easy to categorize one way or the other. The message from our scripture readings today is that in God's eyes we are whole and good. In God's eyes we all belong. In God's eyes; we are all insiders. In God's eyes, we are all welcome in the Church. Amen.

⁶ See this quote, from Carson, D.A. eds; Edwards, J.R. (2015). *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke*. Nottingham: Apollos. "Love: The extension of the gospel to Gentiles was not an afterthought because Jews rejected Jesus; it was the result of divine election of Gentiles (Eph 1:4-5), already operative in the days of Elijah, indeed, even in the days of Abraham, who at the time of his call was a Gentile.

⁷ This reading marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He starts at home. We, too, need to begin our ministry at home. This church is our home. Yet, we need to make sure that our state of mind is ready for all things: this is why Paul tells us We need to teach. Luke's gospel is about more than presence, it is about the kind of teaching you see from people such as Fr. Roman who explains the process. It is not that a ministry of presence is not appropriate at times; however, to truly be a disciple of Jesus, we need to proclaim the gospel by talking about it. We need to proclaim the gospel by living it. We need to proclaim the gospel by loving God and all our neighbors and by being made whole and complete in this love.

Love is both about being authentic to ourselves and accepting the hard truth challenges of Jesus.

⁸ Jesus went to preach to the gentiles after this. This is part of the message of Luke. Those people in the temple rejected Jesus' idea that God could love those outsiders. The ones who accepted Jesus, were both Jews and Gentiles. This is why we must reach down and find God's love within ourselves. It is why we must become a better version of ourselves.

⁹ Reese, R.A. (2016). "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany Year C." *Working Preacher*.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/authors/ruth-ann-reese>