

The Spirit Knows No Boundaries

Text: Luke 4:16-30

My in-laws live in Colorado Springs so my family comes this way often. We celebrate certain boundaries along the way, the Colorado-Kansas line, the border of El Paso County, and the Colorado Springs city limits all provide us clues that we are getting closer to our goal. Though the city limit sign means we are almost here, it is the Kansas-Colorado state line that we celebrate most. We honk the horn and yell and celebrate being in Colorado. Boundaries, however, are not designed to mark progress, they are designed to separate. And as I contemplated the gospel text we have just heard I was struck by the way in which Christ and the Spirit ignored boundaries rather than observing and celebrating them.

Of course the physical boundary that is challenged in our text is the boundary between Nazareth and Capernaum. The hometowners challenge was DO HERE WHAT WE HAVE HEARD THAT YOU DID IN CAPERNAUM. At first glance it appears that the towns folk want to remove the boundary between Nazareth and Capernaum, but reading between the lines we discover that they are most concerned with keeping the boundary. Their words were a challenge to Jesus to be sure that little hometown, faithful, Jewish Nazareth receive a more extravagant display of his miracles than foreign, gentile-dominated Capernaum. Their challenge celebrated the boundary between Jew and Gentile, between religious and pagan, between conservative village and liberal city, between people perceived to be safe and people perceived to be dangerous. DO MIGHTY MIRACLES HERE OR THE BOUNDARIES MIGHT DISAPPEAR.

And not only did the Spirit-anointed Jesus refuse their request, he challenged their celebration of the boundaries. YOU ARE RELIGIOUS FOLK, he said, READ YOUR BIBLES. THERE WERE MANY WIDOWS IN ISRAEL DURING THE FAMINE IN AHAB'S REIGN, BUT GOD DID NOT SEND ELIJAH TO THEM. NO, HE SENT ELIJAH TO THE WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH IN SIDON—THE GENTILE WOMAN, THE PAGAN WOMAN. The boundaries you've erected to keep yourselves separate do not matter to God.

In fact, that was also the message of text or texts Jesus had read from Isaiah. THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. To the poor - now there was another boundary—almost impossible for those of us of middle-class mostly egalitarian America to fathom. First century Palestine was clearly marked out by social boundaries. Boundaries between those with status and honor and those without. Boundaries between the folks were "getting long" and the poor of the land who were destitute. Oh, you can theologize about God's preferential option for the poor and calculate the total number of references to the poor in Scripture and the spiritual standing they have in holy writ. But on the street and in the synagogue it wasn't like that. Pharisees disdained the filth of the poor and the folks just getting' by avoided eye contact with them. It was as clearly communicated as culture can communicate that the poor were worthless scum, a drag on all decent Jewish society. And Jesus quotes Scripture saying; THE BIBLE SAYS, THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD HAS ANOINTED ME TO PREACH GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR.

And if that isn't enough the Spirit also anointed him to PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE. Frankly, Jesus was stomping all over boundaries of all kinds by claiming this prophecy for himself. Most of the captives in Jesus' time were debtors who couldn't survive economically in depressed Palestine. The blind were parasites on society, filthier than the poor who could see. Every body in the synagogue was sure they were part of the oppressed—under the boot of Rome, but most of the synagogue crowd was surviving. The oppressed of Jesus' time were the marginalized poor losing home, families, and opportunity simply because they did-

n't have enough clout to keep it from happening. Often it was the upstanding leaders of the synagogue who were doing the oppressing—in the name of money. All of the boundaries that human being erect to protect themselves from each other and to project themselves in control over each other. all the divisions we create to mark our territory and power, our superiority over somebody else, Jesus stomps all over those kinds of barriers. And he says that the Holy Spirit anointed him to do it.

It is the Spirit's work to destroy the boundaries that we create to mark status, value, and importance among human beings. The very fact and the way it is emphasized in our text attacks another boundary that many of us were raised to celebrate. Always unspoken, often unrealized because it was at the level of assumption, was the boundary we created to mark out the work of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't that we were trying to fence him in—it was just a hardening of the categories in our definitions. But for most of us the Holy Spirit did spiritual work. He convicted, he comforted, and most of all he sanctified, in fact, mostest of all, he entirely sanctified. Which we interpreted to mean that the Holy Spirit had categories for people. Sinners, saveds, sanctifieds and his work was moving people into different—in fact into higher categories. And once he got a person into the sanctified category, the Holy Spirit got tenure and didn't have to really work anymore on that person until he retired. Those were the lines in which we colored the Spirit and we could list Bible verses to prove we were right. Just like the folk at Nazareth.

And just like the folk at Nazareth, for most of us genuine, sustained, Spirit-directed encounter with the Scripture was a boundary-bursting, paradigm popping experience. The Bible says that the Spirit's work is not putting people into categories, keeping the boundaries between the good folks and bad folks; NO, the Spirit's work is to destroy boundaries, to transcend boundaries, to ignore boundaries. Every bit as much as the Spirit's work is to convict, sanctify, encourage, provide words for witness, and to guide into all truth, the Spirit's work is also compassionate ministry. It is to preach good news to the poor. It is to set debtors and addicts and abusers free. It is to give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, access to the paralyzed, and dignity and worth to the handicapped. It is the Spirit's work to find the people who have fallen through the cracks of society, people who are marginalized by poverty, lack of education, and dysfunctional families. People who we avoid making eye, ear, and nose contact with. People who are as precious to God as we are, but we don't want our kids marrying their kids. The Holy Spirit is not impressed by our boundaries between the church and the world, between sacred and secular, between spiritual/theological and material/physical. The Holy Spirit only knows one kind of people, people who need what God created them to have. And clear implication of our text is that the Spirit is in the business of anointing people to cross boundaries to meet people's needs whether those needs are spiritual, physical, economic, psychological, or emotional. It is time for us, once and for all time, to give up the little spiritual box in which we have kept the Holy Spirit. And if we can catch a hold of him as he comes blowing out of that box, we—in the Church of the Nazarene—can be in for the ride of our lives. We haven't been wrong about the Spirit; we've just been too small in our vision. Way too small. Perhaps what we have thought, seen, and experienced of the work of the Spirit is as small as the vision of narrow minded Nazareth trying to keep Jesus in their little town box. Perhaps what Luke experienced of early Christianity turning the Roman Empire upside down may point to what could be in the days ahead if we can follow the Spirit past the boundaries we draw between ourselves and those in need. May God help us! (And fasten your seatbelts.)

—Given by Roger L. Hahn during the Solemn Assembly worship service at the 4th Quadrennial Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Conference, Colorado Springs, Colorado, October 27, 1998.