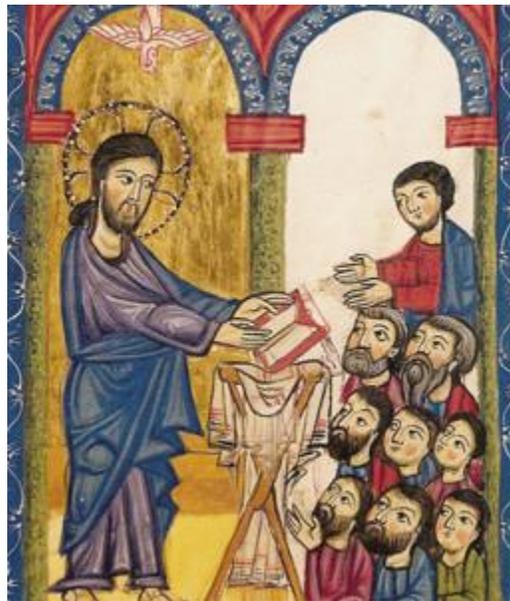


Translating the Gospel (Part II): It's Nonsense!

Luke 4:21–30

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He 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.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.



Anna Carter Florence, a preaching professor, once said, “If people in the pews aren’t regularly yelling, “nonsense!” we may not be preaching the fullness of the gospel.” In the clip we just saw, the preacher speaks justice. The church affirms, “Amen!” He preaches change is coming. Again, “Amen!” He says God blesses those who are persecuted because they are living for God and the church nods in agreement. But then the Holy Spirit temperature drops when he preaches equal freedom for gay friends. Arms fold over. People start clearing their throats. Perhaps the professor’s words are true: “If people in the pews aren’t regularly yelling, “nonsense!” we may not be preaching the fullness of the gospel.”

Let's begin by confessing that the good news challenges us. It challenges our understanding of who is "in" and who is "out." It challenges our understanding of who and what and how God is. It calls into question our priorities and confronts our self-interest. Recently, a struggling church had received a large endowment. Over the years the church has been getting grayer, poorer, smaller. So the money became a game changer. The church leaders met to decide what to do with the money and we can imagine how it went. They make a list of all the things they need. Each one feels strongly about which priority belongs on top. But then they decide to open up their bibles. They happened to turn to the Sermon on the Mount and read: "Where your treasure is there is also your heart. You cannot serve both God and wealth."

"Good reminder, they said, but the parking lot could really use a repaving, and the choir could use some new choir robes; so let's see what else the bible says."

So they flip to Luke 18:22 where Jesus says, "Sell everything and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven." The leaders look at their long list; then they look at each other, "Let's go ahead and see what the Old Testament has to say." Yes, the good news includes us and comforts us, but it also confronts us: our priorities, our politics, our own limited perspectives.

As Jesus preaches, we watch as he goes from hero to zero. Oh, the sermon starts out inspirational: "I'm preaching good news to the poor!" Well 95% of the people in the room are poor. "Amen," they shout.

"I'm here to release the captives!" They shout, "Amen"—100% of them are under the smelly big toe of Roman occupation. In response, they pour out the accolades: "You knocked that one out of the park, Jesus!"

"Good first sermon! Your father would be proud!"

They even say, "Your words have shown us God's favor." Translation: we are the "in" crowd you were speaking about.

Now, part of me wishes Jesus would've quit while he was ahead. But he can't because their understanding of the good news is too narrow. So he retorts, "No doubt you'll want me to take care of our own people first. But, historically, a prophet has had a hometown disadvantage." That's strike one. And if he stopped there, the congregation probably would've forgiven him. But still, Jesus keeps pressing: "Lots of Jewish widows could've used a meal during the great famine, but who did God choose to feed? Not the insider, but the outsider." In the company of a patriarchal and nationalistic audience, that's strike two. And I wish he would've just stopped there. After all, we get the point. But then Jesus turns political: "There were many sick people in Israel, but God chose to heal Naaman the five-star *general of the enemy's army*." Three strikes and you're out. I wish Jesus had simply let it go, but he couldn't. Their understanding of the gospel was too narrow.

Well, what are we to do with the disruption of the gospel? What do we do with the holy agitation that stretches us? Do we reject it? Do we embrace it? Do we sit with it, allowing the gospel to work on us? Someone once said that, "The church is the only cooperative society that [primarily] exists for the benefit of its non-members." If our understanding of the church is that we take care of our own first, and then others second, we have to sit with the agitation that we might be doing things backwards, do we not?

I remember when the gospel really agitated me once. It happened to me in a seminary class, when we were forced to watch the old movie, *Places in the Heart*. In the movie's final scene, just before the church takes communion, the minister opens the bible and reads from 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong. If I have prophetic powers, have attained all mysteries and knowledge, and have all faith, but do not have love, I am nothing." As the minister is speaking the words a woman who just learned of her husband's adulterous affair reaches over and touches his hand. Well, just then someone in our class stood up and stormed out of the room, because she had just learned that her partner had cheated on her. Under her breath you could hear, "That's nonsense!" (I'm cleaning up the language, of course.)

Then, in the movie, the congregation starts distributing the bread and the cup around, just like we do here. Suddenly we see that communion is being passed around not only to the congregants, but to *all the characters* we've seen throughout the film. The elements are given to the heartless banker who tried to foreclose on a young widow. Except, just as this happened someone else in the class reacted because they had just lost their house to a bank in a foreclosure. So he pounded his fist on the desk and said, "That's nonsense!"

Then the elements were passed around until they were offered to white man who lynched a young black boy after he accidentally shot the town sheriff. I could feel the agitation quivering inside of me until communion came to the sheriff who was killed, who then passes the bread and cup to the young black boy who accidentally shot him. "The peace of Christ," he says. "The peace of Christ," the young black child responds. It was then the insult of the gospel welled up inside of me and I wanted to yell, "That's nonsense!"

Because it is.

The gospel insults our notions of who belongs at the table. It confronts the barriers we set up internally or externally. Yes, it agitates. Yes, it makes us angry. But it is the stuff of the gospel: where love overcomes hate. Where life conquers death. Where peace overwhelms violence. Where God's welcome circle gets drawn wider and wider until there is room enough for everyone.