

SERMON
4th Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 4
January 31, 2010

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace, from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Father Gerry Pierse was a parish priest and seminary professor who served most of his life in the Philippines. He was also a well loved author of many devotional books and articles. He died on July 12, 1999 from a tragic swimming accident in Queensland, Australia. His body was found on the rocks of the Gold Coast.

Before his untimely death, he had been writing reflections on the Gospel readings that were prescribed for the lectionary. The one for today's reading was entitled; "He Broke All of the Rules". I would like to share with you a portion of his reflection. Pierse writes:

"Recently, I had a wonderful evening with a former student of mine. He was no longer the grubby, demure, T-Shirted little boy of the 1960's.

He had become a 'successful' businessman, one of those constructing new buildings in different cities of the Philippines. During our meal he told me the rules for getting ahead that he had learned in business school, but even more so from the University of Life – the rat race world.

'First of all', he said, 'you make the impression that you are rich, famous and successful. You must dress snappy and look the part. Have all the paraphernalia of progress hanging out of you, a beeper in your top pocket, a cellular phone on your belt, and an electronic organizer in your clutch bag embossed with an impressive logo.

Remember, nearly everybody is taken in by appearances; they always trust their first impressions. People DO judge a book by its cover and they judge you in the same way.’

‘The second important rule is that you never start your campaign in your home area. Avoid your own family, neighborhood and friends. They know you and your weaknesses and the weaknesses of your family. If you have any success, they will be the first to get jealous and pull you down.

Your home place is like crabs in a pot. There is no need to put a lid on it. The crabs pull down anyone who wants to escape. No, it is far better to begin with total strangers, and if you have a Stateside accent, it helps.’

‘The third important thing is not to upset people. Sell yourself by telling them what they want to hear. Be like the politicians who make surveys to find out what people feel and what they want. Then they get speech writers to find witty ways of promising the people the nice things that they want to hear. Flattery lubricates life and pays big dividends.

Do not forget a word or two also about their loved ones, especially if they have died. People love hearing their dead relatives – who are no longer a threat – praised. It makes them think that excellence was hereditary and that brilliance was bred in their family.’

‘Lastly, do not put yourself on the line. Do not say that you are going to do something. Just make promises, paint a bright picture of the future, distract people from the present. What people want is illusion, not the hard facts of reality. Better still, give them a scapegoat.

Tell them that some other group is responsible for their problems. The worst thing is to tell people what they do not want to hear; like that they should be responsible, sacrifice for others, or limit their own lifestyles.’”

Pierce continues; “After this entertaining evening, I went home to read the Gospel and prepare for this reflection. Poor Jesus didn’t have a chance! He broke all the rules.”

Our Gospel story today is a continuation of last week's story. Remember Jesus had gone into the temple in his home town of Nazareth. He then was handed a scroll where he read a different passage than the reading prescribed for the day. Then he concluded by saying; "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's where we begin this morning. At first, the people are excited. "Hey, is this not Joseph's son?" This was an expression of amazement that the hometown kid had done well. This was their "homeboy!" At last, there was somebody that Nazareth could be proud of.

They had heard of all of the things he had been doing in other towns; feeding the hungry, healing the sick, casting out demons, giving sight to the blind... Now they thought it was their turn. Finally, Jesus has come back home to his own people.

Perhaps some of you grew up in small towns. You might know how it feels. Maybe someone from your town made it big in Hollywood. Perhaps someone became a famous athlete. Maybe a person from your town wrote a best-selling book or became a renowned scientist. It kind of makes you feel proud. You might even go around saying "Yeah, I knew so-and-so when I was growing up."

I know that I do that. One of my hometown boys was the singer "Prince". I would say; "Yeah Prince and I used to hang out at First Ave. We were cool!" Perhaps a little exaggerated, but sometimes you have to do that to enhance the story. You want to make it look like you are a happening kind of guy because of who you know. I would guess that this is what it was like that day in Nazareth.

But soon the excitement and amazement turned to resentment and anger. Jesus 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.'"

In other words, the people of his hometown were willing to accept Jesus, but only on their own terms.

They would welcome him for what he could do for them, for the personal advantage that they can claim and enjoy because he is one of them. They respond as those who see the needs of the world through the lens of their own personal and local needs. They tend to reduce all the problems of the world into their own problems.

We can almost hear them; “Why, yes, we have blind people here in Nazareth. We are all poor and need good news. Yes, there are people here that need to be freed from various things that they are in bondage to. We are oppressed and carry heavy burdens! Yes, we want the year of the Lord’s favor, because we want the release from debts and taxes that it might bring. Yes, we welcome this future that will bring us all we want! Amen!

Gracious words! Welcome home, kid! Do it here in your own hometown!

But that is not the future Jesus is bringing! Instead, he begins by casting himself in a different role than the miracle worker about which they have heard. He takes to himself the identity of a prophet. And as soon as Jesus identified himself in a prophetic role, he would no longer be accepted with favor.

For now he stood before the people of Nazareth, not as the hometown boy who had returned to shower his kinsmen and friends with favors, but as a prophet of God come to call them to be servants, to be light to the whole world.

And the people of Nazareth would rather kill Jesus than share him with others. For they had still not learned from their history the nature of God whom they served, and so on this occasion were ready to kill his son.

The story reads: “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.”

Why did they do this? They drove him out because he not only had dared to share the good news with others outside of their community, but he had brought them face to face with their own narrowness and closed future.

The famous theologian Soren Kierkegaard noted that many great minds of his century had given themselves to making people's lives easier – inventing labor-saving machines and devices. He said that he would dedicate himself to making people's lives more difficult. He would become a preacher.

Stanley Hauerwas is Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University. Recently he was conducting a seminar for preachers when one pastor said; “The Bishop sent me to a little town in South Carolina. I preached one Sunday on the challenge of racial justice. In two months my people were so angry that the bishop moved me to another congregation.

At this congregation, I was determined for things to go better. I didn't preach about race at all. But one day there was an incident in town, and I felt compelled to speak out.

The congregational board met that week and voted unanimously for us to be moved. My wife was insulted at the supermarket. My children were beaten up on the school playground.”

Hauerwas stared at him for the longest time. Then he replied; “And your point is what? We work for the living God, not a false, dead god! Did somebody tell you it would be easy?”

At this time, I would like to get a bit personal. I have been here at Atascocita Lutheran Church for almost nine years. Atascocita has become my “hometown.” My family and I have made some good friends during our time here.

We have also lost some good friends, many of them because of what I have said from this very pulpit. And I can't tell you how painful that has been, and how much that saddens me.

It would be so tempting for me to just make everyone happy – to just say what people want to hear. I confess that there are times when I have done that. But there have also been times when I have tried the best I can to be a prophetic voice that speaks the words that are unfortunately sometimes hard to hear. They are words that challenge. They are words of change – words that suggest that God is doing something new and different in the lives of the people.

And there have been people who have said; “Isn’t that Gary? We know him. We socialize with him – we see him at the grocery store – he hangs out at the gym (okay, he doesn’t hang out at the gym as much as he should). He is one of us. Who is he to say those kind of things. That’s just his opinion. He has no authority to say those things!

But the words I speak are not words of condemnation. They are words of inclusion. They speak of God’s inclusiveness. They speak against the “country club” mentality that says that WE have the corner on God’s love and grace. They speak of God’s love for all people, not just a chosen few.

This is why the people of Nazareth led Jesus to the edge of a cliff with the intent of killing him. It wasn’t because he condemned his hometown people. It was because he told them that they were not in any way favored by God over and above anyone else.

And this is the good news that is so hard for some people to hear, even in our day. God does not favor the good folks here at Atascocita Lutheran Church. God does not favor any particular race or tribe. God does not favor the United States of America. For God does not play favorites. Rather, God’s love and grace are universal. God’s favor is bestowed upon all of God’s creation.

So let this be good news to all of us. Let us receive God’s love with grace and humility. And then let us share this love within our families, our communities, and indeed throughout the world. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.