

Jeremiah 1: 4-10
I Corinthians 13: 1-13
Luke 4: 21-30

Rejoicing in the Truth
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A folktale from the Native American tradition:

One evening, an elderly Cherokee man told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, faith, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and peace." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf will win?" The old man simply replied, "The one that you feed."

Over the centuries, we have "fed the wolf" – fed one wolf or the other – with stories and sacred writings. People have used the Bible to hurt, exclude, or enslave others. They have used certain verses to justify war and persecution. Others have used words from the Bible to learn more about justice and compassion and peace. The fact is, you can pull almost anything you want out of our Scriptures to construct yourself a world that justifies your own point of view and feeds a wolf.

Someday I'd like to do a study of what is left *out* when Jesus quotes Scripture to his audience. He often quotes the Psalms, it seems: the Psalms would have been his prayer book. And he quotes from the Torah, the law, from time to time. And he quotes from the prophets, especially Isaiah, as he did in his home synagogue in Nazareth – I believe that last week those beautiful words were read here:

"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." And he sat down, as we read today. What he did not do was finish the reading. It *should* end, Isaiah ends with, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus was announcing a new era, a year of jubilee and liberation, and he does this by leaving out certain words. I wonder if this was Jesus' way of interpreting and disagreeing with Isaiah: his way of saying, "We have labeled God as a vengeful God out of human sin. But let me tell you something about this God, and about the ways we misunderstand mercy."

At first, this seems fine with the folks at the synagogue. This well-spoken man is offering them a wonderful gift, right here in his hometown. They claim him as a local celebrity: "Is not this Joseph's son?" But Jesus hears this question as a grasping claim: "We know you, we own you, and we expect that you will make us proud. As long as you keep preaching that we deserve all these great things. A few miracles wouldn't hurt either."

This is where Jesus launches into a harsher kind of preaching and claims the title of prophet. He reminds them of their own history: God does not limit mercy to insiders, but delights in generosity to the outsiders. I think that Desmond Tutu was describing this when he said, "We may

be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."

And the good people of Nazareth couldn't take it: they could not feed this wolf. They refused to renounce their possessive feelings about God. And this wolf erupted into anger against the former favorite son. It is clear that Jesus sometimes went out of his way to make people uncomfortable and angry, as he does in this story. Some people believed that he was one of the ancient prophets come back to life. In Matthew's Gospel, we hear that some people thought he was Jeremiah himself.

To us, though, Jesus was more than a prophet. After this early sermon in Nazareth, his ministry encompasses so much more than words. When we continue to read, we find healing, friendships, examples of a new way to live and a new meaning of death. We see divine grace reflected in this life. We look to Jesus for hope and inspiration in a way that we look to no other person in the Bible. We look for ways to live in community that reaches beyond the borders of a hometown or a home country. We look for ways to step out of our own narrow world of self-interest. Jesus gives us a new framework with which to look at the world and a new way to hear God speak.

At the risk of seeming to simplify this too much, we might call this a framework of love. This is not a soft, sentimental love, but a hard and challenging love that can only be realized in community. And so we come to the 13th chapter of I Corinthians, written a generation after Jesus escaped from his hometown. The Apostle Paul is desperately trying to convince the Corinthian church to turn away from arrogance and envy and wrangling so that the liberating gifts of God can blossom and bear fruit. Their community needs a slap upside the head, so Paul wrote the love chapter.

As I said, this is not soft or sentimental or static. In the middle of the chapter there are 16 verbs in a row that describe the action of love: "love shows patience, love acts with kindness, etc.'" This is something so vibrant and busy that it cannot stop finding ways to express the expansive love God is always giving.

This chapter also lists the things that are worthless without the framework of love, the ears of love, the voice of love: things like eloquence, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity and self-sacrifice. It's a bit difficult to hear all those things described as worthless, isn't it? In fact, they are all qualities and actions Jesus displayed in his ministry. The key was that he loved people, all kinds of people. He loved the ones he healed, the ones he criticized, and the ones who hurt him. He loved them enough to tell them when they were wrong; he loved them enough to teach them how to expand their horizons. It is that union of love and challenge that makes it so difficult to be - or to hear - a prophet in the footsteps of Jesus. Wouldn't it be nice if there were neater categories, like those partial categories Paul spoke of? We would rather be a community of either prophets **or** healers. We are very aware of our limitations of energy and insight. Paul wrote, "For now we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." We are working towards that goal of completeness we find in Jesus.

Once in a while I like to read contemporary translations of Scripture – either to see what is left out or what is illuminated by a different word. Here is how Eugene Paterson translates the end of the chapter: "We do not yet see things clearly. We are squinting in a fog, peering through the

mist, but it will not be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright. We will see it all then, see as clearly as God sees us, knowing God as directly as God knows us. But for right now, until that completeness comes, we have three things to do. Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly."

Beautiful as faith, hope and love are, I repeat my earlier words: this is hard and challenging. It calls for a sacrificial spirit and an honest look at our tendencies to privilege ourselves and exclude others, our tendencies to be either clanging cymbals or shrinking violets. If we allow this chapter about love to remain a comfortable and romantic poem, we will have missed the call and the promise of Jesus. Jesus, who spoke words that made people want to kill him. Jesus, who spoke consolingly to people beaten down with trouble. Jesus, whose faith, hope and love led him to the courts of an oppressive empire to speak the truth and die.

Fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King said that "the judgment of God is on the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century." Or, I might add, for the 21st century either. And some would say that this has already happened: that we have forfeited the loyalty of millions by our timidity.

I have faith in and hope for, and love for, this congregation of God's people. I have faith that we can crack open the ancient categories of privilege and power to share a jubilee proclamation for all people. I have hope that we can discover our gifts in community. And I have love for a people who follow that prophet away from the hometown, away from the cliff and out into a future of healing and grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.