

TEXT: Luke 4:21-30
THEME: All are chosen by God
SUBJECT: Privilege
TITLE: Bringing It Home

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
03 February 2019
Messiah Moravian
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A small church related college had an annual event called Christian Emphasis Week. The student Christian group would invite a speaker to campus, who would preach several times and have discussions with the students, all aimed at deepening faith and creating a mood of religious revival.

One year the students at this college got more than they bargained for. They invited a speaker none of them had heard, but who had a reputation for being dynamic and exciting. On the first night of the special week, the campus chapel was filled with the faithful. Of course, the impious, the jocks, the Greeks, stayed away. This was, after all, an occasion for religious insiders, for the truly Christian.

The speaker began by opening the Bible and reading the selected text. When he finished, he closed the Bible and then suddenly flung it across the stage and out an open window. The students sat in stunned silence.

Were their eyes playing tricks on them? Did the preacher really throw the Bible out a window? The preacher looked at them and said, "There goes your God." He proceeded to preach a challenging sermon on the difference between worshipping the Bible and worshipping the God revealed in Scripture.

Jesus left home to begin his ministry and garnered a reputation as a dynamic preacher, a wisdom teacher and a healer. In his very first sermon to the people who watched him grow from childhood through adolescence into adulthood, Jesus throws his neighbor's understanding of God out the synagogue window.

At the outset of this service, all seemed normal. Jesus is handed a scroll containing the words of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus finds the text he wants, not the one the lectionary assigned, and reads:

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.

Then Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At first the congregation responds warm heartedly, enthusiastically. "Good sermon!" "Beautiful!" Heads nodded as people whispered their approval and appreciation, proud of their hometown boy and his eloquence.

Then questions began to arise in the minds of the hearers. If Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled today, why is everything the same? Why hasn't anything dramatic happened here in Nazareth, like we heard happened in Capernaum? We have only heard words but seen no deeds of power.

This is when Jesus gets testy. Many widows in Israel were starving when Elijah was sent to a widow of Sidon, a Canaanite town about 40 miles south of Beirut. The Canaanites, you will remember, were the people the Jews drove out in order to occupy the Promised Land. It is as if Jesus told his neighbors God favored the displaced Palestinians over the State of Israel.

As if this were not sufficient provocation to lose his shine, Jesus pokes a stick in the other eye. Many lepers in Israel needed cleansing, healing, but Elisha was sent only to Naaman the Syrian. Syria, the sworn enemy of Israel, receives preferential care. The point of the sermon sinks in and the proud and admiring congregation becomes an enraged mob bent on murder.

Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," pictures Ruby Turpin sitting in a doctor's waiting room, evaluating each person seated around her. Ruby judges herself superior, by more than a grade or two, to everyone else, especially to a poor, unkempt, teenage wretch seated across from her reading a book. Ruby thinks it sad the girl's parents did not groom her more attractively. Perish the thought of having a child as scowling as she.

The scowling child, Mary Grace (note the name), listens as Ruby chatters on about the superiority of poor blacks over "white trash." Without warning, Mary Grace fixes her steely eyes on Ruby and hurls her book across the room. (Ms O'Connor does not tell us what book Mary Grace is reading, but I like to think of it as a hard bound copy of *War and Peace*.) The book hits Ruby in the head and she falls to the floor with Mary Grace on top of her hissing into her ear, "Go back to hell where you come from, you old wart hog!"

This, says Flannery O'Connor, is the violent, shocking beginning of Ruby's redemption, the catalyst for her repentance and her heavenly vision. This is what is popularly called being woke. What the guest preacher does by throwing the Bible out the widow, what Mary Grace does by throwing her book at Ruby, what Jesus does by throwing the prophets at his neighbors is to shock and awaken them and us.

The truth is, Jesus says, many widows in Israel remained hungry while Elijah was sent to a Canaanite widow. Paul says love rejoices in the truth. Jesus' neighbors do not rejoice, but try to kill the truth teller.

Our response to hearing the truth, to being woke, reveals whether we are ruled by love or governed by fear. Fear reacts violently to the truth; love rejoices in the truth.

