

Do you recall a commercial from 20 years ago of a young man traveling to all manner of different places to verify "CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW" "CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?" Our message this morning is as old as the mountains, not only 20 years ago but 2000. The Word of God has been in mouths since before time: NOTHING makes sense without love.

Two weeks ago, we demonstrated that according to John, Jesus' first sign of the love of God was transforming water into wine, NOT to demonstrate a miracle, but A SUPERABUNDANT MIRACOLE. The Gospel of Luke begins differently, after the stories of Jesus' birth, his baptism at age 30, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth to preach his first sermon.

Imagine the talk of the town... "The Carpenter, Joseph's son is coming home" which was quite a statement because Jesus was usually described as without a father.

"You know he is coming to Synagogue and invited to preach this weekend?" "Mary must be so proud!"

"Mary, so little ever happens in Nazareth the whole town is proud!"

Everyone in town is there. Jesus' Second grade teacher. Mary's Next-door neighbors. The girl Next-door who had a crush on Jesus in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Their own child now a grown man, baptized, a Rabbi walks into the Sanctuary commanding reverence. Standing before the assembled congregation, Jesus is handed the scroll appointed for this day, which suitable to the occasion is from the High Priest and Prophet Isaiah. In a clear, strong voice, Jesus reads in Hebrew

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."**

What is the most important idea in that sentence? In Hebrew the phrase "The Lord's Anointed" is pronounced "MESSIAH"! and he went on

**"The Lord has sent me to proclaim liberty for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, to set free the oppressed, and declare the year of the Lord's Jubilee!"**

Jesus sat on the Preacher's bench, as Rabbi's did to teach, and you could hear a pin drop, when Jesus pronounced:

**"TODAY, this Scripture is fulfilled, in your hearing!"** The whole Congregation would have erupted in applause, stomping their feet and cheering. His opening Kick-off was a Field Goal! Rather than a boring sermon of Generations ago, or a promise of Some day after the resurrection, Jesus said GOD sent me as MESSIAH to say TODAY!

HOWEVER, Having set them up, Jesus then pulled the rug out from beneath their feet! Jesus does not offer to serve as their Golden Goose, the Genie fulfilling their wishes: Liberating Nazareth from Captivity, Giving sight to their blind, repaying all their debt; instead, more shameful than his promising to do nothing, Jesus interpreted this passage in the CONTEXT of the whole of the Old Testament.

In the Days of Elijah, when there was drought and famine for more than 40 months, there were Widows throughout Galilee, and the Prophet was sent to none of them. The Lord sent Elijah to the Widow of Zarapheth in the Nation of Sidon!

As the plague of Leprosy scourged the people of Israel in the time of the Prophet Elisha, none of them were cured, only Naaman the General of the Syrian Army!

The people of Nazareth were outraged incensed, because instead of promising hope to Israel, he pledged to love their enemies. And they took him to a high cliff, meaning to throw him off... Now over the years, I know I have had a couple of sermons that have fallen flat, even bombed. Sermons that you receive nasty emails or visits about, but no one ever attempted to throw me off of a cliff...

Do you recall, according to Luke, what happened immediately before this? after Jesus' Baptism and

before his sermon? Among the temptations, the Devil ordered Jesus to change stones into bread to satisfy the people; The Devil took him to the top of the Temple at Jerusalem inviting Jesus to throw himself off because God's angels would protect him; The Devil took Jesus to a high mountain, showing him all the kingdoms of the earth as an inheritance... How similar this seems to the people not getting what they want, so attempting to throw Jesus off a High Cliff no longer in a spiritual vision but before his own home town, but Jesus walked away.

Speaking with Itinerating Missionaries David and Pam last Sunday, we discovered we both had each gone from Milwaukee to what was then the Soviet Union in the 1980s. For me, to learn firsthand about the existing Church which had been underground for 70 years: for him to evangelize people there to convert to Western Christianity. However, both of us agreed, we had not gone to the Soviet Union to adopt Communism or to befriend Russians, Russians had been an United States enemy throughout the Cold War.

I wish David had used his presentation at the Sunday Afternoon Openhouse on Sunday morning, because rather than emphasizing conversion of Muslims to Christianity, what he described were the number of high ranking officials and Military, to whom he has ministered as Undisclosed Christians. Since the late 1980s, the Berlin Wall has come down, Soviet-block nations have been dispersed, and more recently there are fears over what Russia will do to Ukraine. What do we say to enemies? Is it different from those we love?

In his poem "Mending Wall" sometimes called "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors" Robert Frost describes how many of us put up walls both to keep others out and keep our stuff protected, describing "The fruit of my trees, are never going to come into your yard to steal your pine cones! So why do we need a wall?" He questions whether God, Nature, the Holy Spirit does not like walls, eroding the labor of our building walls. So possibly to question: If Good fences really do make good neighbors, or maybe If good neighbors need no fences or walls...

As a student of Human Conflict, I have been intrigued, because at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it seemed as though we in North America had outlasted the concept of enemies, we are the last of the Super-powers, with a strong market economy. Yet over the last two decades our unwillingness to listen has made enemies of one another, has built barriers of silence between us.

Instead of our beginning point being that conflict is neither good or bad / we just disagree; in the world today we live in constant competition: for driving, for parking, for who will be first in line at CVS, for groceries and distilled water before it all runs out, which quickly escalates into anger. Who will have to die, what will need to happen, for us to listen to the word we already know, for us to care about the blindness and captivity of others?

If you have ever gone to a wedding, you have probably heard this passage from Corinthians. In the Comedy "Wedding Crashers" one turns to his neighbor whispering "I bet you \$20 the reading is 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. I have officiated at enough weddings, I can quote Paul without the script. Yet, it was not written for weddings at all, Paul was writing to a Christian Church community much like us.

At one point I used a King James Version for a wedding, and discovered that instead of the word "love" they had translated Paul's intent as "Compassion" so I looked for the root word Paul had used, and it was "WOMB" which was surprising, until we recognize that LOVE, having COMPASSION for others "Gives Birth" to what otherwise never would have been. There is a life-giving quality to this kind of Love.

Lonni Collins Pratt is author of a book called Radical Hospitality, in which she shares the story, that she and her husband lived across the road from an abandoned old log cabin. But then someone moved in. Her husband was more outgoing than she, so went over to visit with the new owner, and returned stating what a nice man their new neighbor was and his grand plans for renovating the scary old house.

A few weeks later, her husband was on a business trip, when in the middle of the night she heard screaming coming from the log cabin. She sat bolt upright in bed, because it was the kind of adult scream that makes you want to hide in the corner. As the scream began to fade, she went back to bed, but had a hard time sleeping. The next day was a cool late-January morning, so she made some Chili and a pie, and took these over to check on the neighbor. As she met the man for the first time, he looked to her a little like Willie Nelson, as if like a horse he had been ridden hard and put away wet. Over lunch, he spoke about his life, how much he enjoyed bringing back houses to something other people would want to live in as their forever home. He moved around a great deal, which meant he had few friends, but it was okay. Then he disclosed he suffered from severe depression, which was hard to claw his way out of. BECAUSE LONNI LISTENED DEEPLY< SHE HEARD THE THINGS HE SAID ALTHOUGH HE HAD NEVER REALLY USED WORDS.

What he really expressed was “I hope you can tolerate this season of screaming pain from a man who will eventually move along. Share this season with me, knowing one day the house will be better for it, and someone will move in who will have a forever home. For just now, I appreciate the fact that you would be willing to smile at a neighbor the morning after you probably heard him scream and cry at night.

Lonni said “When you really listen to someone scream against the darkness, you are never the same anymore. Listening is the beginning of hearing that opens us to understanding, and understanding is opening to the love described here by Paul.