

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

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

Has anyone here today ever met a Lottery winner? It is quite an exciting thing when a lottery winner is from our hometown, bought their ticket from our favorite corner store, or is a member of our family. It's as if we get to share in their good fortune just by being near them. We are proud of this person, until we find out that they aren't planning on sharing any of their good fortune with us. Or maybe they are sharing a little bit, but are giving more to another person, or charity. Then what?

One person's fortune, can turn someone else into a jealous, scheming, sometimes tortured mess. This doesn't just go for lottery winners, but also for any kind of joy that someone else has. Maybe a co-worker gets the promotion we were striving and hoping for. Maybe the couple next door has no trouble having children, while you and your spouse have been trying for years. Maybe a close friend gets on the sports team that we desperately wanted to get on as well, but didn't. We can't help but criticize the other person in our minds, and close our hearts off to shared joy, or a widened vision of blessing. It's human nature and, as most of us likely know, it is difficult not to be jealous when these things happen.

When Jesus came to His hometown of Nazareth and began to teach, the local Jewish community was quite proud of Him.

After all, they had heard of the things that He had done at Capernaum, and were convinced that He was some sort of

prophet from God. They believed that Jesus had just won the lottery, so to speak, and was about to shower them with God's favor because, after all, He was one of them, so of course that is what He would do. Besides, they agreed with what He was saying, at least at first. But as long as they were pleased, they were proud, and they wanted to take pride in the light of special favor from God.

Then Jesus starts talking about the blessing going, not to those in His community, but further abroad, to the Gentiles. He uses stories of Elijah and Elisha, where God healed, and included, people that were not part of the Jewish faith. He teaches that God's gift of His grace is more inclusive and abundant than the covenant that the people in the synagogue believed God had made only with them. With this, everything changes.

Isn't it interesting how the mind can turn quickly when we do not agree with someone. We may feel that a member of the clergy, a boss, a political leader, a teacher, or a friend is wonderful, until they say, or do, something that isn't exactly what we believe. Then we are shocked, or angry. After all, we like to get together with like-minded people, because it feels good to be part of a group that we understand, and that we think understands us as well. When someone who we feel belongs to us says something contrary, or challenges the current status, we are often quick to turn on him or her. It is one thing for an outsider to say, or do, something we don't agree with, but it's a completely different game when it is one of our own.

This is where we find Jesus in our Gospel story today. When the inclusive nature of Jesus' message became clear to those in His home congregation, their commitment to their own community, and the boundaries they erected, overtook the joy that they initially had in receiving a prophet of God in their midst. They

were blinded by what they saw as unfair treatment, and did not want to accept that God's grace is not subject to their lists of who is in, and who is out. God's grace cannot overcome our human desire to be special and it often brings us to the point where we are simply unable to receive it for ourselves. Thus begins a vicious cycle: if we are unable to receive such grace, how can we share it with others? We can't.

There is a message of warning for us from those at Jesus' hometown synagogue. They were so focused on what they believed God's blessing should look like, just for them, that they missed the opportunity of grace that Jesus was bearing. The Gospel says that they "were filled with rage" and "drove him out of town". How dare Jesus tell them who should be included?

How dare Jesus tell us?

Part of becoming a mature Christian, is learning how to put our boundaries, and expectations aside, in order to listen to what God has to say to us. This is difficult work, and a lifelong process.

In the Epistle reading today, the St. Paul is encouraging the churches in Corinth to love in the radical way that Jesus teaches.

They are caught up in a conflict around what spiritual gifts are the greatest. To help them understand, Paul writes to them of love and spiritual maturity. He compares the growth of our hearts to the growth in our life cycle, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways". We know that when we are children, we have a narrow view of the world. It is always about us, and what is in our immediate surroundings. As we grow into adulthood, and experience more of life, we understand how big the world is. As we mature as Christians, we understand more fully what grace is, and it

continues to widen our hearts through love.

Being a Christian isn't easy. Neither Jesus, nor Paul, ever tell us that it is. It requires a commitment from us, as it says in our Book of Common Prayer's Catechism: "The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God". This is a full-time job that shapes our lives. It calls us to live, to die to ourselves, and be resurrected with Jesus, over, and over, and over, again. Each time we are resurrected with Jesus, our hearts get a little wider, we know grace that much more deeply, and we are able to follow Jesus a little bit more down the road of love.

When Jesus speaks to His hometown synagogue, He's speaking to our hometown church gathered here today. Paul echoes Jesus' message, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love". What does God's love look like in our church? Let us open the ears of our heart to listen for it, and walk in grace to find out.

AMEN.