

“The Acute Phase”  
EpiphanyC-04 – January 31, 2010

Preaching Text: *“When they heard [Jesus’ words], all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” (Luke 4:28)*

Tough love. That just may be what’s happening here as Jesus speaks in his boyhood place of worship.

As we noted last week, it is also the climax of his auspicious return after embarking on a widely-acclaimed preaching, teaching and healing tour in and around the region of Galilee<sup>909</sup>. Curiosity has piqued in the old neighborhood, as those who’ve known him since his youth find themselves intrigued, if not stunned, by his sudden notoriety.

As worshippers settle into their familiar “pews,” all eyes are fixed upon him as he begins to read from scripture, from the Book of Isaiah. Then, sitting down, the customary posture for Jewish preachers, he dazzles them with his depth of understanding, his “gracious words.”

Even after he risks the seemingly blasphemous admission that he’s the long-expected Messiah, the very one Isaiah’s words foretell, the folks just can’t say enough about him. Maybe, they assume, he’s indulging in a bit of rhetorical hyperbole. But never mind. They are smitten. It’s a simple case of hometown boy making good and in the process bringing great honor to town and synagogue, even if it’s all a bit surprising for most.

But then things take a sudden, ugly turn. Responding to his hearers’ request that he perform the same miracles and cures they’d heard so much about from the surrounding communities, he flatly refuses.

And he doesn’t just refuse, which is bad enough. He insults them to boot!

How? By reminding them of days past, when the ancient prophets Elijah and Elisha refused to heal members of the Jewish faith community, but did cure some of the hated outliers, the Gentiles. One can almost feel the unease turning to anger as it ripples through the stunned assembly.

The unwelcome implication, of course, is that no miracles or cures can be performed because these holy and faithful worshippers are

spiritually lacking. It is their faith/essness that is at issue. Yet their despised Gentile lessers, religiously impure and culturally inferior, somehow *are* deserving? This is simply beyond the pale.

So the crowd, in full-throated rage, proceeds to chase Jesus, the erstwhile golden boy, out to the edge of town, and even tries shoving him off a cliff!

Family therapists might explain this sudden, murderous rage as symptomatic of what is called the “acute phase,” whereby a family or group reacts sharply to someone within its ranks attempting to break out of its self-understanding.

As the person begins to “individuate,” to think and act in ways contrary to the group’s prevailing norms and expectations, the system fights back. It tries, often in dramatic ways, to reassert the equilibrium that’s been momentarily lost. The renegade member has disturbed the group’s homeostasis and either must be “repatriated” or expelled.

It is no accident Luke inserts this story at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. This violent rejection of his message in a place one would have assumed would offer its fairest hearing – here in his hometown among his closest friends – not only underscores the discomfiting nature of his message, but anticipates Golgotha as well.

At a minimum, this suggests that people don’t like his message, in part because it doesn’t fit conventional wisdom, cultural or religious.

Years ago, I occasionally would listen to a business program on NPR, not because I’m terribly interested in business, though I probably should be, but because it was the only thing on the radio dial as I drove to and from church for night meetings. What I remember most about the show was something the host often would say. “Sacred cows,” he would intone, “make better burgers.”

Clever, right? A more clever way of saying, I suppose, “Think outside the box.” It got my attention, yet it begs the question, Is such a statement true?

The assumption behind it is that there is such a thing as “conventional wisdom” and that that wisdom often is in error. We get to thinking in a certain way, individually and as a group, and no longer remember why we think the way we do, if ever we did.

It's just a perspective *from which* we think. Which, if you stop to think about it, is just another way of saying "prejudice," as in "*pre-judging*" how we see the world. And such pre-judging blinds us from seeing clearly what is right in front of our eyes.

The faithful in Nazareth miss the powerful new thing God is doing in their midst precisely because they no longer expect anything new, because they no longer are open to anything new.

But conventional wisdom is a funny thing. It's conventional because it's commonly accepted. And what is commonly accepted can be, by definition, almost impossible to recognize, exactly because its given-ness is so universally assumed!

The faithful in Nazareth wouldn't have thought their reaction to Jesus was based on conventional wisdom, far from it, but instead from true discernment and godly insight.

So let me ask you. What conventional wisdom do you employ? And are you even aware that you employ it?

In order for these questions to be meaningful, we have to put ourselves in the shoes of those listening to Jesus' words. It is one thing to consider the conventional wisdom of the past, from the safety of the present.

No doubt those in the synagogue that day had heard the stories of Elijah's and Elisha's ministry to the Gentiles countless times before, with nary a controversy. Yet when Jesus applies these stories to *their* lives, in the here-and-now, all bets are off.

One of the temptations of every age is to assume that contemporary thinking is devoid of error, as opposed to the obvious blunders of the past. We pride ourselves on being free of bias, misjudgment, even prejudice, be it religious, cultural or otherwise.

But the tenacity with which the worshippers reacted to Jesus that day suggests, to me at least, that he had struck a real chord. He had the audacity to point out their flaws, and they reacted not so much because they knew they were wrong, but because they thought they were right! Alas, we are no different with our own time-bound biases and prejudices.

This, of course, does not mean that everything we think we know is wrong, or that there aren't timeless truths we would do well to embrace.

It's just that we should take great care in seeking to discern God's truth, even as we are to take care in the way we seek to apply that truth.

From Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, we read chapter 13, the "love psalm." It is read frequently at weddings and is among the loftiest words in scripture.

But love, we know, requires careful discernment, particularly as we apply it to our families, our friends, our world. For knowing how best to love someone is not always easy. A child may know love to mean one thing, while adults may understand it to be something else altogether.

In Luke, Jesus exhibits a form of love his listeners reject as hostile and uncaring. Yet God's love often demands that we move beyond our comfort zone, beyond the conventions of our day, beyond the unthinking impulses and habits of thought that affect even our religious life.

In the end, Christianity is about spiritual discernment, which doesn't afford the easy comfort of lazy thought. Rather, in every moment, we are summoned by the Spirit, sometimes to reaffirm what we know and sometimes to jar us loose from mistaken thought and error.

Either way, the Spirit summons us to love, but as Christ would have it. Amen.