

**First Lutheran Church
Aitkin Minnesota**

**February 2 and 3, 2013
Pastor Bob Munneke**

**“Love Like Jesus”
Luke 4:21-30**

They – them – those people – folks different than we are.

Different color, different faith, different language, different sexual orientation, different economic status, different background, the other, different in the sense of not belonging, not deserving, not eligible, not as good, not as valuable, not as important.

They – them – those people.

It was this sort of thing about which Jesus and the good old boys in his home town were having a conversation. Our Gospel lesson today tells the story:

Jesus had begun his ministry. He was preaching and teaching and healing. Doing all of this well, He spoke with people who had a sense they were catching rock-bottom truth. Folks were stirred. Everybody was talking. Jesus' reputation preceded him wherever he went.

The Gospel writer does not tell us why Jesus stopped off at his hometown, Nazareth, the place where he grew up, where Joseph had his business, where Joe and Mary raised their family. I'm guessing that Jesus wanted to check on his family – how they were doing. He got back to Nazareth on a Sabbath Day, so he stopped in at the family church. The Gospel writer tells us that this was part of the lifestyle of Jesus – he showed up for Sabbath worship. This was part of his faith discipline.

The congregation is glad to see him, and offers for him to read the lesson for the day which happened to be a section from the book of Isaiah that Jesus had adopted as his job description. Bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captive, bring sight to the blind, set free the oppressed, tell everyone that the time has come for the Lord to save his people. It is a great passage with powerful words.

Everyone was pleased. The hometown boy has a gift, speaks well and puts a lot of feeling into it. You really get the idea that he believes the words.

But then things take a nasty turn. Jesus says that this scripture has been fulfilled this day. Hmmmm.... What does that mean? Isn't that getting a little carried away? Who does this kid think he is?

And then Jesus says he appreciates the nice welcome he received, but that he is going to need to lay some truth on the folks ---- and that they will get mad about what they hear. And sure enough, Jesus gets into the “they, them, those people thing”. And in a word, tells the folks that they have framed things incorrectly, and that they need to remember that God loves the “theys, thems, those other people” as much as he loves these hometown folks and that the Lord wants good things for the “theys, thems, those other people”.

The blessings are for everyone. This message hit like a lead balloon, and did not go over well at all, and, as is often the case, when those hear something they don't want to hear, (even though they are hearing the truth), rather than acting on the truthful message, they decide to kill the messenger.

That has happened throughout history, and still happens today. Just observe what happens. Maybe the messenger is not always literally killed, but often gets pretty beat up verbally, reputations are attacked, threats are made, and all sorts of bad stuff happens.

To speak truth to falsehood does not go over very well. It did not go over well when Jesus spoke in his hometown church that day. People were all upset. Mob rule took over and they haul Jesus out to a hill, the idea being to push him off the edge and then throw rocks down at him until he died. That was the way blasphemy was dealt with in the neighborhood.

No details were given, but the Gospel writer says that Jesus turned around and walked back through the crowd. My guess is that there was just something about Jesus that caused everyone to feel uncomfortable about actually grabbing him and tossing him over the cliff.

So what do we have here: Jesus shows up at his hometown church, is well received, but then starts talking about how the Lord God loves the “theys, thems, those other people” as much as he loves the hometown crowd. Everybody gets really mad because this upsets their frame of reference, their idea of how the world is put together, their idea of how things operate.

Their idea was that they were blessed so they could soak up the blessing, and everybody else (those people), well, too bad, they will just have to work harder, but don't expect me to do anything about it. It's not my problem.

Jesus blows that all apart. That is what the talk about the widow in Zarepheth in Sidon and Namaan in Syria was about. God loves the “theys, thems, those other people” as much as he loves you – a truth the hometown folks had trouble handling.

Now, let's fast forward to today. Jesus comes into our midst too, comes to us in the scriptures, the hymns, the conversation, the Lord's Supper, the proclamation. You see, Jesus gives us all the time, an invitation and a promise. I'll meet you over at First Lutheran at the worship services, the Bible studies, the classes, the fellowship times. I hope you won't stand me up on our date. Hope you will show up. “I'll be there,” says Jesus, “with a word to challenge, confront, help, comfort, strengthen, a word to help you stay connected to me, a word to connect you to eternal life (the good life). I'll show up to bring you a word of truth against the falsehoods all around your world.”

So Jesus comes into our midst today, to us who live in a crazy world with complex issues and lots of challenges and lots of baloney flying all over the place and says, “Love one another, love one another, as I have loved you. You are to love one another.”

And when the Bible talks about this kind of love, it is a reference not to feeling, but to action. We have in our lives that feeling kind of love, and that is good and important too, but when Jesus says we are to love one another, he is talking about action, about acting in a loving way. Our old friend, St. Paul, helps us understand this through that beautiful section of I Corinthians 13, our second lesson for today. “Love is patient and kind”, says St. Paul, “not selfish, not ill-mannered, not irritable, does not keep score, is not happy with evil stuff, but is happy with the truth.”

Jesus' love is action, loving actions, and no one is to be off limits in receiving our love. Jesus one time told a story about a guy who got mugged and left to die. Some folks walked by on the other side. One guy stopped to help. Part of the purpose of Jesus telling the story was to get across the point that whoever needs our help is our neighbor. We are to act in a loving way toward whoever needs us, including the “theys, thems, those other people”. Everybody counts in the eyes of Jesus, and we are to let our eyes be like Jesus.

I recall a story told by a friend of mine. His daughter worked for an agency that was helping folks

in an inner city area of Chicago. This lady was distributing clothing at a center, and said she needed to get a count of the people there. She felt a tug on her coat and looked down into the face of a young boy who said, "Miss Johnson, do I count today? Do I count?" A lot of people in our world today are asking, "Do I count? Do I count?"

Jesus comes into our midst and says, "Of course they do! Everybody counts!" And he asks us to follow up on this.

Remember the song that a lot of us grew up singing in Sunday School? Remember?

"Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world,
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world."

We could add another verse:

"Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world,
Muslim, Jewish, Christians,
Straight or gay, left or right,
Jesus loves the little children of the world."

Jesus loves all the children of the world, whatever their age, 2 or 22 or 82. Now he calls us to be channels for his love. Today we receive the Sacrament. We receive the body and blood of Jesus to become the body of Jesus to be sent out into the world to love like Jesus, to be channels for his love.

I recently heard about a Muslim lady who lives in the Balkans, an area torn by war in the 1990's. She lives in a town where 8,000 Muslim men and boys were massacred by a Serbian Christian group. This Muslim lady lost her husband, sons, father, and brothers in the massacre. The area was devastated by the war, and people have been struggling to stay alive. This Muslim lady organized gardens and plantings of fruit producing trees and bushes and other projects to help the area. All people in the area are given help and assistance, regardless of ethnic background.

One day a Serbian neighbor called on this Muslim lady, and said, "Why are you doing this? Why are you helping me when it was my clan that carried out the massacre? I don't understand." The Muslim woman replied, "Because you are my neighbor." Here we have the words of Jesus on the lips of a Muslim woman. "Because you are my neighbor".

They – them – those people. Jesus comes into our midst today and tells us that this frame of reference is not what God had in mind when he created the world.

God loves all his children. Jesus loves all of his brothers and sisters, and we are to love like Jesus. Love your neighbor.

Amen.

