

Sermon 1.31.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Third Sunday of Epiphany, Year C

Nehemiah 8:1-10 | Psalm 19 | 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a | **Luke 4:14-30**

You can't always control how people hear things. That's what Jesus discovered in this morning's reading. It's amazing how multiple people can hear *the exact same words* and yet hear something different.

For instance, take the phrase, "Black Lives Matter." In light of the systemic racism that exists in our society today, in light of racial economic inequalities in our nation, in light of a criminal justice system that is unfairly biased towards people of color, and in light of the fact that our black neighbors feel unsafe in our country – many people have heard the phrase "Black Lives Matter" as a call for change, a call to work for justice and equality for black people in this country. For many, it's been a much-needed and long-overdue rallying cry.

And yet others have heard the phrase "Black Lives Matter" and responded with fear and anger. In Lansdale, just a few minutes away, Trinity Lutheran Church put the phrase on their church sign, and received angry phone calls and hateful words from some in the community.

It's amazing how people can hear the same words and yet hear something different.

Or if I tell you this morning that "God sees what is going on in your life," some of you will hear it in different ways. If you're in the midst of pain or trial, you might hear those words as comforting and hopeful. But if you've been doing wrong, if you know you're not living the right way, if you're engaging in what you just *know* is sin, then when I say "God sees what is going on in your life," you might hear those words as condemning and convicting. It's amazing how people can hear the same words and yet hear something different!

If I say that “the church is changing,” some of you will feel fear and trepidation while others will feel hope and relief. If you hear the words, “racism is wrong,” some people will hear it as judgment in light of their behaviors and attitudes, while others will hear it as good news. I can say “God loves everyone” and some of you may think “Amen!” while other people resist because there are some people that they really *don't* want God to love.

You can't control how people hear things. We all hear and process words based on our own actions, our own experiences, our own worldviews and prejudices and convictions and beliefs and fears.

That's what Jesus discovered in this morning's reading. He went to synagogue to worship, and he was invited to be the lector who did the Bible readings. They didn't have books back then, so he opened up the scroll of Isaiah and read from the sixty-first chapter. “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind...to let the oppressed go free...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19) He read these words so powerfully that you could hear a pin drop, and everyone was waiting to hear what he would say next.

He looked at those gathered and said, “This scripture is fulfilled in me,” and the people got really excited. That passage from Isaiah was associated with the Messiah, the one they were waiting for, who would come and set the Israelites free. Jesus was declaring that *he* was the Messiah, that *he* was the one they'd been waiting for. It was amazing and exciting news.

But then Jesus kept speaking. He explained what kind of good news he was bringing. He gave examples of the people he was going to set free. He did it by telling them two stories, and it made people furious.

The first story was about the prophet *Elijah*. In Elijah's day, the king of Israel had abandoned God and was worshipping idols. And when Elijah publicly called the king out, he had to flee for his life. He ran all the way to Sidon, an area outside of Israel, where a widow took care of him and gave him shelter. (1 Kings 17)

The second story was about the prophet *Elisha*. (No, you're not going crazy, their names sound almost exactly the same!) Elisha once helped to heal a man from Syria who had leprosy. Even though he was from Syria, a nation considered to be an enemy of the Israelites, God still blessed him and healed his leprosy. (2 Kings 5)

When Jesus told these stories, the Israelites who were listening got really angry. It might seem confusing to us, but they were angry because these stories were about God healing and blessing and loving *Gentiles*. You see, the Israelites believed that *they* alone were God's people. *They* were the insiders, and non-Jewish folk – whom they called Gentiles – were outsiders. But Jesus pointed out that there were lots of widows in Israel who could have helped Elijah as he was fleeing for his life, but it was a *Gentile* woman who helped him. And there were lots of Israelites with leprosy at the time Elisha lived, but it was a *Gentile* that God had healed.

These were stories about times when God blessed people that Israelites considered to be enemies. These stories made it sound like God didn't *just* love the Israelites. They made it sound like Syrian lives mattered to God. Like Gentile lives mattered as much as their own.

Suddenly, Jesus' words didn't sound like good news anymore. He was basically saying, "Hey! When I talk about bringing good news to the poor and freeing the oppressed, I'm talking about these people! People you don't like, people that you hate, people that you think are your enemies." He was announcing that the good news of God's grace and love is for EVERYONE.

And this made the people so angry – they were so angry when Jesus said God wants to bless outsiders and reach out to Gentiles, so angry when he said that God cares about all people equally – they were so angry that they tried to throw Jesus off of a cliff. (v. 29)

You just can't control how people hear things. When he told a bunch of Israelites that he was bringing good news for *everyone*, including Gentiles, they tried to throw him off of a cliff.

But later, when Jesus would tell Gentiles that the good news he brought was for everyone, *even them*, they would give thanks and weep and rejoice. It's amazing how people can hear the exact same words and yet hear something different.

Martin Luther realized this back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And that's why us Lutherans don't just care about what Bible verses say, we care about how the *affect* us. How they *impact* us. We care about what the Bible *does to us*. God's Word can be convicting and condemning, causing us to feel guilt and shame. And God's Word can also make us feel free and reborn, full of hope and faith. God speaks to us in ways that both convict us *and* set us free. I don't know who first said it, but it's true, that God's Word both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

Maybe you hear the words Jesus spoke about bringing good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed – as good news that brings you hope and joy. Maybe you're aware that there are things in your life that bind you – your own sinfulness, your poor choices, your addictions and fears – and you long for freedom, and so these words Jesus spoke feel like gentle rain on parched earth. Maybe you walked into church today needing to hear about God's favor, and so these words feel like new life growing up from within. Maybe you hear Jesus tell these stories about Elijah and Elisha, proclaiming that God's grace is for *everyone*, and all you

can think is, “thank God, because I need it!” Perhaps all these words feel like good news. And if so, that’s good, because they are.

Or maybe you heard the words spoken this morning differently. Maybe you’re angry that the pastor said “Black Lives Matter” in a sermon. Maybe you heard Jesus say that God’s grace is for *everyone*, and you hate it, because there are some people who you really *don’t want* to experience God’s grace, and you want God to be on your side and dislike the people you do and support *your* worldview. Maybe you heard Jesus say he came to bring good news to the poor and it makes you feel guilty, because *you* pass by poor people every day, and there is real poverty and hunger and brokenness just two miles away on the other side of City Ave., and what are we doing to fix that? Maybe these words Jesus spoke make you angry and you want to reject all of this *grace* nonsense, because in life people should have to earn what they get. Perhaps all these words feel convicting. And if so, that’s good, because they are.

That’s how God speaks to us. In ways that are both demanding *and* freeing, convicting *and* full of grace. My job is *not* to simply tell you what you want to hear. My calling as your pastor is to speak God’s Word as best as I’m able, and hope you don’t throw me off of a cliff. God’s Word *should* make us feel uncomfortable and convicted, *but don’t shy away from that discomfort*. For it shows your very need for Jesus, who offers you grace and forgiveness here, now, today. That grace will seep into the broken cracks of your heart, into all the places that are not yet in line with God’s will, not yet consistent with God’s desires, and will change you. It will transform you to bring good news to the poor, release for the captives, and freedom for the oppressed.

For that is our call as God’s people. It’s convicting and freeing, it makes us uncomfortable and it brings us grace. So listen, for God is still speaking. Amen.