

If you missed the sermon last week,
 don't worry,
 because our Gospel reading today did too.
 It cuts out the important words Jesus said before this passage:
 how he encouraged the assembly in Nazareth
 to focus on how God's fulfillment of promises was happening today,
 here and now, right under their noses.
 I preached about the difficulty of seeing the promises fulfilled,
 how hard it is to lean into God's grace
 in our daily living.

This week is the second installment of the sermon,
 in which Jesus raises and answers
 the more complicated question
 of why this is so hard.
*What keeps us from seeing
 God's work here and now?
 What prevents us from getting on board with
 God's mission today?*

The answer plays out in what happens
 after Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
 The crowd initially reacts very positively,
 speaking well of him and amazed at his gracious words.
 The preacher's hit a homerun; they love his sermon;
 they're impressed that Joseph's son has amounted to so much!

Jesus could have just stopped talking at that point.
 He had the synagogue's attention; he'd won them over.
 But then, seemingly less gracious words come from his mouth,
 words that Jesus likely knew
 would cause him to fall out of his audience's favor.
 "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself,'"
 he says.
 Jesus anticipates what they'll want him to say and do next.
 They'll want him, the hometown boy,
 to fix and cure them, his backwater hometown!
 And they'll want him to do the extraordinary things

that he did in Capernaum already.
 They want the same miracles and healing and release,
or possibly more
 for themselves,
 because, after all, they are the people who knew him then.

They anticipate that the forgiveness and grace and promise-fulfillment
 that Jesus just preached about
 is coming for them,
 especially for them,
 and maybe even a little extra for them.
 In a phrase,
 those in Jesus' home church
 expect special treatment.
 And Jesus knows it.

So Jesus nips all this in the bud.
 He goes on to say that his mission, and God's work,
 will first take place elsewhere,
 and with other people, too.
 "But the truth is,"
 he breaks it down,
 "there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah,
 when . . . there was a severe famine over all the land,
 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon."
 And, "There were also many lepers in Israel
 in the time of the prophet Elisha,
 and God cleansed none of them except Naaman the Syrian."

If you don't get these references,
 here's what Jesus means:
 When God could have sent the prophet Elijah to help in Israel,
 where there was a famine,
 God chose instead to send Elijah to Zarephath,
 way far north,
 barely within the Promised Land limits.
 And given all the needy widows in Israel,
 God chose to send Elijah to help

a foreigner,
 a woman not of their religion
 and not a member of their nation.
 Likewise, given all the lepers to heal,
 God chose Naaman, another foreigner,
 another non-Jewish outsider,
 to dip in the water and receive healing from the prophet Elisha.

No wonder that the people,
 when they heard this,
 were filled with rage.
Go first to outsiders?
Choose to heal foreigners before us citizens?
Put non-religious people ahead of us faithful worshippers?
Favor someone who lives in the boonies?
Help one of our enemies?

Jesus' home-run sermon
 on his own turf
 looks like it's about to be a foul-ball after all.
 No wonder they want to hurl Jesus off a cliff.

The pew-sitters on that Sabbath day
 thought that God's promises and grace and work
 would be for them,
 and they are,
 but the promises and grace and work are not
only for them.

Jesus also fulfills the promises
 for people outside of their circle,
 for folks foreign to their existence,
 for those the Nazarenes may not even like,
 including whomever they'd consider their enemy.

They thought Jesus had finally come to shine a light on THEM,
 to give their poor little town some real attention,
 to share with them a bit of what God had shared with others.
 And after all that expectation,

Jesus makes it clear that they've made the wrong assumptions about whom the fulfillment of God's promises are *for*.
They're NOT the first or only people God intends to serve.

Unfortunately, the synagogue in Nazareth isn't the last community to make this problematic assumption. The Christians in Corinth struggled with it too. They assumed that some people—
the people with the better gifts to give,
or folks with more luxurious lives—
were more important, more special,
than those with less-great spiritual gifts
or a more menial subsistence.

And Paul, their pastor-from-afar, knew it. He knew some people thought that they were better or superior than others, that they deserved first-dibs at church before others, and that they didn't have to accommodate others before themselves. Which is why he admonishes them that
“[i]ndeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many . . .
The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’
nor the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you . . .’”

Paul reminds them that for those who follow Christ, no gift, no person, no position in life is more special than another.
All are needed:
weak and strong.
All belong to Christ:
poor and rich.
All are equally important to God:
noble and inferior.
All are bound together by faith, hope, and a great Love.

The crowd in Nazareth failed to recognize where and among whom Jesus' ministry would take place:
with the enemies before the friends,
and with people thought to be reproachful or undeserving.

The church in Corinth similarly missed God's mission of wide-embrace, incorrectly assuming it would better for the rich to be comfortable in church than to accommodate the poor.

These two different communities
faced the same problem:
both wrongly assumed
that they were the first or only people God intended to serve.

Try as we may not to, we as the church today
still face the same problem:
assuming that God's grace is *only* or *first* for us
and *not* or *second* for others.

We still have a hard time believing that
God would go first to outsiders,
choose to heal foreigners or prisoners before upright citizens,
put non-religious people ahead of faithful worshippers
and love our enemies
just as much as God does all these things for us.

The Gospel today warns against those wrong assumptions
and reminds us, once again,
that's God's grace,
the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus Christ,
is
for
everyone.

Every story that we've heard so far in this season of Epiphany
has made this point.

At the stable, the weird, foreign magi show up to adore the Christ child
because Christ is born to save the whole world.

At the Jordan river, all the people are baptized by John, including Jesus,
so that God and humanity may no longer be stratified.

At the Wedding at Cana, Jesus provides abundant drink for all the guests,
servants and celebrants alike.

God works grace and reveals glory where and when and among whom God
chooses.

Yes, among us.

And also, yes, beyond us.

To these acts of welcome,
to Christ's openness and wide embrace,
to God's unmerited grace and favor,
we may react with shock.
Lord knows there are plenty of examples
in our culture and current events and our own lives
of not welcoming strangers or loving the enemy.

Which is why we need the hope and faith and grace and love
in the words that Jesus gave to his hearers
and Paul shared with Corinth.

With assurance that because Christ lived and lives
we can see how God's good news for the poor and release for the captives
and freedom for the oppressed is taking place today.
With the truth that God's selfless love for us bears all things,
endures all things, and never ends,
we can get on board with God's mission today:
bearing
and enduring,
and, by the grace of God,
persisting too
in love for one another and beyond one another,
beyond what and whom we can imagine.

AMEN.