

Sermon for January 28, 2006: God's Words in Our Mouths

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

1 Corinthians 13

Luke 4: 16-30

Near the beginning of The Fellowship of the Ring, the first book of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Bilbo Baggins celebrates a major birthday. At hobbit parties, it is customary for the guest/host to make a short speech. The words that come out of his mouth are not the words that his guests expect. Let me read you a few lines from Tolkien's classic.

Sometimes the words that come out of our mouths are not the words that others expect to hear. That was the situation that Sabbath day in Nazareth, when Jesus returned to His hometown after His baptism, His time of temptation in the wilderness, and the beginning of His ministry. There was a buzz in town – local boy makes good – and maybe more than that. Jesus seems to confirm these expectations when He reads from the prophet Isaiah. It's no wonder that every eye was fixed on Jesus; the words He read pointed toward the fulfillment of the promise of a messiah, an anointed one, who would fully restore the status of the Chosen People. They had been suffering under the oppression of foreign rulers, and the oppression of local leaders who seemed to be merely puppets of their occupiers. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled..." No wonder they were poking one another – of course they were amazed – this thing that they had waited for, prayed for, longed for so passionately, seemed to be coming true at last – and right in their little town, by a hometown boy. Just think what that would mean for Israel. Just think what that would mean for us. We're about to be #1 – restored to our preferential, exclusive spot, as the apple of El Shaddai's eye.

Jesus reads their mood accurately, and He reflects it back to them. We can't tell His tone from the text – He may have kidded them – I know what you're going to say – or He may have been more challenging – I KNOW what you're going to say. But whether Jesus started out joshing them or challenging them, He certainly turned their expectations upside down with His two examples of God's grace to those who were NOT part of the chosen People – the widow at Zarephath, and Naaman, a commander in the army of the Syrians – rankled. They both were well-known individuals who had received miracles from God, through Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was widely expected to return as the forerunner of the messiah. Elijah was a prophet among prophets – only Moses was more well-regarded than Elijah. Elisha was his follower. Elisha asked for, and received, a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Yes, those residents of Nazareth were familiar with those stories, and they may have had mixed feelings about them. Why not have Elijah stay with, and bless, an Israeli widow? Why didn't Elisha cure any Jewish lepers? We don't get answers to why questions. But one thing is clear – even hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, God was showing favor, and bestowing blessings, on folks who were not part of the "RIGHT" group, people who were outsiders, people who were Gentiles. That sort of behavior by God can shake feelings of *exclusivity, feelings of privilege and power*. And now Jesus is juxtaposing those stories with this beloved scripture from Isaiah – and therefore implying that God's grace is a LOT wider than anything they have imagined up to that point. That *exclusivity, that privilege, that power*, is fading away.

That didn't make those hometown folks happy any more. The mood switched faster than we can say fuggedabout.

Jesus was challenging them to change their understanding of their call. Instead of being part of an exclusive group that largely excluded outsiders and other Jews who didn't measure up, for various reasons, their privilege was going to vanish. But that *exclusivity, that privilege and that power* was too much to give up. Better to not be open to the widening of the circle of the Chosen People too radically. Better to just reject the message, and the Messenger.

Paul's famous passage on love also reflects a shift in the understanding of what it means to love, and who is "in" and who is "out". Paul was writing to the Corinthians about their gifts and how all of them were called to use their gifts to build up the Body of Christ, the church. As humans do, they were trying to set up a pecking order of gifts. Jesus wrestled with His former neighbors in an attempt to persuade them to abandon their pecking order of in-group Chosen People, and out-group Gentiles. Likewise, Paul wrestles with the Corinthians to get them to abandon their pecking order of greater and lesser gifts. Instead, Paul reminds them that it's all about love – God's love for us, and our love for one another, a love that breaks all sorts of boundaries – *boundaries of exclusivity, of privilege, of power*.

In point of fact, God knows each of us – God calls each of us by name – and God doesn't care about our age, our social ranking, our power. God cares about whether or not we will answer that call, and whether or not we are willing to really live out God's will, so that God's Words are in our hearts, so that God's words are in our mouths, so that God's words are acted out in our daily lives. How committed are we to bringing good news to the poor in our community? How committed are we to bringing release to the captives in our community – those who are captive in their homes due to age, disability, illness, or lack of transportation? What about those who are captive due to pay that does not come close to providing for a living wage? Or those who are captive to homelessness, or other economic constraints, having to decide between paying for fuel oil or food? How committed are we to helping those who have been blinded by racism or sexism to be able to see others in the light of God's love? How much do we really care about freeing those oppressed by addictions? How can we proclaim the year of the Lord's favor if we insist on hanging on to our perception that we are the one and only chosen people?

The bad news is that, on our own, we can't do it any more than those folks in Nazareth could. The Good News is that we don't have to do it on our own. Jesus assured His followers that He would be with us always, until the end of the age. God's words CAN be in our mouths. We can adjust to the changes that God calls us to, we can give up our desire for *exclusivity, privilege, and power* if we remember that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Let us pray.

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” Then the LORD put out His hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4: 21-30

Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to Me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And He said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and 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. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Him out of the town, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their town was

built, so that they might hurl Him off the cliff. But He passed through the midst of them and went on His way.