

Luke 4:21-30/Jan 30, 2022

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, this is kind of an embarrassing story, but it's Sunday and we're at worship and now is the time to confess our sins.

So, my mother and I went to Kenya in Africa in 1998. We were on safari. We went the Maasai Mara where we were looking for the big 5. One morning, while we were out and about my mother and I had a confrontation, with each other, not with any wildlife.

I had my binoculars up to my eyes. I was searching for whatever the guide was telling us to look for. My mom got impatient and kept trying to take my binoculars away from me, because she liked mine better than her own. I was getting irritated, because I was trying to find the animal, and then I pushed her away with indignation, "These are my binoculars! Use your own!!"

Well – with that, the entire van gasped, or it seemed that way to me anyway. She basically just landed on the seat and wasn't seriously hurt, but there was some major judgment going on in the van towards me. Embarrassed, I said I was sorry and gave her my binoculars and we went about our excursion.

Have you ever had an experience like that? This is mine! Not yours! It happens, all the time, and it even happened to Jesus in today's gospel reading.

Jesus was in his hometown saying wonderful things and the people really were excited. "That's is our boy! He is going to bless us! He belongs to us! We're so fortunate!"

And then... And then Jesus says that he hasn't come for them, but for dirty rotten Gentiles and those who are sick! "What?! How can that be?! You are ours, not theirs! Give us the blessings, not them!" And then they chased him to the edge of a cliff in order to stone him to death.

But, Jesus walks right through them, because this is not how the story ends. It's way too early – we're only in chapter 4. We've got 20 more chapters to go! Jesus has a lot more people to tick off as he turns the world upside down.

The Jews were waiting for the Messiah, and they thought he was coming only for them. The Messiah was to set them free, not anybody else. He was theirs.

But, if we look to Luke 3:38, we see that Jesus' genealogy goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden – all the way back to Adam – all the way back to God. So Jesus' family tree is much larger than just the Jews in Nazareth. It includes all people from all time and place. And as we trace Jesus' genealogy in Luke, we find two important figures - Noah and Abraham.

Noah, as you know from Noah and the Ark, had three sons – Shem, Japheth, and Ham. The descendants of those three sons populated the entire planet after the Flood. Shem the Israelites, Japheth the Europeans, and Ham the Canaanites and other cursed people of the Middle East into Africa. But, even Ham's cursed sons are still part of Jesus' family.

Abraham was born 10 generations from Noah, part of Shem's line who were blessed after the Flood. Abraham was 58 years old when Noah died, because Noah died at 895 years of age. At the time, Abraham was living in Ur in modern day Iraq. God called Abraham from Ur to bring the good news of God to all nations – all of them – including the cursed lands of Ham, Noah's cursed son.

For Jesus, his ministry is not only for the Jews, the descendants Shem, more specifically the offspring of King David, but for all people – the cursed and righteous alike.

Jesus doesn't just belong to one group. He belongs to everyone, and to make that clear to his friends and family who thought they owned him, Jesus brings up two foreigners from the past – a widow and a general. Can you get two greater extremes than that?

The Widow of Zerepath took Elijah in during a great famine. Because King Ahab had turned to worshipping the god Baal who supposedly provided water, God stopped all water from flowing. God was making it clear that God alone is God. There is no other, but Ahab was stubborn and refused to repent, which is ironic here, because God was his, but he refused God's blessings.

So, God sent Elijah to the widow. If God's own people will not believe in him, perhaps a foreigner will, and she did after her dead son was brought back to life. She praised God and confessed that God alone was God. Here Elijah filled Abraham's call to bring the knowledge of God to all nations. God brings the dead back to life – the literal dead and those who had been cursed. You can read all about that in 1 Kings 17.

And then there was Naaman, found in 2 Kings 5. Naaman was a great general of Aram who had, through God's help, been victorious over Israel, again because of the idolatry of the king of Israel.

Naaman had taken an Israelite girl as contraband to be his wife's slave. When the girl saw Naaman's leprosy, she told his wife that the prophet Elisha in Israel could heal him. The wife went to Naaman and told him to go to Elisha and be healed.

Now, you can imagine being a great victor and having to go beg one of the people you had just defeated for healing. Kind of humiliating. But, he gave in to everyone's pressure and went to see Elisha.

When he got to Elisha's house, he made a big scene demanding Elisha to come out, but Elisha wouldn't go see him. Instead he was told through a messenger to go bathe three times in the River Jordan, to which Naaman throws a fit – “That dirty stinking river?! The rivers of Aram are much more majestic than that!”

Naaman expected more of a show from Elisha, but the wisdom of a slave comes through once again. “Master, it's not hard, just go do it.” And so Naaman finally gives in and goes and does as the prophet had told him, dunking himself three times in the Jordan, and when he came out his skin was good as new, just like a baby.

With that Naaman went back to Elisha and praised God. He confessed that there is no other God and that he and his family would continue to worship God alone. Through Elisha, Abraham's mission was fulfilled again. A foreigner went home praising God, while the king of Israel worshipped Baal.

God brings healing to foreigners, the diseased, the dead, and the oppressor. Through healing, God makes God's self known.

That is part of the Hebrew scriptures, but Jesus friends and family do not want others to be blessed. They want it all for themselves. It's mine.

But, what they come to find out is that when you try and grasp Jesus in your fist, he slips right through your fingers. It's like trying to hold Jello in a clasped hand; it just oozes out between your fingers.

Jesus is not just ours. He is for the entire world, for the healing of all nations. He is for the dead, diseased, oppressor, and foreigner, and if we hold on too tightly to Jesus, we lose him.

The first week in February is Interfaith Harmony Week. During this week, we are reminded to hold Jesus loosely, as we always should, so that others will know God more fully, because that is the goal – to make God known in the world.

Jesus is not just ours and no one has to have the same relationship with him that we have. Jews and Muslims alike revere Jesus as a prophet, and Hindus consider him to be another revelation of God, and that's ok. The goal here is for all people to know God – to know God's love, grace, and mercy.

If we approach those who are not Christians with fists, Jesus slips right through our fingers. Jesus, after all, was crucified, died, and was risen. He only brought healing. He never hurt anyone. In the midst of any violence on our part, which includes more than just physical violence, Jesus slips right out of our hands, only to be resurrected in forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation. Open palms. Open arms. Jesus on the cross.

When I was a kid, we would sing a song that went – “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.”

That's nice, but the more important thing is that by our actions others will know who God is. As William J. Tom said, “For some people, you are the only Bible they will ever read.”

Jesus is not ours. We do not own him. Jesus is for the healing of the entire world and he uses us for that mission, so let us hold him loosely so that he can easily be shared with all people everywhere.

Thanks be to God. Amen.