

## Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Epiphany

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Grace Church in Scarborough

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A teaching on spiritual freedom.

What do you do when suddenly a conversation turns in to a family fight?

What do you do with Jacob, who quite school and now doesn't have a job, and you always want to say, "Hey, Jacob, why don't you go back and finish up school while you wait for a job?" Because you know what he is going to say, and the silence that will follow and how he will not meet your eye.

What about the way you feel about yourself when you visit with your aunt in the nursing home? You know she will let you know how long it was since your last visit, and the whole time you are there she makes you feel more and more bad about not going more often, and inside you are just longing to get away and never go back. There are so many little corners of life which feel like there are landmines left over from some conflict in the past. Everything is fine and then someone says something and BANG! There was an explosion which surprised even you.

I don't understand what was going on with Jesus when he was back in his home village.

I imagine it as a great homecoming. Everyone knew him since he was a child. His old school friends are married and working, settling down, but he had been away. Everyone knew he was "religious" and that was OK. Quite where he has been and what he had been learning no one was sure, but the word had been out that he had started preaching in churches in the area. So when he came in to town on a Sunday it was no surprise that he was in Church, and sitting up near the front. The minister asked him to read from the Bible and say a few words. He chose one of the favourite readings, the one about the Messiah who would set everyone free one day. Then he said that this was the day, and right here and now it was happening. Yes, here in our little village. Everyone felt so proud to be there, and that this was our local boy, all grown up, and we were his village, and he was so religious and clever!

Then suddenly he started being rude. He made us feel unimportant, he said that God was interested in other people, and we never had mattered. Then someone shouted for him to shut up and he left the building and we all followed him and, well, it all got out of hand very quickly. It got nasty. No one ever really understood what happened.

This Gospel seems to sit uncomfortably next to the reading from Paul in Corinthians.

Here Paul is teaching about love. For Paul love was the fulfilling of the law. It mattered to keep the rules and commandments. It mattered to remember to pray and go to church. But above all the other things, any other thing, Paul says it matters to love.

In the Gospel, frankly, Jesus seems not be very in love with his old home village.

I have a point of view about Jesus, which not everyone shares. I am not sure I am fully, or even partly right. But this is where I am about Jesus. I think he was human. Being human means, well, being human! I am human, and so are you. I don't think I am perfect, but I am OK with that because I think perfect people are usually very annoying, and they are faking perfection anyway. I am getting better, I think. I keep learning things. I learn new things about other people and I learn about myself. I discover long settled faults in myself, and I try to grow beyond them. I learn things about other people which surprise me and always give me deeper respect for them. I have fewer certainties as I get older. But I think I am getting slowly gentler and maybe even kinder.

Someone said, "To grow is to change. To be perfect is to have changed often." I like that.

I believe God loves me as I am. I believe God loves me so much that he is unprepared to leave me this way, and is at work, trying to get me better.

So this is true of Jesus too, because whatever is true of humans, of me and of you, must also be true of Jesus.

In the Gospel stories we see Jesus grow and deepen and change and expand. They are the story of Jesus increasingly understanding who he is in God's eyes, and what he has to do to be faithful to God's vision of him.

The thing that marks Jesus out is not his ready-made perfection, but his single-minded determination to go God's Way, no matter how difficult, painful or, finally, how fatal that was.

So back to Nazareth.

I remember preaching as a visitor in a church some years ago. I had preached a sermon with a lot of challenge in it, because my friend, the priest there, had told me what a curmudgeonly lot his congregation was! At the end of the service one of the ladies came up to me and said, with a delighted smile, "Oh, I love your accent. I could listen to you for hours!" Now, what I wanted to do was explode at her and shout, "But did you hear any words that I said!"

This is as close as I can guess to what Jesus might have been going through. It is a risky thing to come home as a deeply changed person. Jesus had met with God, had been swept by the Spirit, harrowed in the wilderness and driven in to a whole new way of understanding life and his place in the world. Back home it might have been as if everyone was gazing up at him and thinking, "Aw, how cute is that! Little Jesus all grown up! Oh, he makes you proud, doesn't he?"

When Jesus cracked and became critical perhaps he was trying to knock that condescension out of their heads so that they could hear him. Maybe he was rattled by how hard the web of old family and community relationships was pulling him back in to his adolescence. We don't know.

Sometimes you don't know why you get it wrong. Sometimes you don't know if you can fix the mess you just made, or if it was the right thing to do to mess things up anyway. One way or another Jesus got all meshed up with the village, and I would have to say, he didn't do this well.

We know he didn't do it well because he was in the middle of a swarm of angry people who were going to give him a final exit from the village.

Now here, I think the vital part of the story is told.

I imagine everyone shouting at Jesus, and Jesus shouting back. They were all lathered up and angry, putting the "fun" in dysfunctional, and suddenly Jesus regained his footing in God. It was as if his bare foot touched the ground, the holy ground of God's creation. The fear and anger, the shame and guilt, the longing to be rid of people who knew him too well and didn't know him at all.... All that writhing stuff inside that makes you do and say things you later regret.....it all ran out of him when he touched some inner ground with God.

I imagine the roar of the crowd, for Jesus, suddenly muted. He realized he was free of all this chaos if he chose to be.

When Paul talks about love, he talks not about an emotion as dodgy as the weather in Newfoundland. He talks about a way to live grounded in the love we find at the heart of God. Love which bears all the hard things, believes all the good things, hopes for all the best things, endures all the exhausting and painful things and never ever ends. Love which chooses not to resent others, or count their failings, chooses not to "win" over others or even prove anything to others.

I think this was like a moment of rescue for Jesus. Suddenly he found his footing again in this gritty, solid, holy love. In love he could let go of his roiling emotions. He could put them down like taking off a piece of clothing that no longer fits. He could put it down and walk straight through the fight which he had been in, because in Love, it was no longer his. He could let it go, and walk away.

This is the freedom of being a person who follows in the Way of Christ. Mostly we see people caught up in the web of winning arguments or losing face, being right and proving other wrong, pride and tradition and knowing who is above you and who you are above, keeping score and keeping others in their place.....it is a net that tangles you up. Jesus sets you free, if you can, like him at Nazareth, just step out of the net and put your feet on the solid ground of St Paul's description of love. In love there is no judgment, no being ahead or behind, no winning or losing, no pride to be kept or shame to be hidden.

All that is - is love. The love of God who loves you as you are. God who loves you so much that he is unprepared to leave you this way, and is at work, trying to get you better. Only God matters. You are free of the rest. The only truth to live by is love, and in that love is the peace which Christ's way gives that you will never find in the world of tangled lines. And that is freedom.