

Jesus had them in the palm of his hand... He had captured the attention of all in the synagogue with his reading from the prophet Isaiah—their eyes were fixed on him... waiting...

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he said.

And, as Luke put it, at that point *“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”*

But... it sure didn't take long before they turned against him, did it?!

- Why? How did it all go so wrong so quickly?
- What was so wrong with what Jesus said? What made them all turn on him?
- What made them all so mad that they drove him out of town to the edge of a cliff?

From our perspective, what Jesus goes on to say seems to come out of nowhere—*“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.’”

“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

It's as if he senses, in the crowd, an air of *entitlement / privilege... of special status... of resentment... of demand.*

They *expect* their hometown boy to prove himself – to do for them the wondrous works they've heard he did in Capernaum, of all places. [You see, Capernaum was known to have a heavy non-Jewish population—were they resentful of Jesus for spending time with those “outsiders”?]

They think Jesus should show *them* some favor / special consideration—they are, after all, *his* “family” / *his* friends and neighbors / *his own* people... They *expect* him to do his best for them.

And Jesus calls them out!

He intentionally “pushes them”—and defends his ministry to “*those outsiders*” by telling not 1 but 2 stories from *their past*—from the days of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha... stories of how God had passed by *them* (the people of Israel... God's chosen people) in order to minister to strangers, and not just strangers, but “outsiders”— people considered to be their *enemies*:

1. A widow from the wrong side of the tracks in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:1-16).
2. Naaman, a leper, who was the commander of an enemy army (2 Kings 5:1-14).

Do you remember these stories?

1--There was a severe famine in the land. God sent Elijah to this unnamed widow... to ask her to feed him. She barely had enough to feed herself and her son, but the prophet promised: *“The jar of meal will not be emptied, and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.”* She was willing to share the last of what she had... and she was blessed. She didn't let the apparent “lack of resources” to stop her from trusting God's promise... for providing for Elijah.

2--Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army... and also a leper. He had a Jewish slave-girl in his house who told him about a prophet named Elisha who could cure leprosy. Although he was, at first, resistant to Elisha's instructions to wash in the Jordan 7 times... Naaman eventually did what he was told... and was healed of his leprosy. He converted on the spot.

There was *judgment* contained in these examples, of course... and the hometown crowd picked up on it pretty quickly. As Jesus pointed out, there *were* many widows and lepers in Israel at that time, but "*none of them*" got help from Elijah or Elisha. That phrase—"none of them"—is what hit the crowd hard and stirred their anger... and drove home Jesus' point—that God's love and mercy and grace is for *everybody* – for "all peoples / nations" (not just a special few)... that the good news Jesus came to proclaim is for *any* and *all* who are open to receiving it...

Jesus reminded them of *those for whom He—the Messiah—had come*—the widows, the lepers, the aliens / "outsiders." [As we know, Jesus' whole ministry will be directed toward the "least of these"—over and over again, to the widows and the lepers, the poor and the oppressed, the "undeserving" and the "outsiders"]

He made it clear that he would not be a prophet who served the special interests of his hometown people. He came as a messenger of God's love and mercy and grace – for everyone... for the whole world – including the people they didn't like / those they considered "outsiders" / "enemies" – and that's when they snapped shut on him.

It was his words of *inclusion* (of God's wide welcome and embrace) in his interpretation of his ministry—that brought about the rapid change from admiration and awe... to utter rage.

The minute Jesus confronted and denied their "*special status*" (and with it, their smug self-righteousness / their false sense of importance and privilege) they got mad—boiling mad—so mad that they were ready to *throw him off a cliff*.

I think their anger stemmed from *more than* just having been "pushed"/ accused of something. My guess is... they sensed that Jesus' words had a certain "bite" to them—a bite of TRUTH—a TRUTH they did NOT want to hear *or* acknowledge.

We all know that kind of anger, don't we? The bite of TRUTH – about ourselves – that we don't want to hear or acknowledge...

Learning what we already know – about ourselves – is often painfully difficult.

All of us know what it is to be at war within ourselves—blaming / making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the TRUTH in love.

Israel should have understood and embraced Jesus' message. Their own scriptures spoke of God's grace and mercy toward all peoples – from way back at the time of the covenant God made with Abraham.

Why did Jesus intentionally "push them" / stir things up / inflame their hostility?

It's hard to say... but he seemed to know what was in their hearts... he seemed to know what they were thinking. So, Jesus knew, in this particular situation, that the only helpful word he could speak was the hard word / the convicting word... a word of TRUTH that would cut them to the core—and yes, make them **angry**.

In many ways, this is a foreshadowing of the way that Jesus' ministry will unfold in the years ahead... a foreshadowing of the trial and death of Jesus (and many of his followers).

As we know, it is Jesus' proclamation of God's mercy and love and grace for all... his good news – in which the poor inherit the kingdom, in which the hungry are filled, and in which the rich and full are brought low... that will ultimately bring him to the cross...

The hard TRUTH we are confronted with today is this: **Christ is not only the One** who comforts us and supports us and rescues us... **Christ is also the One** who challenges us and sometimes upsets us... who “calls us out” / holds us accountable, telling us the TRUTH we don't always want to hear (or acknowledge).

Jesus' message of *inclusion* (God's wide-welcome... God's love and care for ALL, including “the least of these”—the widows, the lepers, and the aliens / “outsiders”)—the TRUTH he proclaims—still upsets a lot of people, even today.

Like the congregation in Nazareth, we don't like to be told that “those people” we don't like—“those people” we don't want around—are beloved / valued by God... just as surely as we are.

Like the congregation in Nazareth, we can be pretty sensitive about hearing God's word of TRUTH—when we don't personally agree with it or like what it says *to us* / *about us*: our pettiness and prejudice, our fear and shame, our smug self-righteousness or our inflated sense of privilege / “special-ness”...

Like the congregation in Nazareth, we want a Christ who will work miracles for us – NOT one who challenges us to live differently, to love unselfishly and wholeheartedly... NOT one who shakes our sense of security... our illusion of righteousness / special standing before God.

To encounter Jesus... is to encounter the TRUTH that comforts us and assures us... but also, at times (more than we like) confronts us and convicts us... and threatens to upend our “status quo” = our way of life / our sense of comfort / our sense of *community*... and *privilege*.

For Jesus has a way of pointing out our unexamined assumptions / our self-serving answers... the false “truths” that we use to justify ourselves / our actions... our exclusion of “others”...

I guess the good news is that when we would like to take Jesus and shake him, saying, “What are you thinking?!?”... it means we're listening to him – really hearing him... that we're paying attention to where the TRUTH of the gospel rubs us raw...

We don't get to tell God what God should do—God is not under our bidding.

Whether we like it or not, God will love and bless and help whomever God wants to love and bless and help.

The hard thing about the God we come know in Jesus... is that whenever you and I draw a line between who's in and who's out / who's welcome (and valued) and who's not... we will find Jesus on the other side.

Even though we *know* (as Christians) that we are called to be different—to choose welcome over rejection...
love over hate... peace over conflict—it is NOT as easy as we hope it could be... or wish it would be.

In Christ's church, we are dared to believe that it is God who brings us together / it is God who makes us a *community*... and that our blessed differences are God's best tools for opening us up to the TRUTH—God's TRUTH—that is bigger than we are... that is always more than any one of us can grasp all by ourselves.

If there is one line that sums up the Jesus we come to know in Luke's gospel, it is this: **God, in Christ, came for EVERYONE!**