

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“This Offensive Gospel”

The Fourth in a Series entitled, On Being Christian

Luke 4: 21-30

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As you know, Jesus was pretty controversial... and often offensive to folks he was around. From one perspective, that's why he was crucified... he offended one too many folks.

You can tell a lot about yourself, you know, by what it is you find offensive. You can tell a lot, that is, if you are awake to see it and know it. Typically we aren't... we're just offended and then we go about justifying why we're offended and then... sometimes... we even go about trying to get rid of what is offensive.

We run from it...Or we drive it out...Hate it... protest it...Sometimes we crucify it... just kill it.

And sometimes we do that, certain that “we're justified and not only that, but we're doing the work of God.” You know there were plenty of “Amens” at the foot of the cross. Calvary is the result of a collision of holiness and humanity. There was too much offense.

Jesus offended almost everyone. His family: **“Who are my brothers and sisters?”** His disciples: **“Get behind me, Satan.”**

He offended the Pharisees... the ancient religious right. He offended the Sadducees... the liberal, spiritual, well-educated, left. He offended the Herodians... the opportunistic secularists of the day.

He offended almost everyone. There are a lot of folks getting miffed in the gospel stories.

And you can tell a lot about a person when you see them offended, when you discover what it is in them that has been offended.

Richard Rohr says something to the effect of **“You know when you've been offended, that the ego is in control.”** When you find yourself taking offense...**“She didn't include me...”** **“They disagreed with me and were critical of me.”** **“How dare he suggest such a thing.”** **“They didn't consult me.”**

When we're in that state... we're being controlled by something... and often it's not of God. We aren't operating at a deep enough level, from a true enough place and then... the guards go up and the lines get drawn.

Out come the words...And sometime the tar and feathers (or internet barrages, where modern day stonings occur). Or maybe even a cross.

Today's gospel reading is all about being offended. And it's really fascinating because when Matthew and Mark tell this story there is an offense but the offense is different. It's really the opposite, what is being offended.

In those gospels Jesus goes home and he's teaching and they are offended because here he is... the carpenter's son... trying to teach them.

"Where did he get this stuff?"

**"I remember this guy... pimply face back in Junior High...
Terrible at stick ball."**

"He and I used to play cards on Friday night."

"Who does he think he is?"

See the offense? God would not work... in this way... through the likes of us. It can't be that common.

"It's all fine and good for someone to be a prophet but not someone I baby sat... The carpenter's son... might as well have been my son... right... no way."

In Matthew and Mark the offense betrays a kind of low estimation of who they were and what it means to be human. **"Nothing good is coming out of Nazareth or me for that matter."**

That's what's going on and by the way, it was the offense that led to lots of heresy in the early church. **"God?... human?... with a body?... God, like one of us... a carpenter's son... doing chores for his dad? ABSOLUTELY NOT."**

That was the offense that led to plenty of problems... heresies really.

The other heresy was almost the opposite. **"God prefers us. We're special" "We know about Yahweh... and Yahweh is our God and we will tell you what it means to know him and have our God work in our lives."**

"For instance, after you walk down the aisle and confess your faith in Christ... you'll need to step over here into the clinic for a little procedure we like to call circumcision. No... doesn't really hurt much... not really... but it will make you like us and that's what counts."

In the story as Luke tells it, "that's what's going on." There is great offense and the offense is not, **"we don't think God would work through the likes of us."** It's the opposite, **"we know God only works through the likes of us."**

They were offended because Jesus had suggested otherwise. **"Remember those two stories, y'all?" The one about Elijah during the famine... and how God used a gentile widow to take care of him. There were plenty of widows in Israel but God chose her."**

"And do you remember that other story about General Naaman. He was our enemy, remember? And he came down with cancer and Yahweh chose to heal him even though for some reason he didn't heal all our Jewish brothers and sisters who went to dip in the Jordan."

"Y'all remember that, don't you? Good stories, huh? I love those stories."

Awkward pause.... and then....

"How dare you suggest what you're suggesting? That God works wherever God wants and however God wants and furthermore, how dare you suggest that our own tradition would teach us this? We suspected as much, you healing over there in Capernaum where all 'those people' live. You are offensive."

“Enough of this. Man the battle stations...Lower the draw bridge...Stones for everyone...Lock and load.”

They were offended. And it's so easy to see their blindness and smallness and closed-mindedness. But let he who is never offended, cast the first stone. And remember, our offense reveals an awful lot about who we are...

Verily, verily I say unto you that Jesus went to Dallas... and showed up at a mega-church, where they were having a rally... singing praise choruses and passing out political pamphlets... and Jesus sayeth unto them, **“I've decided to use this church in a special way.”**

Anyone here offended at the thought... that Jesus might be at work in a place with using PowerPoint during worship? No? Then how 'bout this:

Verily... I tell you the truth... God sent his son to an aids clinic in Houston. It isn't faith based... mostly it's run by gays and lesbians... and Jesus appeared to them and sayeth unto them, **“What you have done to the least of these you have done to me.”**

And they said back to him, **“Who, us? We didn't mean to do this for you.” “I know,”** he said... **“Still... thank you for caring for me and mine.”**

Anyone offended?

Verily... a local pastor was reading a poem written by a Sufi... a Muslim mystic, and cried at the beauty and truth of it. Anyone offended... anyone want to cast stones at the thought that God might reveal truth outside the boundaries of our faith? Maybe you don't want to run me down the hill out there and over the cliff and into the creek, but some of you just made a mental note to send me an email this week: “Note to self...nip heresy in bud.”

“Verily God spoke into and through the suffering of the holocaust, in the camps, in powerful, loving ways. People knew God, knew Jesus, in the midst of that madness.”

“Verily... verily...” someone might say, **“God spoke to me through my abusive, alcoholic step-father... go figure.”**

“My whiskey priest...”

“My atheist neighbor.”

“Verily... I tell you the truth... did you know studies have shown conservative evangelicals actually give more time and money to help the poor and oppressed than do liberals?” Offended? Is the thought anathema? Ready to shoot off an email?

Or might you pause humbly for a moment and remember Jesus... who seemed to offend everyone and often on purpose. If he has offended you, join the club... but also join the club of those awakened by the offense and who, rather than throwing stones, chose to follow him. Follow Jesus instead of that offended ego.

And when we do, we find that God's love can never, ever be bounded. Not by ethnicity... not by doctrine... not by morality or behavior or any supposed privilege.

God can make sons and daughters out of those rocks. Knowing God is about grace, not merit.

That's what Jesus taught... what he lived.

Christians worship and love God, who is revealed in Christ as one whose self-giving love never stops pouring out to everyone... everywhere... to anyone and anywhere. God doesn't just *love everyone*... He knows and loves that woman in Baghdad this morning, who went to prayers, made lunch, and felt hatred towards America when she heard the bombs go off and had to call her kids inside.

Offended?

Good... maybe we're getting it...It should offend our small egos. How else is God going to stretch us? Jesus knew those stones weren't their favorites. He was trying to get them out of their own backyards of smallness. The ego is always about me. Jesus is always about the world. God's work, God's presence, God's love are never boundaried...That's Jesus' work... So....

Christians are those who are just going out looking for what God is already up to in the world and in time, sometimes.... we're also given the blessed opportunity to bear witness to what we think it means., whom it points to..."Can I tell you about Jesus?"

Being Christian means we're in on a mystery and it's a mystery being worked out in the world. It's a loving mystery that we believe can be seen in anyone... or at least the Saints can see it...

Saint John wrote, remember???? **"The light who enlightens every one, was coming into the world."**

"The lamb slain before the foundation of the world" in the fullness of time, came to take away the sin of the world.... **"Behold..."** The world's sin.... All of it... everything, everyone.

The One who is life... emptied himself of life. The God who is love... in love, gave himself even to those he offended. He died ... from offense... an offense to many. But to us... it is salvation...

That's what it is to be Christian...Seeing this offensive one in such a way that we understand he is savior of the world.

So come... believe this "offensive gospel": That God loves you like you are... that God's love isn't bounded, not by who you are... not by who anyone is. Believe...follow...and take this Offensive One into the deepest part of your being... Come, take all of it and eat.

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