

**SERMON**  
**“Pardon Me While I Offend You”**  
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**January 31, 2010**  
**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

“Ah, my God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Yahweh 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 Yahweh.” Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth; and Yahweh 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.”

**Luke 4: 21-30**

Then he 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 heavens 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.

## SERMON

We left Jesus last Sunday finally filled to the brim with the power of the Spirit. Oh my gosh! Katy bar your door, for the Spirit of God is on the loose! Oh, the joy of it! After all. Isn't it what gives meaning and purpose to our lives? Isn't it the Spirit bringing the word of God to life, binding together the Body of Christ, and bringing to awareness the saving presence of God among us? Wasn't that what all the hoop-la of Christmas is about?

As long as he was a little tyke, it was all great fun. But now that he's full grown and filled to the brim with the power of God's Spirit, he's starting to talk nonsense. One moment they could not have been more pleased with him. They could hardly believe that the one reading to them from Isaiah 61, who speaks so well...is a hometown boy, Joseph's and Mary's boy. With him, the messianic age has arrived and they can barely contain themselves. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Oh joy of joys, the messianic age has finally arrived and the one to bring it us has been **right here in our own back yard all along**. How much better can it get?!

If Jesus had **stood up from that preaching chair** at that very moment he could have walked away a crowd pleaser. He could have left the people with smiles on their faces. But oh no, the great truth teller had to lay it on them. Jesus did not pussyfoot around issues. He tells it straight, even when the truth hurts. He had to of known that what he was about to say was going to be offensive. He could just as well of said, "Pardon me while I offend you!" Let me tell you about the peculiar nature of my walk among you." Then Jesus cites two examples of prophetic moments when God acted to redeem and to save two "outsiders." He reminds them of the time Elijah, during a severe famine, gave food to a Gentile widow and her son, but fed no Israelites. Preacher Jesus goes on to remind them of the time Elisha healed Naaman, a Syrian army officer.

He throws in their faces the stories from a time in their history when there were more than enough poor widows and lepers in town that needed help. He did not need to go out to do mission work. There was more than enough pious Jews to minister unto. He did not need to search out poor pagan widows from the wrong side of the tracks. He certainly did not need to go help an officer in the army of Israel's enemies. He did not need to be so offensive as to tell them that God might send help to a Taliban officer while passing over a beloved Sunday School teacher.

“When they heard this, they flew into murderous rage. You can almost hear their tongues wagging, “How dare you talk that way to us? You don't need to throw it in our face that you would rather go help foreigners than us.”

It turns out that the “acceptable year of the Lord” is not acceptable for the people. What's acceptable to God, Luke tell us, may be downright offensive to us.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about the time at a retreat when the opening exercise was to tell a story about someone who had been Christ in their lives. After they had all thought about it a while, people began to tell their stories. There was one about a friend who stayed put through a long illness while everyone else deserted, and another one about a neighbor who took the place of a father who was self-destructive. One after the other, there were stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue. The conference room turned into a church, where we settled into the warmth of each other's company. Oh how we savored the comforts our savior had to offer! Jesus our friend was there, and all was right with the world until this one woman stood up and said, “Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, “Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him or her for it?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, “The Company of Strangers,” p. 42-43.

Often Jesus has a calming, uplifting, and healing effect on people—but not always. We preachers were told in seminary, “If the congregation you serve, if your people start getting angry with you, you can be assured that you are doing something right—for the gospel of Jesus Christ can be very offensive. “Whenever the gospel is faithfully preached,” says Luther, “demons are set loose.” Now many a professor recommended we gradually offer up the rabble-rousing part of Jesus’ message. You know. Do some trust building. Endear yourself into the hearts of the people before you sock-it-to-um! I even hear myself telling the search committee when they expressed concern that I may be too liberal for this congregation, “Oh, I will ease the people into the more radical teachings of Jesus.” Oh, how far I am from hitting the mark of my Jesus, for Jesus in his first recorded sermon lays the outlandish truth on them.

Akin to Jeremiah, when I felt called to become a minister, I resisted. “O my God, no,” I railed against the thought of it. “It’s not in me to be one of those pious pastors. Plus, I am not a good writer and certainly not a public speaker—and...I’m a woman.” And like Jeremiah, I heard in my mind’s voice God saying, “Do you say, I am only a woman?” And God assured me that I would be given the word and the courage to speak, and not have to go around being flakily pious. What God did not prepare me for was that my fear of fake piety, writing and public speaking was a cake walk in comparison to the God given words that come forth when I write. “I cannot say that,” is often my argument with God. “I could offend the folk.” But God can be unrelenting.

Sermonic tension can be hard on us preachers. Most of us are people pleasers. And we want our sermons to be crowd pleasers. To hear after worship that you really liked what we had to say, boost our shallow egos. We are natural born nurturers. We want to care for our people...to love our people, and have them love us. We think of ourselves as reconcilers and peacemakers.

The preacher in me could not but feel sorry for Barack Obama when his preacher got him in all kinds of hot water during his campaign. His preacher said some wild, challenging, outrageous things in some sermons. Obama was criticized for not being offended and walking out in indignation at what his preacher had said!

In reference to this, Obama replied when a reporter asked him about this, “Look, most Christians could tell you, if we walked out of church every time our preacher says something with which we disagree, we wouldn’t stay until the end of many sermons!”

Obama could have cited Luke 4 in his defense! Obama’s pastor was accused of sounding anti-American and unpatriotic. Isn’t that what the folk in Nazareth thought about Jesus’ comments? He was being anti-Israel. Unpatriotic in implying that God was not always on the side of Israel, and that God also loved and cared for Canaanite women and Syrian army officers.

I also cried when Obama thought he had to distance himself from Jeremiah Wright. It’s hard enough to offend your own. It breaks your heart sometimes. I cannot imagine what it must have felt like to attempt to speak God’s word, then have those words throw out in such a way that offends people around the world...and then one of your own...turns on you.

In Nazareth that day, Jesus made the folks mad when he interpreted scripture in such a way that portrayed the work of God as a wide reach beyond the bounds of their definition of “insider” and “outsider.” Well, they didn’t like it one bit. It made them so mad they wanted to throw him off a cliff. The same man, just moments before, had admired and loved him. And it doesn’t stop there. He keeps on offending people, right and left, throughout his short life as he tries to move them beyond the bounds of their set definitions on so many subjects. He got them so worked up and angry that there was no other option but to kill him.

So the question is: Are we willing to let Jesus walk among us unhindered? Are we willing to walk and talk with him with our minds open to even hear what sounds offensive? Are we willing to listen to Jesus, no matter what he says to us? Are we willing to following him no matter where he takes us?

For as scary as it is, as difficult as it is, it is what will give our lives purpose and meaning. It is what will allow the word of God to take life in us and in the world. Jesus walking around unhindered is the saving presence of God among us. It is what will bind us together as the Body of Christ.

Katy, bar your door, for the Spirit of God is on the loose!