

“A Rebuilding”

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On the bulletin cover is a picture of the congregation that I grew up in, in northern Minnesota: First Presbyterian Church of Hibbing, Minnesota. Hibbing was a real blessing to me and my family. We moved there when I was going into 10th grade. My mother took a teaching position up in the old mountain Iron Range. That was even farther north, and we were so blessed.

We went to that church the first week we moved to town and we went there every Sunday after that; and, I was treated so well and with so much caring. We had wonderful pastors. We had two pastors on the staff that were just great and were there the entire time that I was there. I was ordained a Deacon in my junior year, I believe. Then, when I went off to college, I received scholarships from a number of people in the church who had businesses.

When I went to Seminary, I received scholarships from those places plus, [places] like the Eastern Star, and some of the other local groups where we had members of the church involved. It was such a community, and so much warmth and caring in that place, and [now] I feel for them. When I was there the congregation had about 900 members. Now they are down to about 64, so it has been difficult. Like so many churches, they have gone down and almost dried up. It is very difficult to be the church now in this 21st century and I pray for them every week. We pray that God will continue to bring new life to rebuild. And, we pray for the places where we have been.

I know my story isn't alone. I know many of you have churches — especially in smaller communities — and they have just dried up. People have moved away, to go to places where they can get better jobs — better paying jobs; where they can go and find hope and opportunity. It is painful to watch.

It is much more difficult for people to find their way to church, and it is our responsibility to share and to invite, so that they know that there is something here worth having. That doesn't mean that we acquiesce; that we try to share a Gospel that is watered down, so that it is unoffensive, so that we share whatever will make people feel good. It's about that, but it's about a lot more.

Jesus knew that at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus started out by being baptized and, in that moment, he knew that he was called, because the very skies opened up, according to the Gospel of Luke, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove came down out of Heaven, and in that moment touched Jesus deeply. And the voice — the very word of God — said, “This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The Spirit filled him in that moment.

Then, according to the Gospel of Luke, the very next thing that happened was that he went out into the desert — into the wilderness — for 40 days to be tempted by the devil. In that 40 days, he went through all of the temptations that the devil could come up with. And, then what happened? The devil walked away with his little fork tail between his legs, and gave up.

It said at the end of that passage, and the beginning of Luke 4:1-11, in the 11th verse, that Jesus remained filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus was not diminished by the temptation, but he was filled up even more. So, he went out into the land right after that, still in chapter 4, at the beginning of verse 14, where he talks about [when] he had gone out and he had preached the Gospel in different places around the area, and they received him.

I wonder what in the world he was preaching, because by the time he made it to Nazareth — his home — he was popular. He was a more celebrated Jewish man than Lennie Bruce or Sammy Davis Jr. [Laughter.] He was special in the eyes of the people of that time, so when he went in to that synagogue the people were excited. They couldn't wait to hear what Jesus was about to say — and they were shocked to their very core.

[When] it all began — you could almost feel the worry — and you could almost feel the fear going on, as he asked for the Isaiah scroll. You see, it wasn't found like a Bible. Whole rolls of scrolls that could be rolled out and they had a number of them. It was a small congregation, so they probably didn't have *all* of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible, but I'm sure they had a number of them [scrolls]. And, picking Isaiah, well that was frightening, because Isaiah said a lot of things that were uncomfortable. But, alright, he rolled it out and he found his spot: chapter 61:1-2. It talked about the Messiah, and darned if Jesus didn't talk about it in the first person, "I." And darned if Jesus didn't pick, out of all of the places in the Hebrew Bible and especially from that book of Isaiah, he picked the part about caring for the poor; he picked the part about caring for those who had been displaced; who had been disbanded; who had been brutalized; those who had been placed in prison for their beliefs.

I mean that was radical stuff. That probably was not what he preached in the other synagogues, or they would have kicked him out, too. He probably went to the other synagogues and preached about God's love, and God's caring, and God's commitment to you, and God's forgiveness, and God's mercy — all of the things that make us feel better. But, here is Jesus having the temerity to read chapter 61:1-2, and then the gall to go back and read chapter 58:6 — all about caring for the least of these.

Now, the people at that time believed, by and large, that if your life was a mess, if you were from a place that was horrific, or you were of the wrong nationality, or you were poor, or you were dispossessed in some way, that was God's will upon you. You had done something wrong. Your people had done something horrible that put you in a position to receive the wrath of God. They would pick and choose their Scriptures to make it fit that ideology.

But here was Jesus, saying that whole mindset — that whole understanding of God, and of God's wrath and God's judgment — is somehow inaccurate. This Messiah, who just happens to be me — Jesus — standing in his own hometown synagogue is going to turn the whole religion of the world upside down; and place the emphasis not on his own people; not on his own nationality; not on the people of his place — Nazareth; but on those who were unlike them. It scared them and it angered them, and they kicked him out.

When they went into the synagogue I'm sure they were so excited. Nothing good ever happens in Nazareth. That is even biblical, folks. Read it in the New Testament. They were so pathetic in the way they viewed themselves. [They thought,] "Finally, something good

was going to happen in Nazareth and it was that carpenter's son who was special. He might even turn out to be one heck of a rabbi — and then he goes and does that to us. Now he is going to humiliate us — not just in our own synagogue, but maybe in the entire Galilee. And, if it's worse and if people start to listen to him, he might embarrass us in Jerusalem, and that is where the Roman Empire is. He could even make it worse for our town, our community. We have got to get him out of here, so we look nothing like him. Everyone knows that we will not stand for this."

Now, you might be thinking, "Why would they do that?" All he talked about was, caring for the poor; caring for those who do not look like them — for those who cannot help themselves.

But, what if Jesus stood up here today, after watching the news, what would he say? Now, I don't even need to go down the litany list. I will let you do that in your own heads. What would he say about those who are poor; those who have been disenfranchised; pushed away? What would he say about those who keep them at bay?

These are not just old stories. They are as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago. Maybe more relevant today. And, they challenge our very being. Maybe it isn't that surprising that Jesus might get kicked out on his ear for challenging us in ways we don't want to face; forcing us to look at the decisions we make as individuals, as a church, as a society.

This is hard stuff. It's painful. And Jesus forced the people to be more inclusive. To not just be Jewish or Nazarene, but to embrace the wider community of Samaritans who were filthy; Egyptians who were horrific unbelievers; and, people all over the rest of the known world, with their pagan gods and their outlandish ways — and Jesus called them to come in.

Would we kick him out or would we embrace his understanding of the faith? It's not as easy as we might think. I lay that at your feet today, as Jesus laid that at the feet of the Nazarenes — his uncles, his aunts, his mother, his siblings, his friends who not unlike mine cared for me, raised me, and wanted the best for me. Would they kick me out today for this sermon, the way Jesus was kicked out so long ago? That is for each one of us in our own hearts to decide, and may we do it fervently in Jesus name.

Amen.