

When Preaching Turns to Meddlin'

Luke 4:14-30

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Has this ever happened to you?...

You get to church and settle in to listen to the sermon,
and then the preacher says something you disagree with.

Everything is going along just fine when, all of a sudden, the preacher says
something that *really* upsets you and you find yourself steaming.

I remember visiting my home church one Sunday—the church where I preached
my first sermon and where I was ordained.

A man who had been a student pastor at the church was filling the pulpit.

He preached the absolute worst sermon I have ever heard.

Rather than proclaiming the good news of God's love for all people,
which is what preachers are supposed to do,
his sermon was basically a diatribe against everyone he didn't like or
agree with—I should have walked out.

No wonder, when he was a candidate to be the associate pastor,
the congregation (including my parents) voted him down.

One pastor told of preaching a sermon on Galatians 3:27-28:

*“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.
There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;*

for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

He talked about the various conflicts in the early church and how Paul appealed to them to rise above their differences.

Then he spoke about some of the areas of conflict in his church.

Suddenly an older gentleman stood up in the middle of the congregation and began preaching his own sermon.

He ranted and raved for a good five minutes, all the while wagging his finger and pointing at the pastor.

Finally he sat down, red-faced and out of breath.

The pastor said, “I’m not sure just what happened after that. I suppose we stood and sang the closing hymn.”

Later in the week, the pastor went to visit the man. He asked him, “What happened?”

He said, “I’ll tell you exactly what happened, preacher, you went from preaching to meddlin’!”

It causes us to ask: Where do you draw the line?

When does preaching the gospel become meddling in the personal affairs of those in the congregation?

Preachers are supposed to comfort the afflicted, it is true,
but are there times when one should afflict the comfortable?

Perhaps Jesus’ experience in his home-town synagogue gives us some clues.

II

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, the son of Joseph and Mary.

When he was about thirty years old he went down to the Jordan River to be baptized.

Then he went out into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed and was tempted by Satan.

After forty days in the wilderness, he returned to Galilee and began teaching in the local synagogues.

He was an immediate success.

Luke says he was praised by everyone. (4:15)

It was only a matter of time before he went back to his home town of Nazareth.

Can you imagine the excitement when he did?

The folks in Nazareth had every reason to be proud—
here was one of their own.

So, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, *as was his custom*.

It was a moment of high drama.

A hush fell over the room.

All eyes were on Jesus.

The clerk handed him the scroll of the *Book of Isaiah*.

Why Isaiah? We don't know.

Jesus may have requested it.

It may have been the prescribed reading for the day.

Or it could have been a random choice.

Jesus took the scroll and unfurled it to the sixty-first chapter, where it says,

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

*because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ...”*

Luke says when Jesus finished reading he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, sat down, and said:

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke. 4:21)

In response, Luke says,

“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’” (Luke 4:22)

Have you had moments in your life when “all spoke well of” you?

I preached my first sermon when I was sixteen years old,
a junior in high school

It was youth Sunday, and I was one of three guys from the youth group given the opportunity to share the sermon.

I preached a sermon I plagiarized from Peter Marshall—
at least I had the good sense to borrow from a Presbyterian!

It was the story in Mark 5 of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment and was healed.

The response was overwhelming.

A visitor to the church that day saw that it was youth Sunday and groaned—
youth Sundays can be SO BORING!

Afterward that person was heard to say,
“I didn’t know we were going to get to hear Billy Graham.”

That's pretty heady stuff for a sixteen year old.

I like it when people speak well of me.

I'm sure you do too.

I wonder: how did Jesus feel when "all spoke well of him?"

III

Now, had Jesus stopped there
and accepted the praise of his elders,
the story would have a happy ending.

The men would have left with a warm glow and gone home to tell their wives what
an amazing young man Jesus turned out to be,
what a good public speaker he was,
and how good the sermon was.

For weeks the town would have been abuzz:

*"Who would've thought? The carpenter's son, a learned rabbi! And from
Nazareth! Will wonders never cease? Can anything good come out of
Nazareth? Ha! This ought to show the Jerusalem big-wigs!"*

No, had Jesus been content to read the scripture and make his comment,
everything would've been all right.

He would have been popular
and well thought of,
and chances are he would have lived to a ripe old age.

It was when he went from preaching to meddlin' that the trouble began.

According to Luke, he sat down—
as was the custom of rabbis when they taught—
and he brought up two examples of how God pours out his love
in ways we don't always understand or appreciate.

The first was the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17).

The other was Naaman, the Syrian general (2 Kings 5).

Both stories were certainly familiar to the leaders of the synagogue.

The problem is these were hardly the favorite stories of the Jews.

The widow was a poor, helpless nobody, who lived in the land of Sidon,
a mostly Gentile area to the north of Galilee.

Why should God favor *her* over the proper Jewish widows of Israel?

And then there was Naaman, a Syrian general who was afflicted with leprosy.

There were plenty of lepers among the Jewish people in need of healing.

Why would God show mercy to a Gentile, and a military man no less?

Jesus used these examples to show just how indiscriminate God can be.

And the upshot of it all was this:

If God can be so gracious to attend to the need of a poor helpless widow in Sidon...

and if God can be so merciful as to offer healing to an undeserving Gentile soldier from Syria...

what gives self-righteous Jewish elders the privilege of saying who belongs to the kingdom and who doesn't?

Jesus went from preaching to meddling,
and it nearly cost him his life.

Luke says, "*When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.*"
(Luke 4:28)

They got up and took him to the brow of a hill outside of town with every intention of throwing him down to his death.

There was once a young American who got a job as a tour guide for church groups from the U.S. touring the Holy Land.

He would stand at the front of the bus with the microphone and point out the sights as the bus rolled through the various towns.

He studied hard and did a good job, but at first he felt like he just had to know the answer to every question—and he got all kinds.

One time, they were driving through Nazareth with a bus full of people, when he pointed out the window and said,

"This may well be the hill from which the people of Nazareth in Luke chapter 4 tried to cast Jesus off."

An old Catholic priest raised his hand and asked, "What is it called?"

The young man searched his memory for a moment and then blurted out, "It's called the Mount of Jumpification."

Everyone has their own internal Mount of Jumpification—
where they have the choice to reject Jesus and his message and his gifts...
or not.

Where they have the opportunity to give up prejudice and celebrate the fact that God's mercy and liberation are meant for all.

The people of Nazareth weren't ready to do that,
but they were ready to cast Jesus off the cliff.

Somehow, he escaped.

Luke says, *"He passed through the midst of them and went on his way."* (4:29)

It would be long time before he returned.

IV

Well, Jesus is not the only one in scripture who went from preaching to meddlin'.

Jeremiah, who was only a boy when God called him, would be beaten, thrown in a well, imprisoned, and hounded for daring to pronounce God's judgment upon the people of Judea.

Peter healed a lame man in the temple,
and everyone was amazed and rushed to hear what he had to say.

But instead of seizing the opportunity for his fifteen minutes of fame,
he accused the crowd of helping to crucify Jesus.

It caused such a stir that the guards came and put him in jail. (Acts 3-4)

Then there's the Apostle Paul—he was always getting into trouble for meddlin'.

In one of his first outings, he preached to the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia and got run out of town. (Acts 13)

In Lystra, they dragged him out of the city and stoned him and left him for dead. (Acts 14)

In Philippi, he and Silas were thrown into jail. (Acts 16)

And in Ephesus, he nearly started a riot and ended up running for his life.
(Acts 19)

When preaching turns to meddling, all hell breaks loose.

Just ask Martin Luther—the Pope excommunicated him.

Or ask John Calvin—he was forced to leave Geneva and spend three years in exile.

Or ask Martin Luther King, Jr., who we honored two weeks ago with a national holiday, and rightly so.

But we forget that many of his supporters abandoned him when, exactly one year before he died, he denounced the Vietnam War from the pulpit of the Riverside Church in New York City.

All of these were guilty of the same fatal flaw—

going from preaching to meddling.

It is dangerous business, I tell you!

V

The question is, where do you draw the line?

When do you move from comforting the afflicted to afflicting the comfortable?

First, I think you have to see a difference between preaching that's abstract and preaching that's concrete.

For example, if I were to say,

“Brothers and Sisters love your neighbor as yourself,”

I dare say all of you would join in saying, “Amen!”

But if I said,

“Friends, before you come back next Sunday, go and introduce yourself to the family who lives in the trailer park or in the run-down house in the poor neighborhood. Take them a fresh-baked loaf of bread or an apple pie; invite them over to dinner; take them to the park—

love *them* as you love yourself”...

Well, you see what I mean?

Preaching turns to meddlin' when it gets specific and concrete in calling for justice for the oppressed and liberation for the captives.

I got to know a former Southern Baptist pastor named John Wesley Shipp.

At the height of the civil rights movement he pastored a church in North Carolina where quite a few members of that all-white church were fervently opposed to integration.

So John Wesley Shipp decided to tackle the issue head on. He preached a sermon on John 13:34-35, where Jesus says:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

He preached the same sermon three Sundays in a row.

The deacons called him in for an explanation, to which he replied,
“I’m waiting for you to start doing it.”

He was soon looking for another church.

Preaching turns to meddlin’ when it is willing to risk everything in the search for justice and truth.

VI

Preaching also turns to meddlin’ when it exposes your blind spots.

Let me ask you: Are there topics of conversation you can’t discuss rationally?

If I were to stand up here and announce that “Barack Obama is the greatest president we’ve ever had,” would it cause you to see red?

Or, if I were to say the same of George W. Bush,
would you find yourself getting hot under the collar?

Blind spots generally refer to areas of our lives in which we are in denial.

Usually we are not aware of our blind spots,
but every now and then something happens that causes us to recognize them
and opens us to the possibility of another point of view.

I once did a sermon on abortion where I called for rejecting the extremes of pro-life and pro-choice and focusing on...
respect for those who disagree with us,
responsibility in our decision making,
and reconciliation for those who suffer
and have to make difficult and painful choices.

A church member named Joan came up to me and said,

“I am very pro-choice, and you weren’t strong enough.”

Then she paused, took a breath, and said,
*“But you know, you made me think of the other side,
 and I didn’t want to do that.”*

Joan, to her credit, was able to face her blind spot and open herself to a different way of looking at the issue of abortion.

Whenever you find yourself getting defensive and unable to talk about something objectively,
 it might indicate a blind spot,
 an area of your life where you are in denial.

VII

Friends, it is never easy to hear an uncomfortable truth about ourselves without getting defensive and angry and responding,
 "How dare you talk to me that way!"

I read the story of a man who gained quite a bit of weight. He went to the doctor for a physical. The doctor looked at his chart where the man's height and weight were written, made a few notes, and then had to leave the room for a moment.

The man sneaked a look at his chart. The doctor had written,
 "The patient is obese."

Who wants to hear something like that?

Jesus wrote a hard message on Nazareth's chart—
 he gave them a history lesson.

God sent Elijah to feed a non-Jewish widow in a time of famine.

Why? Perhaps because she was willing to first share her bread with him ([1 Kings 17:10](#)).

God sent Elisha to heal a non-Jewish leper, Naaman the Syrian.

Why? Perhaps because he was willing to humble himself by washing seven times in the Jordan River in order to be healed (2 Kings 5:14).

The people in the synagogue are livid when Jesus claims that the blessings he brings will go to others whom they disdain.

Nobody else had the guts to tell them what Jesus told them, and us:

"You can't claim God's blessings for your life unless you claim them for other people's lives at the same time."

Nobody else but you has the power to accept this hard message as the guiding light of your life.

Nobody else but you has the power to accept Jesus' gifts of peace, forgiveness, and justice for your life.

VIII

Finally, preaching turns to meddlin' when the gospel hits home.

What matters is that when it does, you turn your discomfort over to God and let God use it to lead you to a deeper faith and a clearer understanding of yourself.

A woman named Donna went to Sunday school one Sunday morning expecting to hear a Bible story and an uplifting lesson.

Instead, she came face-to-face with herself.

The lesson was entitled, "Who's pulling your strings?"

It had to do with how our lives are often governed by external forces and not the Spirit of God within us.

Donna went home livid.

"No one's pulling my strings," she said, as she threw her Sunday school lesson book down on the coffee table.

Later that week she said, “You know, I’ve been making a list of all the different voices I listen to and how much influence they have over me. I can’t think of a thing I’ve said or done lately that was my own idea.”

The following Sunday she could hardly wait to get back to the class.

Over time this one lesson changed her life.

She still listened to what others had to say,
but from that day on, she sought to pull her own strings.

Yes...preaching turns to meddlin’ when the gospel hits home.

If that is the case, I pray that the example of our Lord will encourage each of us
to be more bold about speaking the truth in love—
to do a little meddlin’ ourselves.

And when the shoe fits...
that is, when a sermon or a lesson hits a hot button in you...

I hope you will be willing to take the message to heart
and not try to throw the messenger off Mt. Jumpification!

Amen.

Sources:

Alyce McKenzie, “The Mount of Jumpification: Reflections on Luke 4:21-30, February 3, 2013, retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Mount-Jumpification-Alyce-McKenzie-01-28-2013>.

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