

Epiphany 4C (1/31/2016)

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

**Luke 4:21-30**

*The fear of rejection is powerful, and can prevent us from being completely ourselves. But God gives each of us a unique identity and role to play in the kingdom. The Holy Spirit anoints us with courage and grace to live fully into that identity and purpose in spite of the risk, and makes us agents of transformation for others.*

This week's Gospel from Luke picks up where last week's left off. Held together, these two passages depict a critical moment at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry: his return to his hometown, the illumination of his purpose to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives, the community's fascination with his teaching, and finally, their sudden fury at his insistence that God's favor overflows their conventional boundaries. From an ordinary Sabbath in the synagogue to Jesus' extraordinary mission statement, from the exclusiveness of religious tradition to the inclusiveness of God's reign, from collective amazement to categorical rejection, this scene is bursting with significance. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus steps into his role as Messiah and tells the truth about God's surprising grace. It's for Gentile widows and Syrians generals, even as it is for God's chosen people. And that's a truth his neighbors don't want to hear, but that we need to hear again today.

This story is about the people's resistance, but also Jesus' resolve. Alienation from his childhood community is no small sacrifice, but the stakes are high. **Jesus stands for the healing of all communities, the reconciliation of all peoples divided by ethnic and religious identity, the release of all who are held captive by restrictive social norms.** His purpose is to make God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven. And that kingdom meets with hostility anytime our faith is too small to accommodate it.

But Jesus' hometown rejection is also personal. He is cut off from his family home, from the people who knew him first, from the source of his childhood memories. It's a painful abandonment, the kind we go out of our way to avoid, even if it means keeping pieces of our identity secret, or keeping quiet about important but contentious issues. The fear of rejection is powerful, and can prevent us from being completely ourselves, especially around the people who knew us first – our families and our childhood communities. But the stakes are high. Just as God anoints Jesus for a singular purpose, **God also gives each of us a unique identity and role to play in the kingdom, the chain-bursting reality that we have first come to know in the love of Jesus, and that is continually breaking into our midst.**

A pastoral colleague once told the story of a congregation he served in the 80s. A young man from the church, the son of a woman who was very active in congregational life, left the community to make his own way in another city. Some years later, he returned home, having contracted HIV and subsequently developed AIDS. The news of his illness was met with suspicion and fear, and his welcome place in the congregation became uncertain. It was a painful abandonment. He had come home to die, but at the very time he needed his congregation most, he experienced mostly disregard, and even contempt.

The pastor, recognizing the young man's isolation, called on him and his mother to discuss a possibility. Would they be willing to tell his story to the congregation together? Could they openly affirm his dignity and invite the congregation into a renewed relationship? What a request! Can you imagine the courage and grace it would take to stand up in front of a community that had rejected you and tell the whole truth about your life, all for the sake of understanding and reconciliation? Even so, that's just what the young man did, with his mother at his side. Thankfully, their church also responded with grace, and

surrounded the family with support in the young man's last days. So, he died in peace, and the congregation was transformed, markedly more capable of love than they had been before.

This is the work of God for the sake of the kingdom. But God does not accomplish this work apart from women and men who claim the fullness of their identity and calling. Dear church, the risk is real, and standing on the side of the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed can get you thrown off a cliff. Standing on the side of the sick, the outcast, the vulnerable, and the stranger can lead to rejection.

**But when we stand there, we stand with Jesus. And his call to discipleship – to take up a cross and follow – is accompanied by a promise: “You, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit anoints us with courage and grace to live into our God-given identity and loving purpose in spite of the risk. And the audacity of our discipleship, even as it threatens to cause offense, also makes us agents of transformation for others. So, God grant us the courage and grace to bear God’s creative and redeeming word to the people who knew us first, to our communities, and to the world.**

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<sup>1</sup> From the liturgy for Holy Baptism, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 231.