

The Congregation

On the last Sunday of January I preached a sermon based on Luke 4:14-21. Perhaps you might want to re-read the scripture and re-experience the sermon by clicking on this link:



It's the story of Jesus' first sermon that was delivered at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. In this sermon Jesus lays out his mission statement and encourages all his followers to get on board with his agenda; "to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Even though the scripture from the Gospel of Luke for that particular Sunday ended at verse twenty-one, the story did not end there. Next we are told that all in the congregation were amazed at his words, but as Jesus continued his sermon by relating two Old Testament stories that declared that God's grace, forgiveness, and love were not limited to the Jews but were freely available to all, the congregation became more and more agitated. Luke tells us that the congregants were filled with rage to the point that they drove Jesus out of town and led him to a cliff and threatened to throw him to his death. So, there comes a point when the story is not so much about Jesus as it is about the congregation and their evolution from paying close attention to Jesus, to praise for his teachings, to mob violence that fell just short of murder.

Yet, Luke says that as the congregation's madness came to a climax that "Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Author, church historian, and public theologian, Diana Butler Bass then asks if Jesus simply walked away from the mob, or was his safe departure a supernatural miracle like Moses parting the Red Sea, or what else might we imagine as an explanation for his escape. Her imagination suggests that we might find the answer in the group of bystanders...the answer might be found in the congregation.

She says, "I suspect the unnamed heroes of this story...made a way for the intended victim to pass safely. Did they spot one another in the angry throng?...Maybe they moved toward one another, hoping to keep each other safe. Did a few others notice the two and the small band then began to multiply?...It must have been hard to go against their family, friends, and neighbors. As they followed the mob to the bluff, they must have worried that if they spoke up they could be thrown off, too. But, instead of submitting...maybe they formed a little alternative community in solidarity with each other. When Jesus was herded to the cliff, perhaps it was they who saw an opening - made and opening - and helped him escape...the bystanders found the courage to do something.

And that's the overlooked miracle of Luke 4. Only a community - even one that goes unnoticed in the crowd - the band that refuses to join the rabble - can keep us from going completely over the edge."

*"Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator,
but, above all, thou shalt not be a
bystander."*

-Yehuda Bauer

Perhaps we have been inactive bystanders too long. Perhaps it is time for us to band together and accept Jesus' agenda as ours. Perhaps we too must "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Yes, we'll find the answer in the congregation when we have the courage to move from inactive bystanders to active Jesus followers that joyfully and faithfully embrace Jesus' agenda for our lives and for our Chapel.

