

4 Epiphany C
The Rt. Rev. Mark A. Bourlakas
97th Annual Council
of the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia

[The following is a condensed version of Bishop Mark's sermon this morning in Roanoke.]

From Bishop Mark: **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus and from your brothers and sisters gathered in Council in Roanoke as the Episcopal Church in Southwestern Virginia.**

“Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

This is St. Luke's last comment after his account of Jesus teaching in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. And it is a really striking comment. The people with whom he grew up around are hard-hearted, insulting and, even, full of rage. And so, *Jesus passes through ... them and goes on his way.* What if I told you, as we gather here this morning, that God is more concerned for a scared, pregnant Latina woman who is illegally in this country than He is with any of our problems?

Or what if I told you that this morning, Jesus is more interested in the healing of a sick young adult who is a Muslim, than He is in with all of our illnesses combined.

Or, that the Holy Spirit is more engaged in the journeys of Syrian refugees than He is in any of our ongoing journeys?

Now, if you disagree with these assertions, or if they evoke even a little bit of confusion or frustration in you, then you are ready to approach our Gospel reading from Luke on this Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. Jesus makes very similar assertions that morning at the synagogue in Nazareth.

Now, let me assure you that the assertions I just put before you are exaggerations. While God does have a deep and abiding compassion for those on the margins, God loves all of us and is equally concerned with all of our struggles and with all of our healing. The compassion and mercy of God in Christ Jesus is not a qualified or partial love. My exaggerations are intended to put you in the mind of the people in the synagogue that morning in Nazareth.

When Jesus rolls up the great Isaiah scroll and announces, *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”* he is claiming to be God's anointed messiah! And this is offensive to the good church going folks in Nazareth. They murmur: *“Is not this Joseph's son?”* Luke then tells us that some of them are so filled with rage that they want to kill him. They go as far as to try and hurl him off of a cliff!

They go from praising the local boy for his wise teaching to a place of defensive and self-righteous rage. Jesus expects this. He says to them, *“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.”*

As Jesus interprets the prophet Isaiah, for the hometown folks, he recounts two familiar Old Testament stories. He speaks of the poor widow of Sidon for whom Elijah performs a miracle, and he tells of a leper, Naaman, from Syria who was healed by Elisha. These are outsiders!

Jesus uses stories of foreigners and unclean outsiders to make a strong statement of contrast for the folks in the Nazareth synagogue. Here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is starting to describe what God's kingdom of mercy and forgiveness looks like. This kingdom love goes out to everyone.

In every season of its common life, we, the people of God, run the risk of becoming narrow and closed off from the active and unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit. Unintentionally, and sometimes very intentionally, we form ourselves into groupings that create boundaries which function to exclude and isolate other people.

Israel's rules and criteria about who was in and who was out have become way too restrictive. They have forgotten that God's covenant with them was much more about justice and righteousness and much less about right interpretation of the law and ritual purity. And so, Jesus points this out. And those gathered for worship do not like it one little bit. Now, this kind of prejudice didn't just happen with the people of Israel a long time ago. More often than we wish to admit, the Church, in many quarters, has the selfish tendency to get exclusive,

forgetting its common mission of loving inclusion for all of God's children.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit begins to push the community to repent of its waywardness and live out the love and compassion that God desires. In both word and in deed, Jesus breaks into our narrow readings of what Holy Spirit is doing and calls us out into new and often challenging places.

In his brilliant book on the Holy Spirit, The Go-Between God, Bishop John Taylor, writes, "I am amazed afresh at the unbelievable daring of the Creator Spirit who seems to gamble all past gains on a new initiative, inciting his creatures to such crazy adventure and risk."

Jesus points to and calls forward from us this risk-taking work of God's Holy Spirit. The Christ of God desires to fill us up with the grace of the Holy Spirit's power. He calls us to be his disciples and follow him, or, as he did in Nazareth, he will pass on by us in order to seek out others whose hearts *are* prepared to listen and act on the Good News. The Gospel story is the foundation and hope of our faith communities. It is not our property to decide whom it includes and excludes.

At the beginning of this new year of our Gospel mission as the Episcopal Church here in Southwestern Virginia, we might begin asking and praying over what Jesus' teaching in Nazareth means for us. How do we begin a new season of opening our hearts to the discipleship of the Gospel?

What new initiatives across this diocese; in our neighborhoods, will we risk undertaking? Our Mission Action Plan is all about strengthening the communion of the household of congregations that make up our diocese. The Holy Spirit enlivens the church to go out and make communion in Christ's name in the world. Becoming a missional church means being a church whose primary focus is on God's mission.

You will often hear me say, that we cannot give away what we do not have. We cannot give away what we do not have. 'Charity begins at home.' St. Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth is the charter of this love.

This is the starting place. We must first practice this radical inclusive love as the Eucharistic community whenever we gather around God's altar.

If we cannot practice and live out the Gospel within the walls of our churches then we cannot really expect to be able to offer it to others elsewhere.

God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus is not partial or exclusive. The Holy Spirit is continually moving and calling us out beyond the boundaries that we find familiar and comfortable. As we engage this kind of inclusive hospitality, we begin to stretch, heal, and strengthen the bonds between each other and between the other parishes that make up this great diocese. And as we build up this fellowship, we can, more and more, spread this love out to the many different neighbors that surround our faith communities. Strengthening the circles of love and inclusion with increase the fruitfulness of our discipleship.

Let us not end up like the hard-hearted folks that morning in Nazareth. Let it not be said of any of our parishes or of this diocese that, "***Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.***" Rather, for Christ's sake, let us pray that the Holy Spirit abides in our midst so that people may increasingly say of us, 'See how they love each other and how they love their neighbors.'

AMEN