

Today would have been Martin Luther King Jr's 88th Birthday. As we begin worship I invite you to sit back, close your eyes if comfortable and listen to some of **King's** dream. I dream of an America where "children will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character?" America is one nation...we are NOT divided: "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."

As you listen to the reading I invite you to listen from the point of view of the crowd—the people of **Jesus'** hometown. After the reading we'll talk with a neighbor. What do you notice? How do you feel?
Luke 4:14-21.
Turn to a neighbor and share what you noticed by listening to the reading from the perspective of the crowd.

Gospel Acclamation

Now listen to the rest of the reading, again from the perspective of **Jesus'** hometown crowd. What do you notice? How do you feel?
Luke 4:22-30.
Again turn to a neighbor. What of the experience was the same? What was different? What happened to cause any changes that occurred?

In this story Jesus comes to his hometown and in worship he reads from scripture, from Isaiah. What Jesus reads proclaim new kind of society in which justice is given to those who need it—the poor receive good news, the oppressed are delivered, the blind given sight. When Jesus says, “**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your **hearing**,” Jesus saying, “**this** new society, this new order is my mission, this is the work I have come to do. I have come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind and freedom to the **oppressed**.”

Hearing this message excites the people of Nazareth. You can almost hear them, “Wow, and to think this is Mary and Joe’s boy.” “He built my chair.” But in the people’s excitement Jesus detects something—entitlement—that they expect some status or special treatment. Then Jesus says, “**No**, prophet is welcome in their home town.” Jesus is saying, “**Remember** Elijah? He did ministry with unexpected **people**.” We read the story of Elijah back on October 30 in worship. There is a great drought in the whole region of Israel and Elijah is running from the ruthless King Ahab. Elijah goes to a foreign region, Sidon, and God saves a widow in the town of Zaraphath and her whole house. Elijah was a prophet to all **God’s** people, seeking to bring justice and goodness to Israel but the life and love of God couldn’t be contained it spilled out, even on foreigners in Sidon. **God’s** love flows in and through people and communities like water, **God’s** love knows no political or cultural boundaries. Jesus says to the crowd in his hometown, “If you are expecting special status because I’m from here, you will be disappointed. In fact the people my ministry includes

will surprise you and I will include people you want to exclude.”

At this the crowd change. They find **Jesus’** message of inclusion so offensive they **don’t** just drive Jesus out of town, they try to kill him by throwing him off a cliff. When their privilege is challenged the crowds respond with deep anger. When what they believe to be their normal deserved privileges or status or right is challenged they are enraged. When in history, even recent history, do you recall something like this happening? People getting angry because their place of favor is challenged.

At Bible Camp one year we did something called the Dinner of Nations. One night from right before dinner to campfire each cabin group would be assigned a country from around the world. It was an exercise from Luther World Relief (LWR) to raise awareness about hunger and poverty in the world. One cabin might be from El Salvador, another from Serbia, another from Uganda and other **Germany**... you get the picture. Based on the circumstances of that country the cabins got different amounts of food for supper and different treatment—some a 1/4 cup of squash, another pizza and pop and dessert. Some of the groups ate relaxing and listening to music and some standing up as they waited to clean up from another groups lavish meal.

Then, during campfire, we would talk about the experience. What amazed me was the responsive of the cabin groups from “rich” nations—when someone would talk about the injustice of some people going hungry while others had too much—the campers from “rich” nations

would say, “you’re just jealous you didn’t get pizza,” or “it’s a game and someone had to be rich, we were the ones chosen.” There was a sense that that felt they deserved the privileged treatment or that if others complaining about injustice they would question their character.

Jesus says, “If you are expecting special status you will be disappointed. In fact the people my ministry includes will surprise you and I will include people you want to exclude.” The crowds find this so offensive they don’t just drive Jesus out of town, they try to kill him. When their privilege is challenged the crowds respond with deep anger.

Tomorrow is the day America sets aside to honor Martin Luther King Jr. and the struggle in which he was engaged. While we are a land of freedom we are not a land without mistakes—especially when it comes to understanding what we label the “other” or “those” people. Slavery and segregation have been called by some Americas original sin. A deed done in the past that continues to have effects in the present. I wonder if there are times and places where we have received special treatment and if we have begun to see that treatment as a right and that if that status is challenged we get defensive or angry? I think I’ve done that. I’ve noticed myself get defensive when I’m told that blacks or women have disadvantages in our country. I think, “I’ve worked hard for my life and status—I’ve earned them.” It is into these moments that I remind myself to breathe and after breathing I am able to remember that it is in place of discomfort that we learn and grow. I am often able to

say, “Maybe I don’t know the whole story. Maybe there is more I can learn.” This is uncomfortable for me, but I am trying to be more open. I think the thing that helps me remain open the most is meeting people and being in relationship with people, listening to their stories. In Corinthians 5 Paul calls us to be agents of reconciliation. What if we were to identify one person who is different from us in racial ethnic background and pray about how to become closer to that person. What if we entered into Jesus mission and take the risky step of talking with that person and explore how each of us can better understand each other’s perspective on life and race in America.

The gospel is offensive but in that offense is the truth of God’s good will and grace to all people. God and Jesus have as their mission to bring good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. Salvation is expansive, it includes forgiveness of sins and salvation is resting in the fulfillment of all God’s promises. It is for you, it is for me...it is for all.