

From the Pastor's Desk

## Jesus' Failure?

Jesus blew it in Nazareth. He was the hometown boy whom town folk had heard made it big. Now he was coming home with a crowd following him. They gathered in the synagogue and sat in anticipated silence for the young Rabbi to walk to the podium. They were eager to hear his first sermon and expected miracles like they heard he had done in other villages. According to their culture, Jesus should give preferential treatment to people in his hometown. Certainly they would hear and see spectacular things from Joseph and Mary's boy.

Nazareth was surrounded by people many considered to be pagans. Heathen Phoenicians lived to the west and north, Samaritans to the south, Greeks to the west. Nazareth was away from the good influence of Jerusalem. It's no wonder that Nathaniel said to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But now Jesus is back in town and will set the faithful on fire. Jesus will help run out the ungodly people. Maybe Jesus can turn Nazareth around. Maybe he can make it a decent place to live. Maybe he can turn it into a godly city again.

I hear many of the same kinds of complaints about our world today. We are surrounded by pagan influences. Look at a magazine rack, so many of them are promoting some kind of idol. There is the problem of drugs, lax morals, unwanted pregnancies, cheating in business, stabbing others in the back – both literally and figuratively.

"If only we could get the Christians all fired up," some are saying. "If we could drive out the sinners and their magazines and their books. If we could just put God back into our schools. If we could bring our nation back to God. If we could do all this, we could become a moral, godly nation again – a good place to live and worship."

And so the hometown boy arrives in Nazareth, goes into the synagogue, stands in front of the large crowd and reads:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He sat down and all had their eyes fixed on him. Then he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:16-19*

He speaks a few words. The crowd whispers to each other how good he is, "Mary and Joseph certainly raised a good son." Then Jesus says something about miracles. The crowd has heard all about the wonders that he performed in Capernaum. Many of the people had gathered to see some great event – a little razzle-dazzle to get this crowd going. If Jesus would just do some healings or some other miracle, we would know that God's power was here and we could drive out these pagan Gentiles and their ungodly influences in the city.

Then Jesus gives his first sermon and everything goes south. Apparently he didn't listen to the church growth experts about how to attract people and grow a church. He didn't give the people what they wanted. Instead, he recalls a story from Elijah's time. God miraculously provided food for a poor, Gentile widow. There were many poor, starving widows in Israel during the famine who didn't receive any miraculous food. The crowd in the synagogue starts mumbling to each other: "Is he saying that God likes Gentiles? Jesus' had better watch what he says."

After that Jesus recalls a story from the time of Elisha. God miraculously cured Naaman, a pagan leper. There were many sick lepers in Israel during that time who received no miraculous cure. The crowd's whispers are getting louder. "Is he saying that God prefers the pagans? That's not what we came to hear! We want to hear some harsh words of judgment. We want him to drive out the Gentiles. Why did he use those examples? Why did he talk about God helping pagan Gentiles? He should be warning us to stay away from them. If God likes the Gentiles so much, what's the use of us keeping all these commandments? He's going to destroy what little faith there is left in Nazareth."

In short, the people declared Jesus a false prophet and attempted to kill him. He was blaspheming those who considered themselves God's elect and praising the pagan Gentiles. The punishment for false prophecy is death. He just wasn't what they expected. He didn't do the miracles they expected. He didn't say the words they expected. He had to be a false prophet, because he didn't act like they wanted him to act.

The people in Nazareth recognize and marvel at Jesus' "gracious words" (Luke 4:22); but when illustrations of God's grace to outsiders was given, their feelings turned to rage.

Do we really want a gracious God? Certainly we do -- for ourselves. But we can't have a gracious God if we don't believe that the same grace is given to those "sinners" outside our church doors, outside our faith, outside our boundaries of acceptability.

(Above information adapted from exegetical notes from Brian Stoffregen, [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com))

In Nazareth, the Jewish people were united not only by their faith, but also by their animosity toward Gentiles, and exclusive claims to salvation. Jesus refused to affirm their prejudice. I wonder if some of our fastest growing churches in America today are popular in part because members are united not only by their faith, but also by their animosity toward "Gentiles" such as gay and lesbian people or religions such as Islam, as well as exclusive claims to salvation. How would Jesus' inflammatory sermon in Nazareth be received today? Would there be rage at God's lavish outpouring of unmerited grace? Why not celebrate it with rejoicing?

We live in a very fearful and polarized world and our tendency is to circle the wagons to protect ourselves. Yet, Jesus calls us to do the opposite and open our hearts to the vastness of God's amazing grace. Fear turns in on itself but love remains open to all. As Good Friday will prove, this love may produce rage but it is not failure.

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