

“Can the Gospel be Offensive?”

Luke 4:21-30

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
January 28, 2007

In Flannery O’Conner’s short story “Revelation,” Ruby Turpin was sitting in the doctor’s waiting room, evaluating each person around her. Ruby had an attitude and everyone in the room knew it. She felt superior to all of them, especially to a poor, unkempt, teenage wretch seated across from her named Mary Grace. Ruby wondered why her parents did not groom her more attractively and teach her better manners.

Mary Grace was reading a book trying to ignore Ruby’s ugly remarks that were hurled her way. Without warning, Mary Grace looked up, fixed her steely eyes upon Ruby and hurled the book she was reading across the room. The book hit Ruby in the head and she fell to the floor. Mary Grace looked at her with contempt and said, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!” This, says O’Conner, was the violent beginning of Ruby’s redemption, the catalyst for her attitude adjustment.

In the synagogue that day, Jesus threw the book, or should I say scroll, at his childhood neighbors and friends. Needless to say they were as shocked as Ruby Turpin. This was certainly not what they expected when Jesus returned home to preach his first sermon among them since beginning his ministry. Perhaps they thought Jesus would take the opportunity to reminisce about his childhood, thank them for their support and ask for their prayers. Surely he would dismiss them with a blessing and enjoy some warm fellowship during the dinner on the grounds. This was not, however, what Jesus did.

After reading from Isaiah and boldly declaring that he was the fulfillment of this prophecy, he mentioned two more prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Both of these revered prophets extended kindness to gentiles, one a despised enemy of Israel. Implied in his remarks was that God was more loving and inclusive than they were and they needed to change to reflect God’s heart.

Upon hearing this, the townspeople became enraged and tried to kill Jesus. They threw him out of the synagogue, drove him out of town and would have thrown him over a cliff had he not escaped.

There seems to be a lot of throwing going on in this story. Jesus threw the book at them, the Old Testament prophets. They threw him out of the synagogue and wanted to throw him over a cliff. What is going on here?

Do you think Jesus was surprised by their reaction? Did he deliberately try to provoke them and if so why? Did he speak out of love for them and God?

We can only speculate about his motives but I have to believe that he had their best interest at heart and was being faithful to God’s call upon his life. He was trying to open their hearts, minds and eyes to new ways of thinking and living that better reflected God’s will for them and all people. He was casting a new vision for the Kingdom of God, one that would build bridges, not barriers between people. Perhaps he had confidence in them to believe they would listen to one of their own. Maybe they would not, but he wanted to try anyway. He knew that prophets were usually not accepted in their hometowns, but maybe this would be different.

Here’s what captures my attention this morning from this story that I want to develop into a sermon. **The gospel offended the worshipers in the synagogue that day.** Jesus’ neighbors and childhood friends were angered by his comments about Elijah and Elisha helping gentiles instead of their ancestors. Mark used the word offended or a form of the word “skandalon” to describe their reaction, an ugly word from which we get our word scandal. In other words, the people were greatly offended by Jesus’ remarks.

Think about this. The gospel offended the people in Nazareth that day and at times it will offend us, too. Why?

The gospel calls for action. It calls for response. It demands that its listeners make changes in beliefs, attitudes, values, priorities, relationships and behavior when necessary. The gospel will not let us settle for anything less than the truth and the behavior that reflects it.

This new word from the Lord that Jesus proclaimed that day in his hometown synagogue blatantly revealed their lack of compassion for those in need and those that were unlike them. The poor, imprisoned, blind and oppressed were not on their minds that day, they were. Their pride, arrogance, desires and own well-being were ever before them, not those living in despair without hope. They wanted someone to rescue them and make their lives easier without regard to those around them far worse off that they could rescue. Jesus knew this and loved God and them too much to ignore it.

This is why he challenged them that day to build bridges to people, not walls between them. He encouraged them to declare hope instead of condemnation, to promote freedom in place of slavery and to heal wounds rather than inflict them. He challenged them to speak for those that had no voice and be an advocate for those the world crushed and ignored.

No doubt he wanted his family and friends to be trendsetters and role models. He wanted them to show the world how to be responsible, fair, kind, forgiving, generous, compassionate, courageous, humble and inclusive. He wanted them to see faith as life-changing for them and everyone around them. So he threw the book at them.

One reason I Corinthians 13 was read this morning in the service was to remind us of the importance of love. One way you love others is to walk in their shoes and endure what they are going through. You agonize and suffer with them, but never abandon them. "Love endures all things," Paul wrote.

There is another way to love people, though, and Luke reminds us of this in his account of Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. You love people by confronting them with the truth and opening their eyes.

You love them by stretching their minds and melting their hearts. You love them by reminding them of what is at stake and showing them the difference they can make. You love them by confronting them with choices, believing they will do what is right.

Recently I heard President Carter talk about a critical moment in the 1978 Camp David talks when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was about to walk out. When Carter was informed that Sadat had his bags packed and had called for a driver to take him to the helicopter, he went into a room by himself and prayed. He asked God for wisdom and guidance. Then he went to see Sadat and asked him not to leave. He became quite assertive and told Sadat that if he walked out on this opportunity to forge a new relationship between his country and Israel, he would betray his own people as well as Carter. The President informed Sadat that if he left, it would end their friendship and the benevolent relationship between America and Egypt.

Carter, speaking with tears in his eyes, said that Sadat walked over to a corner of the room by himself for a few moments, came back and informed the President he was staying. A few days later, a peace agreement was signed by Sadat, Menachim Begin and Carter that has not been broken. Egypt and Israel live side by side in peace to this day.

Sometimes the gospel is assertive and offensive, isn't it? It throws the book at us, refusing to let us live a lie or merely for ourselves. It's called tough love. We don't like it many times and can offer a variety of reasons to ignore it.

Perhaps it is time for you to listen to those speaking to you and respond a different way. It is time to confront misguided thinking and selfish behavior. It is time to quit defending bad decisions and making more of them. Instead, it is time to become the role model Jesus believes you can be that reflects the heart of God. Maybe it is time for you to get hit over the head with a book.

