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 Texts: Luke 4: 16-29; Luke 15: 1-10  
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“An Extended Grace”

Every preacher’s got a story to tell about a sermon that didn’t go well. It’s a badge of honor in the trade. I’ve got a few that I could share, and one day I probably will. But few of them top what happens to Jesus on his first outing. I’d like to explore that story with you this morning as a way of framing what Lina Tuck will be sharing about our emerging work on immigration and sanctuary issues. Several months ago I shared that we had learned that a significant number of people who come to our food pantry had concerns about their immigration status. I also shared that our Board of Deacons had spoken at length about how we as a community of faith should respond to the wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy being enacted. There are varying political and theological positions within our Board of Deacons, but everyone was convinced that some form of response was necessary. And Lina has been unbelievably helpful as we’ve explored what that response should be. But before we go there, I want to set that work up theologically. And I want to do it by exploring that disastrous first sermon that Jesus offers in his hometown. Every preacher’s got a story to tell about a sermon that didn’t go well, but few of them can stack up to Jesus on that Sabbath morning.

He shows up in Nazareth a hometown hero. And he just gets out by the skin of his teeth. What happens along the way during that first sermon? Why does the crowd move from adulation to agitation in such a short span of time?

The crux of it all comes in Jesus’s chosen texts. He reads first from Isaiah, a famous passage then as now, about good news being offered to the poor, restoring sight to the blind, and releasing the captives. It’s red meat for any preacher, and the congregation eats it up. They cast themselves as those in need of release, as those in need of freedom. They read the text as many of us tend to, turning it into a mirror of their own concerns. They hear, and they read, narcissistically. There may well have been important ways that members of that congregation needed release, or freedom – we don’t know. But Jesus effectively blocks them. What he says, in so many words, is this: *This is not about you!*

He goes on to cite two instances from the Hebrew Bible when a singular, lonely outsider was chosen to receive special attention from the prophets Elijah, and Elisha. In the first instance, during a time of political crisis, Elijah both receives and offers hospitality not from a religious insider, one of the righteous, but from a widow and her son, residing in ancient Israel as immigrants, as outsiders. In the second, it is a man from Syria named Naaman who receives healing. Another immigrant, another outsider, receives the attention of the prophet, not those who dwell comfortably inside.

This is not about you, Jesus tells that congregation in his first sermon. It makes them mad, angry enough that they attempt to harm Jesus. But it was a way of establishing at the very outset of his public ministry where the good news of the Gospel would be directed. It was a way of reorienting the congregation at Nazareth, repositioning their gaze. To the insiders, to the righteous, to the prosperous, to the well

cared for, Jesus says: *this is not about you!* It's about the invisible ones living among you. It's about the lost and forgotten ones living right under your noses. This is not about you. But you might have an important role to play.

Then as now it's a word the faithful need to hear. To help us understand a little more about that word, and about our response, I've asked Lina Tuck to share some of what she's been up to these past few weeks and months. It's something that both of us have been excited to share with all of you.

Lina Tuck

I'd like to add a short addendum to all that Lina has shared. The addendum has to do with the signs we've been displaying off and on over the past several months. As you might imagine, I've heard a lot about the signs, some of it positive, some of it less so. For a few weeks, we've had banners sent to us by some students at the Lyme Art Academy hanging on the side of the meetinghouse, and prior to that we had the "We Affirm" sign sitting on the corner of Ferry Rd. and Lyme St. I'm cognizant that there are differing opinions among us about the aesthetics of those signs, and that's OK. But what I want everyone to hear is this: the foremost reason that we were approached for help on this matter of sanctuary, the foremost reason that one particular woman found the courage to enter an imposing, wealthy, white dominant structure to ask for help, was the "We Affirm" sign. She had seen it from the road many times while taking her daughter to school. It was that sign that convinced her that we were a trustworthy community, one that might have the ability to help.

I've had to field a number of criticisms about the signs from various apostles of good taste, complaining about how we'll ruin property values in town, or how inappropriate they look in a historic district. My response, at least lately, is to tell the story that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke, about the lost coin, and the lost sheep. In those stories, the 99 are found, and they're all doing quite well, but one coin, one sheep, has been lost. And so the shepherd concerns himself with the one, seeking out what has been lost, forgotten, or left to the wolves. Most of us are among the 99. Most of us are among those who are doing well, even if we do have concerns, even if we do struggle at times. But most of us, most of us, aren't at risk of police violence because of our skin tone. Most of us aren't at risk of deportation. Most of us aren't at risk of losing our homes. Most of us won't ever be subjected to religious persecution. I don't want you to misunderstand me: it's not that we don't have profound needs here. We do, and they matter. There are powerful concerns of life and death and sickness and health to be confronted here, that's all true. And it does matter. Not only that, Lina's story helps to remind us that things aren't as simple as we assume them to be. Some among us have faced the wolves. Even in Old Lyme, our neighbors may be at risk. Nevertheless, nevertheless, it's also true that, for the most part, we in Old Lyme, we who worship at the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme are not the ones that the wolves will pick off under cover of night. We're not, by and large, the ones who go to sleep afraid, or who fear to leave the house because of what might happen after a chance encounter with the authorities.

For those of us who do dwell in safety, for those of us who do dwell in comfort, for those of us who do rest easy at night, Jesus says this: Rejoice! Be glad! Give thanks!

Truly, you have your reward. But the Gospel isn't, first and foremost, about you. It's about the widow at Zarephath in Sidon. It's about Naaman the Syrian. It's about the lost coin and the lost sheep. It's about those whose value as human beings has been ignored, or forgotten. It's about those who wander alone in the darkness, without support. It's about those who are not property owners, not office holders, and don't come from prominent families. It's about those who hope someone will notice them, and offer a hand of friendship. But really, for the most part, it's not about us.

It's a hard word that Jesus offers to people like me, and perhaps to people like you. The Gospel isn't about us, not really. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus wages a long and consistent argument with those who would make of religion an exercise in spiritual narcissism. What Jesus tells his hometown crowd, then as now, is that this is not about you!

But that doesn't leave you out of the picture. It doesn't mean that you're unimportant. The Gospel becomes about you when you participate in an extension of grace, when you worry less about the status of the 99 who are doing well, and more about the status of the one who is most at risk from the wolves.

That's why the signs have been out there. That's why I preach as I do. That's why we engage the sorts of missions and ministries that we do. That's why we bought a refugee house. It's why we care about Palestine and Haiti and Green Grass. And it's why Lina is working so hard to respond to the needs of those who fear what may happen to them as a result of the social policies now being tested. It's why we need your help as well. We all participate in the Gospel when we concern ourselves not with the 99 who are found, but the one who is lost. We need your help to extend this grace.