

Our gospel reading today is connected to the gospel reading from last week. We heard Jesus reading scripture in his home town synagogue, from the prophet Isaiah, a word of good news: *“The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to preach the year of God’s favor... Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”*.

I imagine people in the synagogue were interested in what Jesus had to say. And initially, they were very happy. Jesus is speaking of deliverance, foretold by the prophet Isaiah... Good news indeed... God is going to bless us and save us!

Jesus is reading scripture from Isaiah 61 verses one and two, but he doesn’t read the second half of verse two: *“to proclaim the day of vengeance of our God.”* In other words, Jesus intentionally cherry picked the scripture a little bit, he omitted the vengeance piece, and I wonder if the parishioners noticed.

And then we have our reading for today. And it doesn’t go very well. Jesus says, in effect, *“Now let’s see, when was the last time that God blessed us? Was it during the time of Elijah, the great prophet, during that great drought and no food? No, I guess not, God’s prophet only gave food to a pagan woman.”*

And you can almost feel the hometown congregation suddenly wonder, *“What’s he talking about?”* And as if that wasn’t enough, Jesus continued, *“When was the last time God blessed us? Was it during the time of Elisha, when people were suffering from illnesses? No I guess not, God didn’t heal any of them except Naaman, the Syrian officer, another pagan.”*

Jesus reminded the faithful that God had worked the other side of the street. In other words, Jesus was reminding them that although they were God’s beloved children, God also loved the other people as well. And that made them angry!

The text says, *“Everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town... so that they could throw him off the cliff.”*

Can you kind of see what’s going on here? There’s some tribalism... We all know God loves our group; we are God’s chosen people, those other people, not so much... Insiders and outsiders... And Jesus directly challenges their notions of who’s in and who’s out.

A quick story...

I attended a conference a couple years ago in Albuquerque on the topic of the Emerging Church. There were 6-7 hundred people there from many different Christian traditions. Perhaps more than a third of the group were Catholic, perhaps a third were mainline Protestants-- Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and so forth...

And perhaps another third saw themselves as charismatic evangelicals; all together, a very diverse group of Christians. And I have to confess, I’ve not always had kind words about some of these Christian groups; truth is I’ve been downright critical of some of them. And sometimes when I hear them talk, my body literally starts wincing and feeling tight.

On the first day of the conference, we did a meditation exercise. We were asked to go outside, to leave the hotel, and center our attention on a single inanimate object. We were to focus on that item for thirty minutes.

One of the objectives of the exercise was to notice how our minds function as we categorize and judge; to notice how we emotionally like and dislike-- how we compare and contrast. The exercise was not to judge how judgmental we were, but rather to simply notice our thinking, to notice our judging.

My initial reaction to the exercise was not very enthusiastic. I thought, “Really, you expect me to stare at something for half an hour!” I wasn’t too excited. But, if nothing else I’m a good student and a follower, so I grudgingly went outside to meditate.

As I left the hotel I passed through the courtyard. And they had this beautiful garden there, flowers everywhere, and some wonderful overstuffed chairs. And there was hardly anyone else was there, so bingo! If I’m going to be miserable, I might as well be comfortable!

I took a big chair, turned it around to face the plants, sat down, got comfortable and gazed out at what was in front of me. And right smack dab in front and center of my field of vision was a huge dandelion.

I looked to the left; I looked to the right, beautiful flowers in every direction, except for what was right in front of me. I groaned and thought about jumping up and yanking the dandelion out, but the soil looked hard and I was sure I wouldn’t get the whole root. Then I thought about moving my chair again, but I’d already made a big deal out of moving it, so I just sat there.

Alright, I thought I’ll just do it. So, I sat there staring at that dandelion, and staring at that dandelion. Now I have to admit, I’m not just a little judgmental about dandelions, I hate them. Every spring I curse at them, I spray them, I dig them up, this is the time of year I start looking for sales on 2 4 D... I don’t like dandelions!

Well, for probably the first ten minutes of sitting there, I kept noticing how judgmental I was about the dandelion, and well, duh! I already knew that!

Then my mind starting going over the chain of events that brought me to the dandelion, and then suddenly I realized-- it wasn’t so much I who had chosen the dandelion, as much as it seemed that the dandelion had chosen me; for some reason God wanted me to see the dandelion.

And that little revelation startled me—it was a kind of baptismal experience. It was God who was doing the work.

I began to realize the sanctity of that dandelion; maybe there was more to this weed than I originally thought. Suddenly I found myself changing gears a little bit. I dared to imagine the context of the dandelion. It's presence in the garden was remarkable. A beautiful garden, every square inch lovingly tended. And I began to wonder, how did that dandelion get here?

I imagined a tiny little seed must have floated in on the air and planted itself right in that very spot. It seems that human beings, like dandelion seeds are always on the air, floating from one place to another. And isn't this God's original call to Abraham; to journey to a new land? What a remarkable God we have, always managing new order out of chaos, always creating something new.

Well, I started to appreciate the uniqueness of that dandelion. It came from someplace else, it had a story, perhaps it was even a story that God knew. When I started to appreciate the dandelion, I also realized what tremendous dignity it seemed to have.

I began to wonder why the gardener hadn't yanked it up yet. It was a mystery to me; it was not a little dandelion. Either the gardener was too blind to see it, or I began wondering if the gardener had indeed noticed it and started to see it as I was learning to see it. The presence of the dandelion was strong.

After that meditation, I took some time to reflect what had happened to me. I think what I learned is this... I know I'm a judgmental person and frankly on some level we need to be. But on another level, somehow God created space within me that transformed my judgment.

I think over the years; my brain has settled into a pattern about how it sees things. I guess you could say I have a rigid set of judgments, and some of them I'm ashamed to admit, are not very

life giving. In my encounter with that dandelion, I found a mirror that opened me up a little; it created room to expand my perspective.

I took this experience to be a message that I needed to change my attitude about some of the participants at the conference. At one point during the conference, I remember being struck with gratitude at the sheer enormity of the diversity. On one hand I was so thankful to be Lutheran, and at the same time I was so proud to be a member of the whole body of Christ. I truly appreciated all the different members.

And like the dandelion I began to see each group with a unique story and tradition. I had never quite experienced anything so whole before. Different branches of Christianity, yet all from the same vine.

I think this is the kind of peace which Jesus gives us-- an ability to appreciate the unity above the diversity—this wholeness. The world, by contrast, would have us focus on all the differences, to find ways to divide and detest.

The body of Christ is one; the body of Christ is only whole when all the parts are together. Jesus works to expand our perspective; the world works to narrow our perspective. Jesus works toward love, inclusion, reconciliation to build bridges, the world builds barriers, brings fear, hatred and violence.

The good news this morning is that Jesus is our center. He brings us His peace, a peace that transcends and transforms our violent hearts; a peace that calms our stormy fears; a peace that leads us to wholeness, and a peace that is lasting and everlasting.

Amen.