

Hearing Good News as Bad News

How do we understand the good news of our gospel message—that seems to be the question Luke is asking of us when this second part of that first pronouncement of Jesus' identity within his home community and synagogue is given. In most English translations, this whole passage is subtitled "Jesus' rejection at Nazareth." The passage begins when Jesus has entered the synagogue for Sabbath worship where he was handed the Isaiah scroll. The text does not say how long Jesus has been in Nazareth, but it does tell us that the community has heard reports about what he has been doing "through all the surrounding country." What Luke gives us as Jesus' reading from Isaiah is not a direct reading from a single portion but is a selection of several pronouncements made within what we now call Isaiah chapters 58 and 61. This appearance and rejection is also described in Matthew has the addition information that Jesus "did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief" (13:58). Matthew's account only tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue and began to teach there, not anything about the content of what was said. The verse about the lack of deeds of power during his stay in Nazareth is added almost as an afterthought to Matthew's account. Luke narrates that Jesus proclaimed his identity as the one promised to fulfill what Isaiah told them God promised for the future. The pronounced promise was for there to be "good news" and Jesus stated that he was the one bringing it. According to Luke at first this pronouncement was well received. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." However this first response did not last. Luke does not give us the content of the "teaching" which came after the scroll was read, but evidently that created objections among the group. At this point, some who hear those there begin wondering how this hometown boy could speak like this; how he could claim authority since he was just a young man they had known all his life and his family was not anything special; he is after all Joseph's son. Jesus' next comment is not one that is designed to impress them or prove anything to them about his identity. When reading texts we are unable to hear the emotional tone of this or the following exchange. When the text tells us that "all spoke well and were amazed" was that the amazement of "wonder, excitement, appreciation or pride" that this hometown boy could stand up in the synagogue and read the scriptures so well? Or does an element of "just who does he think he is" begin to be raised by voices in the congregation as they recall his boyhood? Or does the issue come from what Jesus says later after the scroll has been handed back? Does what Jesus say then challenge their understanding of who they are and what God desires from them? Does their anger arise because they want him to perform his deeds of power only for him, not for that neighboring village Capernaum? Have they failed to actually hear God's word to them? Is the reason Isaiah's words have not yet been fulfilled is because they haven't been acting or living according to the message God has sent them. Jesus responds to their reaction with two important points. The first is related to how hard it is for those who have seen you grow up to accept that they may need to re-evaluate just who you are. When Jesus tells them that God's promise to the through Isaiah has been fulfilled in their hearing, in many ways he is issuing a challenge to them. Jesus says that they may not accept him, but that what he is teaching is God's message to them and for them anyway. We do not have Jesus' teachings for that day except it was began by the reading of the Isaiah scroll, yet we do have the content of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew; we have the record of to whom Jesus went and

what he did during his ministry among us—he went to the poor and he healed many who were not acceptable to the society in which he lived. Perhaps that is why the actions of Elijah and Elisha are found in this passage. Both of these prophets of YHWH went and ministered to those who were not members Israelites; not those the Israelites considered among God’s chosen. It is Jesus’ lifting of these examples of God’s care for others that seems to spark their rage. These were reminders of the widow at Zarephath in Sidon who was fed during the famine and the healing of Naaman, the Syrian. God’s acts of love were inclusive of those they rejected as “chosen.” Our scriptures are filled with language about God choosing a particular person or people, especially with language about those who are descendants of Abraham who became the nation of Israel. These people had a strong sense of being a “particular people”, a nation chosen and blessed by God. Unfortunately, as many prophets make clear, the people have turned that blessing into a privilege thinking it would spare them from suffering the consequences of their disobedience to God. In their minds, God’s special relationship with them meant that they must be special and therefore better than the “gentile dogs”; that is, better than all non-Jewish people. But like Jesus goes on to do in his ministry, the prophets reminded the Jewish people that their calling had a purpose—not that they might be privileged but so that they might be that “light to the nations” which Isaiah had told them they were to be. Moses had told them they would as a nation speak for God and represent God’s purposes in the world. What Jesus is telling them is that God’s vision for the world is larger and more inclusive than they have accepted. Our task when we encounter these texts is to place ourselves within that audience. When we accept the blessing of God’s love and grace for us, his outreach to heal and restore us, to free us from our burdens of sin, do we then think that we are special? Do we tend to look around and judge others, deciding of course God’s blessing is for those like us? When we discover that God’s vision extends beyond the boundaries we would draw, do we get angry? If we feel that we are privileged instead of recognizing the extent of our blessing and God’s grace toward all, then may be hearing the good news as bad news. For if our Lord loves and accepts all, doesn’t that mean we are asked to do the same? The passage from 1st Corinthians today is well-known and although it is most often encountered during a marriage ceremony, it is not actually about love as an emotion; it is directed to a congregation in turmoil, one experiencing division—the drawing of boundaries amongst them which separate them into ones with more status, ones who consider themselves better than another; ones considering themselves exalted and privileged rather than humbled by a blessing. For in this text love is a verb; not a noun or an adjective. This first part of Chapter 13 is a description of how to come together and stay together despite differences. According to Paul the spiritual gifts bestowed upon each member has one purpose and that is to serve God, and the way to do this is not in divisive actions or words. Instead Paul proposes “a still more excellent way.” According to the literal meaning of the Greek, a way beyond measuring. The gifts they have been given are good, but if they cause them to forget about loving their brothers and sisters, then those gifts become worthless as they do not serve God’s purpose. What makes all of our words and actions valuable and important is how they serve to witness to our Lord and serve God’s purpose and vision. In this list of things Paul uses to describe love it is a busy, active thing that never ceases its work—always finding ways to express itself for the good of others. Paul is asking the Corinthians to strive for the kind of love that Jesus pursues and proclaims as the acting out of God’s love for the world. We are asked to pursue love like this as

well, for the sake of God's mission in the world. Paul's description of love declares what love must or must not do—in the description there are 15 actions given, seven of them are musts: be patient, be kind, rejoice in the truth, to bear all things, to hope all things and to endure all things. The remaining eight which should not be done are: not to envy, not to boast, not to be arrogant; not to be rude, not to be irritable, not to rejoice in wrongdoing, and the last and possibly the hardest is not seek its own way. Christian love is the bond which binds us together; it is a bond to be used to gather and include. God's love is a gift we have been given to share with all because God gives it to all whether we approve or not. We are called to invite others into the blessing of God's grace, rejoicing in the gift knowing it is ours but recognizing God's love is so abundant and overflowing out of God's self that it includes even our enemies. The good news is truly good news; knowing that God gives it to others should not be heard as bad news by us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.