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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Epiphany 4

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers, as many of you may know my family and I go to the Chautauqua Institute in New York state each summer.

The institute is a community located on the western most Finger Lake, and while our kids enjoy recreational activities, my wife and I attend lectures by renowned speakers on various topics.

That is not all we do. We don't just listen to lectures. There are also concerts, dance performances, and worship throughout the course of the day.

The Chautauqua Institute is a bit of an intellectual, cultural, and religious playground all wrapped into one.

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Now this past summer we had the opportunity to hear one speaker that particularly piqued my interest.

The lecturer's name was Amanda Ripley, who is an American journalist and author.

Ripley has written for *Time* magazine.

Her work has also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Politico*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* of London.

In addition to her journalism, she is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling book called *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way*.

I haven't read that book, but I did read another book by her called *The Unthinkable: Who Survives when Disaster Strikes and Why*.

In this book, she interviewed a number of persons who survived various disasters including the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11, the mass shooting on the Virginia Tech college campus, and the stampede at the Muslim holy site in Mecca.

It was a fascinating read, quite eye-opening.

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Ripley has also written a third book called *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*.

I am presently reading this book, and I couldn't help but think of this book in light of the gospel reading for today.

For today's gospel reading gives witness to its own abundance of high conflict.

Now, Ripley's book describes high conflict as that which happens when discord distills into a good-versus-evil kind of feud, the kind with an *us* and a *them*.

Ripley says that in this state of high conflict, the normal rules of engagement no longer apply.

In this state of high conflict, the brain behaves differently.

In this state of high conflict, we as human beings feel increasingly certain of our own superiority and, at the same time, more and more mystified by the other side.

Indeed, in this state of high conflict, the situation can easily devolve into violence.

And that pretty much sums up what we see in our gospel lesson today, doesn't it?

Jesus is in Nazareth, the town of his upbringing.

And he is there in the synagogue on the Sabbath, speaking to the crowd there.

And initially, it seems he is well received.

The text says, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

But then something goes terribly wrong, such that at the end of this passage, the crowd there in the synagogue is driving Jesus out of the town, leading Jesus to brow of a hill in order to hurl him off a cliff.

So, what has happened? What did Jesus say to turn the people in the synagogue into a mob?

What is the cause of this high conflict?

Well, Jesus says to the people in the synagogue these words.

“There were many widows in the time of Elijah (an Old Testament prophet). There were many widows in the time of Elijah. But then there was a severe famine in the land, and Elijah was sent to none of the widows in Israel, but to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon.”

In other words, Elijah was sent NOT to the Jewish widows but to a Gentile, a non-Jew.

And then Jesus goes on.

“There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, and none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

In other words, Elisha was sent NOT to help Jewish lepers, but to a Gentile, a non-Jew.

And by these words, Jesus apparently stirred up a hornet’s nest.

Jesus apparently poked a sleeping bear.

Jesus upset the applecart.

For Jesus is stating that God’s mission is large enough to include those who are not Jewish, and is even partial to non-Jews.

God’s mission is indeed directed specifically to those who would be seen as outsiders, or social pariahs, those who are of lowly status, namely the widow, the leper, and Gentile.

Now why the people in the synagogue would react in such a violent way to Jesus’ words is hard to fathom.

For these stories that Jesus quotes are directly from the Jewish Holy Scriptures.

The story of Elijah caring for the widow at Zarephath appears in 1 Kings 17:8-14, and the story of Elisha healing Naaman appears in II Kings 5:1-17.

All the more, it is noted in the Old Testament that God’s mission was to include all peoples.

The covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 declares as much.

The Lord said to Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who

bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse; AND IN YOU ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.”

Furthermore, in the Old Testament God had called the prophet Jonah to declare God’s word to the very enemies of the Jewish people, the Ninevites.

And Jonah is incensed that he should have to declare God’s word to THOSE people.

Jonah is livid towards God.

Indeed, Jonah stands as THE dramatic embodiment of that capacity in all of us, Jew and Christian alike, to be offended by God’s grace to all those of whom we do not approve.

So, this is why the people of Nazareth are enraged by Jesus’ words.

This is why they are ready to kill Jesus by throwing him off a cliff.

Jesus is throwing the very words of their Holy Scriptures in their face.

To be sure, anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition.

Personally, I see parallels in our own nation.

How often, for instance, have we heard that we are “a nation of immigrants”?

And yet our country has struggled over and over again throughout its history with what it means to allow immigrants into our country.

Often times it is the very immigrants who have come before who now want to take a stand against the latest wave of immigration.

How ironic is that?

No, as human beings, we don’t like to face the truth of our own tradition.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

“Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

These are the words that appear on the base of the Statue of Liberty.

These words were penned by Emma Lazarus from her poem "The New Colossus."

These are the words of our tradition.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
EXCEPT when those tired and poor huddled masses are persons whom we do not
approve, whom we consider to be true outsiders, or whom we consider to be of
just too lowly a status.

No, we don't like to face the truth of our own tradition.

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But, in today's gospel reading, it is quite apparent that Jesus is not willing to
withhold God's grace from anyone.

He is not willing to categorize persons as outsiders, social pariahs, or of lowly
status.

To Jesus a human being is a human being.

And that proverb then, "Doctor, cure yourself."

Which was a well-known maxim in ancient times, and which was used to say that
one must not benefit others to the exclusion of one's own.

Jesus sees this maxim as needing definite revision.

Because obviously, in Jesus' day, the general understanding was that we should
take care of our own, forget everyone else.

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The question then that this text is asking, and the question we need to continue
to ask ourselves is this.

To whom does God favor?

And it is this particular question to which the Gospel writer Luke was particularly
sensitive.

Indeed, of the four Gospels in our New Testament, Luke is often the one which is
lifted up as the most Gentile-centric.

In others words, Luke seems to be writing to a predominantly Gentile audience.

It is not that Luke thinks that God is not concerned about Jewish Christians, but Luke just doesn't want us to lose sight of Gentile-Christians.

Luke just doesn't want us to focus on the Jewish Christians, to the exclusion of Gentile Christians.

And, lest we forget, if it were not for the Gospel of Jesus Christ being made accessible to Gentiles in the early Church by the likes of Luke, and Paul, and Jesus himself...

If it were not for the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ being extended to Gentiles, none of us would be hear sitting in Church today.

For if I am not mistaken, none of us here can claim Jewish heritage. We are all Gentiles.

We are all outsiders.

We are those who in Jesus' day would have been seen as social pariahs, at least in the Jewish culture.

We would have been seen as the tired and poor huddled masses, unfavored, with little or no status.

And yet the early church welcomed such as these, such as us.

We have been blessed so as to be considered favored by God.

We are among those who are favored by God.

So, how could we ever be so prideful to see others as disfavored, disapproved, or discounted?

PAUSE

To whom does God favor? To whom does God receive with grace? The answer is you and me, and all people.

PAUSE

As Christians then, we don't have a certain monopoly on God's favor and goodness...

We don't have a certain monopoly so we are privileged to circumscribe of line of exclusion.

God's circumscribed line is one of inclusion always, because of Jesus Christ.

Which then reminds me of a poem my father-in-law recently shared with me, and with which I want to conclude this sermon.

This poem my father-in-law remembers from when he was a youth, and which has stuck with him now well into his eighties.

The poem is entitled "Outwitted" written by Edwin Markham.

It reads...

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!

Love draws a circle to take us in. God's circle of inclusion...
God's circumscribed line of inclusion is the cross.

PAUSE

High conflict, then, is often the result of an *us versus them* perspective.

But God's grace in Jesus Christ does not see *us* and *them*.

God's grace in Jesus Christ is a perspective that only sees all people together, which is how we should also perceive the world.

Such a perspective by humanity would go a long way to removing conflict that rears its ugly head now and again in the human society.

Draw a circle that takes the other in.

Draw a wide circle by which all are included.

Draw a circle like God did on the cross for all people.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.