

Epiphany 4 Year C: 2 / 3 February 2019

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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"I pray that we all can risk as Jesus did and embrace the path of love such that others can see God's love at work through our worship and mission – can see Jesus in our midst."

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

Psalms 71: 1-6, 15-17

The whisper campaign. That event within an institution or organization that occurs in the shadows where well intentioned individuals voice their discontent by sowing seeds of doubt from which discord will eventually germinate. When that happens, it isn't healthy for anyone. Yet, this phenomenon exists in almost every community, whether religious or political, for-profit or non-profit. It even manifests itself within many families. Maybe it's just part of human nature, or a natural occurrence and by-product of gatherings in general. Whatever its source, Jesus wasn't immune from it. Matter-of-fact, he may have been a magnet for the whisper campaign.

What a minute, the town folks clamored, aren't you Mary's son? You know, that woman who lives on the outskirts of town, the one who had that questionable pregnancy no one talks about? Wasn't she sent off to her cousin's house for a while? Are you not the Jesus whose birth was problematic, occurring under unusually circumstances? Weren't there questions about your paternity? I heard it wasn't Joseph. Who is your real father?

In his hometown, the town where he grew up, where he played as a youth, Jesus offers a critical assessment, presenting himself in such a way that sheds light on all their misguided and ill-informed accusations. He exposes their doubt and maybe even their hypocrisy. How dare this pretentious upstart come into their synagogue and tell the people he knows more about

scripture than their elders do. I can just hear the vocal uproar: This isn't how we do things here. This isn't what we expected.

The detractors are vociferous in their rage, such that they expel Jesus from their midst to the point of wanting to cast him off a cliff. They wanted to vanquish him. Jesus, on the precipice of his ministry, encounters severe resistance. It appears that Jesus' ministry is about to go downhill rather quickly, just as it's beginning. The whisper campaign has done its nefarious work, but it will not detract Jesus from his prophetic call as is evident by his passing through the crowd unscathed. Though he is rejected, he remains true to his sense of self and his calling.

Luke, throughout his narrative, is trying to answer a question for his community. That being: What kind of Messiah is Jesus to be? His response to that question is very clear: a prophetic one. Why else would Luke have Jesus quote from Isaiah as well as mention Elijah and Elisha? In doing so, Jesus has aligned himself with the prophets of yore, who, themselves, were questioned by their contemporaries and seen as deeply suspect. Jesus is rejected because he espouses a message of hope and liberation from the captivity of sin that isn't just for Israel, but for all the nations. So of course the hometown crowd is going to be incensed. The Messiah was to be for their own people, not the unclean of the world, not the outcast and surely not the downtrodden. It was to be for good people like us who follow the Law, who practice their religion faithfully – or at least try to. How dare this presumptuous upstart come into their midst and tell them differently, especially when he, in their eyes, lacks credentials and certification, who comes from a dubious family background, and seemingly has no experience as a rabbi.

Jesus, throughout his ministry, professes a gospel of love where the blind see and the deaf hear; where the poor are fed and sheltered, and the prisoner is set free. But this gospel wasn't meant for those outside the prescribed norms, who were not the chosen people. Jesus, however, carries this message well beyond the confines of his hometown, as well as accepted religious practice. That's what the whisper campaign sought to undermine. The radical Gospel of Jesus, what every Christian is call to profess, is that of all the virtues – faith, hope, love – God is a God of love. God is Love, as incarnated in Jesus the Christ. Jesus' detractors cannot abide by that. Thus, their whisper campaign, their shadow operations, will haunt Jesus throughout

his ministry and will culminate in the passion, where Jesus' own disciples will betray and abandon him in an ultimate act of rejection.

Now, when I put this Gospel reading along with its hermeneutics in conversation with my own life, with the life of this parish even, I am left with some uncomfortable questions. I am left wondering, if his own community of Nazareth didn't recognize God at work in Jesus, how do I recognize Jesus in the face of a stranger? When the stranger walks into our midst, do we see the face of Jesus? If I, we, are honest, most see the stranger as a much-needed volunteer or financial resource. Someone to tap and wrangle into service. We see hope, but not the hope Jesus proclaimed. What we often see are individuals that need to be assimilated into the community and trained in how we do things. When folks enter our worship space for the first time, of course we are curious. But do we recognize the face of Jesus in their seeking and vulnerability? More importantly, do they see the face of Jesus in our community? When visitors enter our space, do they observe God at work? What testifies to God's love being shared through our common worship and our shared mission? What testifies to that truth? The good folks at Nazareth failed to see in Jesus God's love at work. Do we fail to see God's love at work in the face of the stranger?

There is a particular line from a poem that the late Mary Oliver wrote that is often quoted: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (*The Summer Day*) – Jesus answers that question by living his wild and precious life authentically and genuinely. Regardless of the risks and willing to make himself vulnerable, Jesus embraces his prophetic vocation, acknowledges his relationship with God as God's son and openly lives and embodies the love of God he professes. In spite of the naysayers and detractors, Jesus sows faith, he offers hope, and he engenders love. Unlike those who participate in the whisper campaign, which doesn't bring faith, instead it undermines it; it doesn't foster hope, it sows pessimism, and it doesn't engender love, it cultivates mistrust. As disciples of Christ, followers of Jesus, we are called into a similar vocation where our varied gifts are used in the service of God's message. A message of radical love when the world around us with negativity and encourages judgment. Will we live as authentically as Jesus or will we surrender to the whisper campaign? Recall that even the closest of disciples embraced the latter and rejected Jesus at

some point in their life. Rejecting Jesus seems part of one's formation as a disciple. But one doesn't have to stay there. I pray that we all can risk as Jesus did and embrace the path of love such that others can see God's love at work through our worship and mission – can see Jesus in our midst.