

# Church: Where Doors Open Outward

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## **Luke 4: 14-30**

Two years ago our Adult Mission Trip was in Birmingham, Alabama, to work on homes damaged from a horrific cluster of tornados that struck that region. Birmingham in July...I was on our mission trip to Nicaragua a few years ago, but Birmingham was hotter.

Our work site was several miles outside Birmingham, well off any main roads. On our first trip to the site, Scott Carlson and I got completely lost. We took a nice tour of the Alabama countryside, but really had no idea where the work site was or how to get there.

But there was cell phone service, so we called our folks and they put the owner of the home we were repairing on the line to give us directions. I told her where we were – or thought we were – and she responded that we weren't too far away. She told me to find the house with the "whale" in the front yard, take the first right turn, and that would lead us to the work site. That seemed easy enough. I told Scott to watch for a whale in a yard. But we could find no whale.

So I called the home owner back and asked again about the whale – did she indeed tell us to look for a whale? Her response – "Yes, a whale, you know the kind of whale where you put a bucket down to get water!" We were supposed to look for a well! Who knew that well was a two syllable word.? And yes, we found it and made our way to the work site. I have since wondered how many stories this woman has told her friends about these helpful, but ignorant, Californians!

But that is the beauty, the significance, the importance of mission trips – for youth and adults. They provide encounters with people and places and situations way outside our familiar comfort zones. For so many of our youth and adults, to go on these trips is to be challenged, stretched, even forever changed. After my senior year in high school, I went with my church youth group on a mission trip to Guadalajara. It was safer to travel in Mexico then. When I returned from that trip and prepared to go away to college, I realized a seed had been planted. Should I consider the ministry?

Hopefully, for all of us, church can be a kind of weekly mission trip experience, a place where we are linked to other people, to our wider world, in open and hopeful and inclusive ways. Not that it is easy, or even something we necessarily always want to do.

As a preacher, I have always found our text from Luke to be a most interesting story. Jesus returns home to Nazareth. People are talking about him, speaking well of him – local boy makes good! He goes to the local synagogue, reads scripture, and preaches. And what happens? "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff."

That must have been some sermon. What could cause such a reaction?

He tells two biblical stories with similar themes. I'll just focus on the first. It comes from I Kings 17. In a time of great famine and suffering throughout Israel, God sends Elijah, the prophet, to Zarephath in Sidon – Gentile country. "Live there," the prophet is told, "for I have commanded a widow to feed you." So he goes, meets the widow, and indeed she shares with him her meager supply of food and drink. And because of her great generosity and faith, God visits her with a miracle. While all the world is starving, her jar of meal and jug of oil remain filled until the rains come again. The shocking element of this story for a Jewish listener is that it is a gentile, an outsider, an alien, a stranger, not a Jew, who is blessed by God.

For Jesus to do this in Nazareth, would be like going into a white church in the segregated South of the fifties and telling a story about how God helped the starving black family when white families all around were also starving; or going into many state legislatures today and telling how God reached out and helped the starving Muslim or illegal Mexican immigrant. It seems that people can take great offense when you talk about God blessing someone who is not one of us; that God's promise of good news to the poor, release to the captives and sight to the blind may be broader and more inclusive than we can dare or even want to imagine. The good folks of Nazareth would rather run Jesus, their native son, out of town, than listen to such nonsense. They aren't sure they want a God that big and inclusive. They would rather keep God safely confined within the

walls of their synagogue, and certainly within their countries borders...a God custom designed for them and their needs.

And that is the temptation of the church in any age, to turn in on itself, to care for its own, to define God in its terms. And I am not unsympathetic to that temptation. This is our community, people we know and have known for quite some time – a community many of us are increasingly tied to with tender and enduring bonds of mutuality and love. I've enjoyed hanging out with you folks for quite some time now. We have made a lot of memories. We like to think of this community as God's neighborhood. And it is tempting, particularly in the often confusing and violent times in which we live, to pull back into a closed circle, drawing on our own resources and concerning ourselves with one another and our needs. Again, not all bad.

But then I think of our call to worship, reminding us that the world is God's neighborhood; I think of Father Centurio from Uganda who was with us in worship a couple of weeks ago, a beautiful Christian man. I think of the hundreds of beautiful children – orphans - he has cared for over the years; I think of people I have met on mission trips from Nicaragua to Birmingham; I think of Jesus reminding us of the width and breadth of God's love, so much wider than the walls of this sanctuary. And it occurs to me that no church can remain strong and healthy and joyous and grateful if it lives only unto itself. Its doors must open outward with much traffic and many different people moving in and out. Its doors must open outward so that it can see what God is up to in the world and then dare to join God there.

One of my mentors in ministry, Browne Barr, told this story. "My mother always insisted upon at least one outsider, one guest, at family parties, picnics and celebrations. In later years she confessed that she did so because we always behaved better when someone else was present. But I remember it, not as an unwelcomed intrusion of someone who limited our freedom and in whose presence we had to behave, but rather as a focal point of interest. The family did and said the same old things from a child's point of view when alone, but a guest often introduced another dimension, stories we had not heard before and a listener we had not worn out before...For us children, the favorite outsider at our family celebrations was a friend of my parents who had actually lived in China. When she came to visit us she brought with her artifacts and pictures and stories of a beautiful and distant place and people who had strange names but friendly faces. We wanted more than anything in those days to go to China and see those people. She linked us to other people, to the world. She taught us geography and sociology and compassion all together."

Hopefully this is what can happen in the church. For too long too many people of faith have eagerly participated in what one author calls, "combative piety." "I am right, I have the truth, so you are wrong!" Turn on the news at night, if you dare, and on virtually any channel at any time you will hear stories of conflict in which religious identity is the key. At times it seems that nothing strengthens religious communities as much as identifying a common enemy. In the memorable words of Jonathan Swift, which I have shared with you before, "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another, but not enough to love one another." If I can make God in my image, then I can deny the image of God in my enemy and perhaps even harm my enemy in the name of God. It happens every day – defining "us" through our hostility to "them." Everything reduced to the least common denominator.

But then Jesus, as he loves to do, turns it all upside down when he tells stories of God reaching out to my enemy, to the other, to the one who does not share my truth. This is how Jesus deals with identity and difference and pluralism...he embraces it, blesses it, includes it. No one is dismissed from his circle of concern, and everyone ends up sitting at his table.

It has been said, "There is just enough room in the world for all the people in it, but there is not room for the fences that separate them." May this be the place where fences start tumbling down.