

SERMON: Unholy Entitlement

TEXT: Luke 4:21-30

My son, Lucas recently got a job as a pharmacy technician at a hospital in Springfield, Missouri. His long-range goal (hopefully not too long-range!) is to go to pharmacy school. I have joked with him on occasion that it will be great when he's a pharmacist, because I'm looking forward to getting my medications at a deeply discounted rate! Of course, I know it doesn't work that way, but it would be nice, wouldn't it?

For another family story, I'll tell you about my dad. He was raised in the Catholic Church, but never was a regular church-goer. So I was surprised when, instead of teasing me like I expected, he seemed quite proud of me when I went to seminary and became a minister. In fact, he told me once when I was visiting him in the hospital that a nun had come to visit him earlier that day. Before she could even say hello, he held up his hand in a gesture of, "stop right there." He took delight in telling her, "My daughter's a minister; I'm covered."

Furthermore, I can't tell you the number of times someone has asked me to "put in a good word for them," as if prayers coming from a pastor carry more weight or get extra special consideration from God.

In the workplace, it's called nepotism, when family members get hired or promoted without qualification, or get more lenient discipline, or receive a higher wage than others doing the same job.

While there are many of us who might not mind *getting* these kinds of special favors, we are quick to call it out as highly unethical behavior when we're *not* part of the family; when we're on the outside looking in.

Last week we heard the story of Jesus teaching at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. The story continues this week, with Luke reporting that, "All spoke well of [Jesus] and were amazed at the gracious words that came from this mouth." I imagined they glowed with pride and were ready to tell everyone, "I knew him when he was just a little boy."

However, Jesus continued to talk. Not his best idea if he wanted to remain popular. But we know he wasn't interested in popularity. Even before the crowd began to ask for any special favors, he jumped in to suggest that they would.

"[Jesus] said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, *Doctor, cure yourself!* And you will say, *Do here also in your hometown the things that we*

*have heard you did at Capernaum.*’ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.’”

To be clear, a widow at Zarephath in Sidon was an outsider. A foreigner. A non-Israelite. A non-Jew. Not one of God’s chosen people. Nevertheless, the prophet Elijah provided for her needs before helping anyone in Israel.

One scholar explained, “In a drought-stricken, famine-ridden land of many widows, God designated but one, a non-believer, to make known both God’s presence and God’s power. In the life-giving healing of the widow’s son, God far surpasses the miraculous, life-giving food provided the widow, her family, and Elijah, and thereby prompts the joyous exclamation of her belief.” (David L Ostendorf, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 308*)

And Jesus didn’t stop there. He continued with another story. “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman, the Syrian.” Again, a foreigner.

It really feels like Jesus is trying to pick a fight here. Apparently, he never heard the expression, “Don’t poke the bear.” Before they even thought to ask, Jesus laid it on the line for the folks in his inner circle, that they would be getting no special favors from him.

It is no surprise, then, to read what happens next. “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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

It has been said that those of the so-called Millennial Generation, born between 1981 and 1996, generally have a sense of entitlement. An article on forbes.com explained, “The idea is that millennials were raised by baby boomer and Gen X parents who spoiled them. They were awarded participation trophies just for showing up to competitive events, and had access to the internet – with virtually unlimited connective potential – in their childhood and early adult years. Accordingly, they grew up to believe that the world already owed them something, and complain when they don’t immediately get it.” (Larry Alton, “*Millennials And Entitlement In The Workplace: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, forbes.com, November 17, 2017)

Based on this passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is clearly anti-entitlement. In fact, he might even go so far as to say that it is an unholy concept. Especially if it is only certain people who believe they are entitled; who believe they deserve *more* than others.

I'm afraid that sometimes we Christians believe that we are entitled to special treatment from God. We believe that we are God's chosen people. That we can lay claim to the family name. That we are the hometown crowd, the inner circle, the saved, and the only ones allowed into heaven. And let's be honest, we'd be angry too, just like the people in Nazareth, if Jesus came and told us he might be serving and healing foreigners and outsiders before us.

Didn't we all grow up hearing that "charity begins at home"?

Years ago, I was talking with a church committee about bringing in a group of young people who were traveling around the country leading worship through drama. The only compensation they required was a free-will offering and a place to stay – preferably at church members' homes the night before. One person asked a question. "What's in it for us?"

Such a statement reveals an attitude of scarcity; a belief that there's not enough of whatever we desire, that if I give some to you, there might not be enough left for me. It is an UNHOLY ENTITLEMENT when I can't be expected to do anything for you unless I get something in return.

If we look also at the passage from first Corinthians, Chapter 13, what we think of immediately is a wedding and the love that spouses and partners are called to have for one another. However, the Apostle Paul was writing this passage in response to members of the congregation at Corinth who were trying to enhance their status based on their particular spiritual gifts, which Paul discussed in the preceding chapter. He talked about gifts of teaching and healing, deeds of power and speaking in tongues. But here, Paul warns them not to take pride in such gifts, because love takes precedence over all.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Love is not just one more spiritual gift in a list of many. Rather, love is the very source of all our gifts, and without it, we are *nothing*. This is God's love Paul is writing about.

It is God's love that we are called to share with one another. And with God's love there is no entitlement. Nothing that makes one person more worthy than another. All are entitled. All are worthy. With God's love there is no scarcity. There is an eternity of abundance, an unending supply. Enough for all. Inner circle. Outer circle. To the farthest reaches of the earth and for all creation.

All are entitled to come to the Lord's Table. All are invited to feast on God's love. Let us share it together, to the glory of God!

AMEN.