

“The Boundaries of Faith”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “NEW BOUNDARIES FOR A NEW YEAR”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

January 31, 2010

Luke 4:14-30 NRSV

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

²³He 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.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But 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; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

All things considered, as a “candidating” or “trial” sermon this didn’t go so well. You know how it is, churches are searching for a new pastor, the search committee presents the best candidate they can find and he or she preaches a “trial” sermon before the congregation in hopes of getting the call to come be their pastor.

Candidating or trial sermons, as you can imagine, can be nerve-racking. You’ve got to impress them enough to get them to vote you in so you want to bring your best stuff. Although it wasn’t a “trial” sermon, I remember my first sermon as a student at a church in Simpsonville, South Carolina, where I was serving as a summer intern. The

pastor was gracious and he asked me to preach one Sunday. I wanted to start things off with a good story, you know, make the folks laugh at the start and you break the ice. It helps them relax and you feel more confident. So I told them the story of a young minister who was giving his first trial sermon for a congregation. He had chosen as his text the verse that reads “Behold, I come.”

So the time came in the service for him to step up into the pulpit and give his sermon. He wanted to impress the congregation so he had memorized his message. He planned to begin with that powerful verse, “Behold I come.” So he stepped up into the pulpit and in a strong voice he says, “Behold I come!” But then he froze. He couldn’t remember the next line. He couldn’t think of what to say. To cover his mental block he said, “But before I continue my sermon, I want to compliment the congregation on your fine singing. Let’s all stand and sing one more verse of the last hymn.” So they stood and sang and when they finished and sat down he stepped up into the pulpit more forcefully than before. Hoping it would give him more confidence and help him remember the rest of his sermon he spoke in an even louder voice, “Behold I come!” Then there was an uncomfortable silence. He still couldn’t think of the next part of his sermon! He began to panic and he could hear a few people clear their throats uncomfortably. So, instead he said, “But that choir anthem was so stirring, so inspiring, I want to hear it again, choir, sing that anthem one more time!” So the choir got up and sang and he sat down

and tried to collect his thoughts and remember his sermon. The choir finished and once again he strode strongly up into the pulpit to begin and he said, even louder than before, “Behold I come,” but he was moving too fast and he hit the front of the pulpit and it just shattered. The next thing he knew he fell through it and right down into the lap of one of the little old ladies of the church. As he lay across her lap sputtering his apologies, she said, “That’s alright young man, you warned me three times you were coming!” So there are real perils in these trial sermons for pastors seeking a call from a new congregation, even if it isn’t your hometown.

There are a few things you have to keep in mind in this situation. If you are the candidate it is probably a good idea to refrain from insulting the congregation you are hoping to be called to pastor. As a congregation, it is probably good enough to just take a vote not to call the candidate. Dragging him or her out to the edge of town to throw the rascal off the cliff is probably a little extreme.

So here we are, Rabbi Jesus has come to preach to his “homies.” It is a high moment. All the grandmothers have a twinkle in their eyes. “I remember when he used to run around during fellowship hour stealing all the matzoh balls,” they say. All the wise old men nod and murmur, “I knew that boy would turn out to be something special, he just had that look – that something extra.” Rabbi Jesus opens the traditional text and reads from Isaiah about declaring good news. It sounds like a good choice of

Scripture lessons for a first sermon. It starts off well. Everyone likes good news.

He begins his sermon by saying, “today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” “Preach it,” comes a voice from the Amen Corner. “Mhmm,” adds one of the Deaconesses, “Alright!” calls another. It is going well. The congregation is smiling, everything is looking good for Pastor Jesus to get a unanimous vote to become the new spiritual leader of his hometown synagogue. He can hear one of the ladies in the second row turn to her sister and say, “You know that’s Deacon Joe’s boy, right?” But then things seem to take a turn.

Jesus tells them, “Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal thyself.’ And then he says something about them wanting him to do for the hometown crowd what he did at Peter’s mother-in-law’s. You know, wow the crowd not just with your rhetoric but with a healing or a nice exorcism like he did in Capernaum. Clearly it was a Pentecostal synagogue! But instead he tells them he fully expects to be voted down: “No prophet is without honor except in his own hometown.” The English teachers in the audience were marking him down for the double negative, on top of everything else he was doing wrong. But then he tops all this by beginning to stretch the boundaries of their faith. As they say sometimes in some circles, he had gone from “preachin’,” to “meddlin’.” The crowd quickly goes from murmuring

admiration to shouting angrily to running him out of town to throw him off a cliff. Just short of tar and feathering him. Fortunately, Scripture tells us Jesus “passed through their midst and went on his way.”

What did Jesus say that was so bad? What did he preach that offended them so? He started to talk about how God’s favor extended beyond their boundaries. He talked about God showing love to outsiders and foreigners and non-believers. He reminded them that Elijah helped a widow in Sidon in the midst of a great famine. She was a foreigner! He talked about God healing a Syrian general of leprosy! That would be as bad as doing something for one of those Roman centurions that were occupying Israel at that very moment. They were outraged! They were stunned! This was beyond belief! This was beyond their boundaries.

So I have to ask myself, where are my faith boundaries? Who do I think is unqualified for God’s love? Are non-Christians unloved by God? Are terrorists beyond God’s boundaries? Do I exclude fundamentalists who judge me unworthy? Mostly I assume God loves the people I love and hates the people I hate, don’t you? Would I be wanting to hurl Jesus off a cliff if I found out he loves the very people I find detestable?

This is the thing that may have challenged the boundaries of faith for Jesus’ hometown synagogue. Love is fine as long as it is a weak, sentimental feeling. But Jesus insisted that God’s love was powerful. It wasn’t based on

feelings, but was evident in action. It called on people to care but more than care, to do. The United Church of Christ had a bumper sticker out a while back, and while I generally don't like "bumper sticker theology," this was one I almost put on my bumper. It said something to the effect that "to believe is to care, to care is to do." I think we know that instinctively because that's why there has been such an outpouring of assistance for Haiti. Somehow the need there has reminded us that love is more than a weak, sentimental feeling. It is a powerful force that drives us to do what is just and what is merciful. This is why God's love is good news for those Isaiah speaks of in his prophecy.

Perhaps this reminder is what got Jesus in trouble. God's love is not just a sentimental good feeling for those we like. He joins Isaiah in proclaiming the good news of God – for the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed. He proclaims the year of the Lord's favor, which, in essence, is saying the time of God's grace, is at hand. And while it may sound good, there is a temptation to dismiss this as the liberal rantings of a bleeding heart that just won't work in the "real world." Our boundaries remind us that the poor are lazy and looking for a government hand-out. The captives, good gracious, they live a life of ease in prison complete with air conditioning, the Internet, and television – we can't build the prisons fast enough. The blind or other physically "challenged?" Well, all those ADA requirements just add costs to doing business that are killing the small-businessman. And don't get

me started on that "oppressed" immigrant stuff. What we need to do is build a wall. Tighter boundaries are what we need, right?

See every time I figure I have it all figured out Jesus comes along and upsets my assumptions. He breaks down my boundaries and barriers. I figure most people want faith to comfort them and uphold their beliefs. But Jesus keeps coming along and irritating the, well, "heck," out of me. Every time I have limited the way God's love and purposes work to my way of thinking I read something in Scripture or the "still-speaking" God speaks in my head of things that makes me want to throw it all over the cliff. There are times I am ready to join the crowd and throw Jesus off a cliff somewhere so he won't keep coming around and bothering me with the limits and boundaries of my faith. And every time I am tempted to do that, he passes through the midst ... and goes on his way. Then I remember that I mustn't confuse my way with his way or his way with my way.

Jesus may not have preached a very diplomatic "trial" sermon but he is the same Jesus that boldly announces, "Behold I come." And what we have to do is not stand on the edge of that cliff but to go with him on his way. Wherever that leads.... AMEN.