

SERMON: "CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME?"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT JEREMIAH 1:4-10
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 4:21-30

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INTRODUCTION

Given the sermon title "Charity Begins at Home?" maybe we should have gone with that proverb as our Old Testament lesson. You know that one, heard it, said it or thought it. Could we have used that proverb, 'charity begins at home' as our Old Testament lesson? No, we could not ... because it is not in the bible

I did a little looking around to find out where this 'proverb' came from and to find out how it has been used. I found some people using other bible passages to prove that sentiment is biblical – seems like round hole and square peg thinking to me. The clearest thing I found was from a blogger, Melinda Cousins

The first use of the phrase "Charity begins at home" in print is found in Thomas Browne's 1642 book Religio Medici. It is now quoted as if it was gospel truth, often by Christians, and it is surprising how many people claim it is biblical or "based" on the Bible. It's not. In fact, my reading of Browne is that he is arguing against the saying. He uses it twice, in these two sentences:

"Charity begins at home, is the voice of the World..." And "That a man should lay down his life for his Friend, seems strange to vulgar affections, and such as confine themselves within that Worldly principle, Charity begins at home."

More to the point, and I'm happy to be corrected on this, but my understanding is that the saying as it was originally taken up as a general English "proverb" was meant to refer to the fact that virtues are cultivated in the every day – that is, we learn to be compassionate and charitable people at home; that capacity within us as human beings begins to develop there, and then grows as we exercise it outside the home.

I think her reasoning points out both the good and not so good in this 'proverb' of sorts. Saying charity begins at home is a good thing when we talk about where charity is **learned**. We are taught charity as in kindness and care for others. We learn to be charitable at home. It is learned there. Charity begins at home.

But to say charity begins at home as some kind of **limit**, to say we need to keep it to ourselves and not share it or spread it too far ... that is not good. That way of thinking is more accurately said as "Charity begins *and ends* at home."

That kind of thinking is not biblical. The one time Jesus does hint at that thinking is the story in Matthew chapter 15 where a Canaanite woman, an outsider, corrects Jesus talking about how even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table.

LEARNING, NOT LIMITS

Speaking of dogs, another insight about talking with dogs snuck into a sermon
A few weeks ago, I talked about how tone is important in talking with dogs
This week a reminder of how dogs hear us based on the wisdom
of the cartoonist Gary Larsen and Far Side Comics

You may remember the one with how dogs listen? It repeated blah, blah, blah
and every once in a while the dog's name - Clarence. Then more blah, blah, blah.
That is how dogs listen. Their ears may actually perk up at the sound of their name.
Maybe, on occasion, we might listen that way too? About them, about that ...
Blah blah blah ... what about me?

Might that describe how the people of Nazareth heard Jesus words ...
A mix of "blah, blah, what about me" mixed with some "Charity begins at home."

That sounds like what is going on here in how his hometown folks respond
to his teaching, quoting Isaiah, that he is sent to bring good news to the poor,
and recovery of sight to the blind, to proclaim release to the captives,
to let the oppressed go free. Are they suggesting that charity
should begin there, with them? Me first please

That's what they would expect from the hometown boy, Joseph and Mary's son
They are ready ... standing at the front of the line, if you will
Then Jesus steps out of line ...frankly, over the line

He 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 ..."

Please note it is Jesus who provokes them. He talks about God's favor being extended
elsewhere. He does so by offering examples from their own history, our biblical history
Elijah being sent by God not to a local widow but to Sidon (what is now Lebanon)
Elisha healing lepers from another land, from Syria

Luke doesn't really tell us about their arguments back at Jesus
'Yeah, we know about Elijah and Elisha, but ...' We don't hear their words
but we do see their actions, their violent reaction to Jesus.

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.

Notice is how they overreacted, how quickly they got violent. Their push back was literal.
Notice also how calmly Jesus just went on. There are lessons in both,
in their tendency to violence (the faithful congregation turned crowd, turned mob)
and in Jesus' path of non-violence.

PUSH BACK

Jesus' first sermon on record didn't end well. I know a thing or two about that - sermons not ending well. More on that later. First let's look at how Jesus' words announcing that what the prophet foretold was fulfilled in their hearing were received.

Verse 22 reports ... **"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."**

A good first impression ... Then things changed when Jesus challenged them.

The people very quickly went from speaking well of him and being amazed at the gracious words (notice that 'gracious words') coming from his mouth to being so filled with rage (that is the word that Matthew uses - rage) enraged enough to offer the 'push back' of trying to push him off a cliff

From gracious words to violent rage. Why so enraged, why enraged so quickly?

Because Jesus talked about outsiders before tending to those of us on the inside?

Because of gracious words? Because of charity beyond home?

No, Jesus' first sermon didn't end well

How about I tell you about how my first sermon went - try to make some connections

No, I'm not comparing my words to Jesus' words. I'm talking about the reaction.

It was after my first year of seminary. I went back to Georgia to be near family.

Worked at First Church in Athens. Preached one steamy humid Sunday in August

A bunch of my fraternity brothers showed up wearing "Kivett for Pope" buttons

An usher playfully asked them if they were at the right church.

Don't really remember the sermon. I'm sure it was let's say 'a work in progress'

What I do remember is the summer storm that surprised us.

It got dark in a hurry. The rains were hard. The thunder and lightning loud.

The storm actually knocked out the power for just a moment

The lights went off and came back on. The organ went out after the first hymn

The president of the university at the time was a member of the church.

He shook my hand after church and with an empathetic smile said,

"I think if you can get through that with your first sermon, you'll be alright."

Some wisdom in his words. I'd humbly suggest, they've proven to be true.

And in a way, not the whole truth.

Preaching has gotten harder, especially so since I have been here with you

And it doesn't have a thing to do with the match between pastor and people

We have shared for ten years now a faithful and fruitful ministry

I feel good about what God has been doing among us and through us

I am so very thankful for you and for our shared ministry. It is a good match

But preaching has gotten harder and harder in large part because

of out context ... trying to be "A Place for Everyone" in an angry world

Angry voices get our attention - hold it and mold it. It hit me

the other day that the heart of the word 'outrageous' is ... 'rage.'

SUMMARY

What are we doing with our anger? What are we doing about the anger all round us
anger that invites us in, encourages us to offer that anger a helping hand,
a helping hand to push someone further to the margins ... or even off a cliff?

Seems so many people, so very often, are going from gracious words heard to rage
to pushing back and putting down. Sometimes we are the ones enraged
And if it is we're not one of the mob eager to push someone off a cliff ...
what are we doing? Cheering on the angry mob with a shout or a like?
Standing by silently justifying our inaction with a "but" to rationalize it all?

As a preacher trying to speak gracious words, I confess that there are times,
I feel like the child throwing starfish back into the surf one by one
I get 15-20 minutes a week to swim against the current - hours of social media,
hours following an algorithm that sure seems designed to fuel our rage
hours of misinformation, disinformation and convenient lies accepted as truth

It can be overwhelming, like the surf and all those starfish on the beach
But the good news is this ... the congregation turned angry mob did not succeed
The one who spoke gracious words, Jesus of Nazareth, walked back through the crowd
And kept on walking ... speaking gracious words, doing gracious deeds
proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind

Angry voices will always turn up the volume ... blah, blah, blah
But grace keeps on going, spreading out all over – home and abroad
The mobs will push back ... Grace, however, cannot be pushed down
Grace doesn't really push back. It pushes through and pushes on

My resolution in this angry and outrageous world is this
Because God so loves me and you, us and them ... I'm going to push on
and push through (or to be theologically accurate led or carried through)
I am not going to be a cynic. I am not going to be a mob-ster
I'm going to be a grace-ster