

## EXPECTATIONS

Luke 4:21-30

### The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

When I went to my second appointment which was the Tennille Church up in Washington County, I went knowing that it had a reputation for being pretty rough on preachers. No one stayed any longer than two or three years. By then the tracks were greased and they were on their way to their next appointment. I looked a list of preachers who had come and gone, saw some names I thought notable, but figured it was going to be different when I arrived. Youth has a way of looking at reality face-to-face and declaring it to be something else.

One of those who had come and gone was V.L. Daughtery, a pastor who modeled effective leadership and strong pastoral work for my generation. V.L. was invited to come back to Tennille for a homecoming type event. Though run out like all the rest, when he returned he seemed like a favorite son at a political convention. All the unpleasant memories seemed to be forgotten and he was extolled as one of Tennille's great pastors. I remember one conversation of that day. One of my members was going on and on about what good times they had on Sunday night after worship was over. V.L.'s wife would come up and play the organ and they would all gather around the organ having such a great time at the informal sing-a-long. Later when V.L. was talking with me about some of the problems he had while there as a pastor, he laughingly reminded me how quickly things can change by saying, "You know that story about Catherine playing the organ? It never happened. She can't even play the piano!"

Later on when Jesus' fame was spreading through Galilee, it makes you wonder how the folks of Nazareth remembered that day when Jesus came preaching. Probably, no one remembered it exactly like it happened. Those that did remember likely would want to tell it a bit differently in order to cast their community in a little better light. When Luke wrote his gospel some decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, some of the old timers in Nazareth probably wanted to say, "Now it really wasn't quite like you are telling it. We didn't really try to push Jesus off a cliff!" Of course, what Luke does is tell the story as it happened and not as the revisionists would want it told.

When Jesus arrived in Nazareth in those beginning days of his ministry, He went to worship in the synagogue as was His custom. It appears that He is recognized by them as a visiting rabbi or teacher since He is giving the privilege of reading the Words of the prophet Isaiah and teaching to the gathered assembly. As we see this picture of Jesus, we see him doing several things. First, He read from the sacred Word a text from Isaiah in which spoke of God's plans to care for the forgotten and neglected masses of people. Secondly, He declared that the Holy Spirit was upon Him to accomplish such a work. Thirdly, He listened to the undermining whispers of those present, who were saying such things as,

*Is not this Joseph's son? (Did we not watch him?)*

*Grow up? Who does he think he is to say the  
Spirit of the Lord is upon him to do God's work?  
He is just one of us.)*

And finally, He tells them that their lack of understanding and acceptance will not slow God's plan for God will always use whoever it is that is willing to be used by Him. God does not look at a person's background, or status, or social standing; He only looks for those who are willing out of an attitude of faith to be useful to the plan which resides in His heart. What Jesus said in the synagogue so angered those who heard it that had they had their way Jesus' ministry would have ended at the bottom of a cliff near his hometown.

The people of Nazareth were not interested in finding out what God was doing in the world so that they could be a part of it. They had their own ideas about what God was doing in the world. It was a set of expectations largely shaped by the past. It was largely shaped by the keepers of the status quo. It was largely shaped by a body of personal expectations. They were unable to see that God was about to do something radically new and that they could be a part of it. Instead of going forward with God's plan for their future, they attempted to create their future in their past.

The church of our day treads the same ground. When we begin to seek a vision for the future, we look everywhere but God. We look around us to see where other churches are experiencing success and then we seek to clone those program and ministries where we are. We look at how things used to be and declare what we see to be the way things ought to be. So often our movement into the future is more about consensus than divine leading. Of course, none of this is new. Neither is it something peculiar to where we are. It is instead a mode of operation which has plagued our larger church causing it to become a declining community of faith over the last several decades.

Somehow we must find a way to create a spiritual environment where listening to God is regarded as the most important ministry of the church. Whenever we look at the record of the church in the book of Acts, we always see a church directed by the person and power of the Holy Spirit. To read the stories in those pages is to understand that the Apostles and the other leaders of the church listened for the sound of the Spirit's leading and then quickly acted on it. When Philip was having a great time leading a revival in Samaria and heard the Spirit calling him to go to the desert, he went. (Acts 8:26) When Peter was practicing spiritual disciplines every good Jew would practice and heard the Spirit saying something about going to a Gentile who was expecting him, he got up and went. (Acts 10). When Paul was trying to follow the dictates of his own agenda and heard the Spirit telling him to do go to an unknown place instead, he got up and went (Acts 16:6). What is common about all of these examples of listening to the Spirit, is that each of these men were led by the Spirit into a ministry which could be characterized as surprising and totally unexpected. It was nothing at all like they expected.

When we are able to see exactly where the Spirit of God is leading us as His people, it will very likely be surprising and totally unexpected. In fact this element of being called to embrace something outside of our expectations may be one of the ways to know and discern that what is perceived is more about God than it is about us. What we should do in the meantime is exactly the opposite of what the people of Nazareth did. Their actions speak of trying to separate themselves from Jesus and His soul penetrating words which cause so much discomfort. A choice opposite of theirs would put us in a position of seeking to be in His presence as much as possible. A choice opposite of theirs would take us to our knees, not for the perfunctory prayers of religion, but to the heart prayers which constantly ask, "Lord, what is it that You want me to do?" A choice opposite of theirs would take us away from some of our secular pursuits so that we live as those seeking to immersed in reading and understanding the Word of God as it is written in scripture. A choice opposite of theirs would mean examining our hearts for the sinful clutter of broken relationships, unholy attitudes, and misplaced priorities so that we can ask Him to help us remove the sinful things which hinder us as we seek to draw near to Him.

As we do such things, it will be like falling in love. No person who falls in love sets out to fall in love. It is something which happens because of other choices. Falling in love is more a product of choices than a result of choosing to make certain choices. When we as a church make a choice to draw near to God with intentionality and passion, we will soon begin to see revealed to us exactly where it is that the Spirit of God is seeking to lead us. And when we finally see it, we will be know it is His leading and not our own because it will not be as predictable as our expectations, but will instead be something totally surprising, totally unexpected, and completely outside the boundaries of our personal expectations.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on January 31, 2010.