

WHO WOULD WANT TO KILL JESUS?

Psalm 71
Luke 4: 14-30

Faith Community
January 31, 2010

Introduction

Why would anyone want to kill Jesus? He was a calm, gentle teacher who taught us to love one another and to forgive each other. He was filled with compassion; he offered people hope. Often we think of Jesus as that revered teacher – wise, insightful, and generous.

We can understand why people would flock to hear Jesus speak, but why would anyone kill him in a brutal, excruciating death? It can seem as hard to imagine as stringing up your favorite college professor – you know the one who wore the tweed jacket with the leather patches on the elbows, the brilliant man who was generous with everyone and would take the time to answer the simplest questions, even though his was a brilliant mind. Who would want to kill Jesus?

I

The scripture we read this morning opens with the people of Jesus' hometown expressing their pride in their hometown boy. They "speak well of him" and are "amazed at his gracious words." Here is somebody who grew up in Nazareth and who's drawing a lot of attention; he may even be a prophet.

As he does well, so his hometown does well. Some are already planning the banner to go over the entrance to the city: "Hometown of Jesus, Welcome." They are proud of Jesus and impressed with what he has said and what he has done.

Some may be nervous about Jesus' words about releasing captives; we certainly don't want to just open all the jail doors, but if he means freeing the Israelites who are held captive by our enemies, then yes, set them free. Jesus said he would give sight to the blind, and that's a good thing. He talked of setting the oppressed free. We're oppressed; if he's talking about setting our people free then we're with him on that.

II

As Jesus continues to talk, the mood of the crowd shifts. Adoration slips into anger. Pride descends into rage. Remember the end of this passage? The people chase Jesus out of town and want to throw him over a cliff. How did those who were "amazed at his gracious words" suddenly become a lynch mob?

Through two simple stories. As Jesus is announcing who he is and what he is about, he recounts two stories from the Old Testament. One is about Elijah, and the other is about Elisha.

During a horrible famine God sends Elijah to an unnamed widow in the city of Zarephath. She takes him in, feeds and houses him, and more than that she trusts in him. For her faithfulness she is accepted and praised by God.

The problem with this story is that she is a gentile, not a Jew; an outsider, not an insider. The people sitting in the synagogue listening to Jesus tell this story, are starting to squirm in their

pews. Maybe they are thinking: what are we – the faithful, chosen people of God – chopped liver?

III

Then Jesus tells of how the prophet Elisha healed Naaman. Naaman was a great military leader. Powerful as he was Naaman suffered from leprosy.

In one of his victories he captured a young Israelite woman. She became a servant to his wife. The Israelite woman tells Naaman's wife that if Naaman would go to Elisha, he could cure him of his leprosy. Later Naaman goes and does what Elisha tells him to do, and he is healed.

Again Naaman becomes a man of faith, trusting in Elisha and in God. But Naaman is a gentile, an outsider, not part of the chosen people of Israel.

Jesus says there were many lepers in Israel at the time, but none were healed except Naaman, the Syrian.

Now there's loud grumbling from the back row, "But we are the chosen people of Israel. We know whom God has chosen." "Why is he talking about outsiders? We have God's promise." The voices get louder. People start coming at Jesus. They force him out of the synagogue. They chase him out of town. They want to throw him down a cliff. How dare he lift up outsiders and overlook our faithfulness?

IV

There is an old story that's been around for a long time. A man dies and goes to the pearly gates where St Peter welcomes him. The man looks around, "There really are many rooms in God's house, and it's so open." Then he sees a closed-in room that is soundproof and has no windows. "Wait, what's in that room?" Peter answers, "Oh, that's the room where we put the Baptists; they think there's nobody up here but them." I've heard it told about Baptists, but it could be anybody who's sure they are in and nobody else is going to make it.

Jesus faced a similar situation in the synagogue that day. Some people knew that they were in, they were the chosen people, and they didn't want to hear about any outsiders being accepted. When Jesus gave them two examples, they wanted to kill him.

V

The people who gave Jesus the most trouble were people who knew they had the answers. When Jesus came with a new approach to God, when he talked about God's grace reaching to unexpected people, they got mad. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, they threw a fit. When he forgave and saved the woman caught in adultery, they were horrified. They were positive that they knew God's will and were in with God, so how dare Jesus break down those barriers. Jesus demonstrated a wider reach for God's grace than they could stand.

God's grace is never limited by a nation, a race, an ethnic group or a denomination. When we say, "This person or group will not be accepted in God's grace," we are deciding for God where God's grace can be found. That's an extraordinarily dangerous decision to make. We don't have the right to tie God's hands; we human beings don't have the right to limit God's grace.

Maybe that's why Jesus said, "Judge not that you be not judged...the measure you give will be the measure you get." Jesus warns us that when we are positive about excluding others, we put ourselves at risk of being excluded.

Conclusion

The problem with the people Jesus spoke to in the synagogue was that they built a fence around who was acceptable to God. They knew that God's people were the Israelites. When Jesus came and smashed holes in that fence they got really angry. They even tried to kill Jesus for what he said and did.

They wanted to fence in God's grace for themselves. Jesus made clear that no human being can create barriers around God's mercy.

The people in the synagogue changed from admiring Jesus to wanting to kill him. They were sure they were God's people, the in-group, saved and chosen by God. When Jesus burst that bubble and showed them the outsiders whom God had chosen, they are so threatened that they wanted to shove Jesus off a cliff.

Judgments will be made. I believe that each one of us will be judged on how we have lived our lives. We do far better to make sure that our own house is in order than to judge someone else's house. Judgments will be made, just not by you or me. The one who will make those judgments is very capable. We don't need to worry about that.

You and I don't know the limits of God's grace. It's not good for us, or anybody else, to try to define whom God can love. Instead, we can celebrate the boundless mercy of God.

Amen.