

## **At First They Praised Him; then They Wanted to Kill Him. Why?**

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston  
Augustana Lutheran Church  
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Two weeks ago, J. Alfred Smith stood in this pulpit to deliver the sermon as we emphasized the contributions of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a wonderful weekend here at Augustana: a special concert Saturday evening, Dr. Smith preaching and leading the adult class on Sunday morning. Something unique and surprising occurred two weeks ago. At the 10:30 a.m. worship service, when J. Alfred Smith concluded his sermon, the congregation applauded. Last Sunday, at the conclusion of Pastor Pederson's sermon, I noted that there was no applause. No clapping followed the sermon I preached on January 10. I'm not sure how to interpret this inconsistent behavior on the part of the congregation. You'll have to help me understand.

Last Sunday we heard in the reading from Luke 4 the situation that produced the first sermon preached by Jesus. In Pastor Pederson's sermon he made direct reference to this one sentence sermon. Today's reading from Luke is a continuation of last Sunday's reading, and we hear that "All spoke well of Jesus" (Luke 4:22). Then some wise guy in the crowd bellowed out, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" The thrust of that question is to challenge the credentials of Jesus: a carpenter's son is to be a carpenter and not pretend to be a rabbi. He should know better than to try to be uppity. Doesn't he know his place?

The dialogue continues, and Jesus makes reference to the works of God through two prophets: Elijah and Elisha, both of whom brought the compassion, care, and power of the Lord God to foreigners – Elijah a penniless Gentile widow in Sidon and Elisha a leprous Gentile Syrian, an enemy of Israel's. Such a message was very offensive to the congregation in Nazareth of Galilee, for they knew the difference between Jews and Gentiles and also knew that Jews were God's Chosen people and the Gentiles were not. What does this Jesus mean by saying that the God of the Israelites showed love and concern for Gentiles? Preposterous!

Jesus got reaction to his teaching all right. It was not positive; the congregation was not applauding. In fact, verse 29 tells us that they wanted to throw him over a cliff to his death – after one sermon!

Do we ever get mad at the words of Jesus? Have you ever wanted to throw a preacher out? How many sermons have you heard? Let's just say you've heard 40 sermons a year for 25 years. How many would that be? A thousand. Some of you have been listening for 50 years which means you've heard at least 2000 sermons. I would imagine some of you have heard many more than that. Any sermon ever make you angry like the congregation in Nazareth hearing Jesus?

I've known Augustana for over 45 years, and I've never heard that you've thrown a preacher out. Does that mean every sermon has been received with consenting minds and hearts? Might it mean that the message of the Gospel was not made clear by those who stood in this pulpit, including me, including today? Or might it mean that those listening heard only what they wanted to hear? I think it's called "selective listening." What do you think?

The Gospel of Luke continues to tell us the story of Jesus including the time when some people became so offended by his message that Jesus was crucified. The Light that he brought was just too intense for some of those who heard him. Instead of changing what they saw in themselves, they got rid of the Light – or so they thought. He was raised from the dead and continues to be the Light of the world.

In the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus told the people that the God whom they worshiped loved not only them but "those people" also. At that time it was Gentiles. Who would fit into the category of "those people" today, here, in Denver? Oh, we would be quite hesitant to name any group of people that we feel ought not receive God's favor. Underneath those thoughts are feelings that judge, condemn, criticize, and isolate us from some people. Most of us are not verbal about those thoughts, unlike Andre Bauer, candidate for governor of South Carolina, who last week said publically, "My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed! You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce..."

As the AP reported, he was attacking those who are poor and receive government assistance. After critical responses came flooding in, candidate Bauer said, "I didn't intend to offend anyone."

Or Paul Shirley, a former National Basketball Player who wrote, "I haven't donated to the Haitian relief effort... I don't think the people of Haiti will do much with my money..."

Thankfully, Paul Shirley does not speak for you who have been very generous with your gifts that help support our Lutheran and interchurch response to the crisis in Haiti, but Paul Shirley must speak for some who have a more cynical attitude toward the suffering in Haiti. It is a complex situation, and I am not trying to oversimplify. What we know is that the pain there is overwhelming, and we are called to respond to human suffering with compassion.

The people who heard Jesus say that God loves and cares for Gentiles – "those people" who are not among the Chosen – so objected to his sermon discussion that they wanted to kill him. They did not clap for him. That's the way the Gospel is – the word of salvation (applause) and the Lord's call to love – God, neighbor, and enemy (impossible). No, it is not easy, but it is God's will and way for us. The Second Reading this morning beautifully describes what is meant by "love." Love is patient, kind, not irritable,

arrogant, rude, or resentful. Paul wrote these words because he saw that some in the congregation at Corinth were unaware how they offended one another and how their attitudes caused hurt in others. The Word of the Lord is a constant challenge to my assumptions and conclusions about people, priorities, and propriety.

Jesus preached in Nazareth, and his Word comes to me today, to you today, calling us to examine our attitudes and actions. I resist; parts of me still need to be converted, so I confess. The Gospel echoes in this worship service: I heard the words that told me that the entire forgiveness of all my sins was mine. Thanks be to God. I am cleansed and restored, not to continue to hold the same old thoughts about “those people” but to be transformed by the renewal of my mind in Christ Jesus. Such a transformation is not instantaneous; living in the new creation is a lifelong process.

Be patient with me, Lord Jesus, and continue to teach me your ways. Amen.