

**Yr. C, Epiphany 4**  
**February 3, 2019**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1451 Words**

**Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10**  
**Psalm 71:1-6**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**Luke 4:21-30**

“Ah, Lord! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” This morning we hear the profound, self-doubt of Jeremiah. “Lord, I don’t know what to say. I’m *only* a boy.” We also hear the utterly unsympathetic response of God, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy.’”

So, what is your favorite excuse to God? Are you ever tempted to say, “I’m just a boy,” or “I’m just a girl,” or “I’m too old now,” or “I’m too busy right now.”? Do you ever think to yourself, “I’m only one person,” or “I’m on a fixed income,” or “I don’t know the bible as well as other people.”

Do you think God is *more sympathetic* with you and me than with the beloved prophet, Jeremiah? I sort of doubt it.

As comforting as it would be for me to say, “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” I believe God is not pleased when we dismiss ourselves. I believe God hopes we will value ourselves as much as God does. I believe God does not want us to sell ourselves short. Being pessimistic is just not God’s style. When it comes to valuing people, God sets the bar so very high for us. When it comes to valuing people, God leads by example!

Just consider the words of Jesus to his friends and neighbors in Nazareth. He promised to fulfill the expectations first described by the prophet, Isaiah.

Jesus promised to bring good news to the poor, because God values people who are often neglected. Jesus promised to proclaim release to the captives, because God values people who are often forgotten. Jesus promised sight for the blind, because God values people who are routinely overlooked. Jesus promised freedom for the oppressed, because God values people who are most easily used.

And this was all fine, as we heard in the Gospel this morning. According to St. Luke, “all (the people in that synagogue) spoke well of Jesus.” According to St. Luke, “*all the people* were amazed at these gracious words he spoke.”

And who wouldn’t? After all, Nazareth was a poor, neglected village. The young men of Nazareth had lived and died in captivity to foreign soldiers. The blind of Nazareth had long struggled to find their way on the rugged, mountain pathways. The people of Nazareth were more likely on the raw end of the deal, economically and politically, than the prosperous, connected people living in nearby Sepphoris and other Galilean cities by the sea.

So, Jesus’ words rang true. The people felt valued. His friends and neighbors felt valuable. The good, faithful people of Nazareth felt swaddled in the comforting words of a chaplain who also happened to be one of their own. Who doesn’t love a hometown hero who makes good?

So, how did their adulation change so quickly into rage? How did their praise *for* Jesus turn so rapidly into violence *against* Jesus? Most preachers get more than one chance to make a mistake, thank goodness! Not so, with Jesus in Nazareth. His own people tried to kill him the very first time he preached. What can we learn from his ‘mistake?’

It seems...as if the people loved the words of Scripture, so long as they believed that it was all about them. The people delighted in those promises of Isaiah, so long as they believed the promises were intended for them.

We're probably not all that different. This truth is conveyed rather comically in a bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus loves you...but I'm his favorite!" It's hard not to place ourselves at the center of God's love, and therefore assume we get to define who's in and who's out.

We say, "For God so loved the *world*," but we sometimes *act* as if God *really loves* the conditions that we want to place upon that Divine love.

Two thousand years later, we are still tempted to read the bible with a narrow spotlight, even though its clear message shines outward like a floodlight.

In John's Gospel we are reminded of God's 'floodlight approach' to all of humanity. In the very first chapter Jesus Christ is described as "the light of...*all* people." Jesus Christ is depicted as the "true light, which enlightens...*everyone*..."

I love how our Eucharistic prayer describes this Light during the season of Epiphany. We thank God because God "has caused a *new light* to shine in our hearts, (in order) to give (*us*) the knowledge of (God's) glory in the face of Jesus Christ"...especially when his words challenge and disturb us.

You see, the beauty of God's glory is not only that it is deep, but also that it is wide. The beauty of God's love is not only that it is deep, but also that it is wide.

As we sometimes sing from our hymnal, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the *sea*"...just as Jesus reminded *his* congregation with a story about a foreign widow who received God's mercy. Jesus infuriated his congregation with the truth that God valued the people whom they did not.

In the second verse of the hymn, we sing of how "There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven"...just as Jesus reminded *his* congregation with a story about an enemy combatant who received God's mercy. Jesus infuriated his congregation with the truth that God valued the very people whom they loved to hate.

When it comes to valuing people, Jesus sounds utterly unsympathetic toward his congregations' prejudices. He was not afraid to speak the scandalous truth about God's love. Unlike Jeremiah, Jesus did not make excuses for why he could not speak.

Well, there's good news (and there's hard news) in all of this.

The good news is that God *still* values people—including us—more than God values our excuses. God *still* values people—including us—more than God values our prejudices. God *still* loves, trusts, and challenges people—including us—by being utterly unsympathetic toward our excuses...and by being unsympathetic toward our prejudices.

You see, being pessimistic is not God's style. When it comes to valuing people, God sets the bar very high for us. God leads us by example!

The hard news is that we are still going to feel disturbed, even infuriated, by the wideness of God's mercy. In the face of such miraculous mercy and love (in other words, in the face of Jesus) we get to see the glory of God. Not only do we get to see it. As followers of Jesus, we get to *speak it*.

“Ah, but Lord, I do not how to speak it,” you might say. “I’m just a boy,” or “I’m just a girl,” or “I’m too old now,” or “I’m too busy now,” or “I’m only one person,” or “I’m on a fixed income,” or “I don’t know the bible as well as other people.”

Save your breath. God is unimpressed with your excuses. Rather, just speak the truth of love. Just speak the radical truth about God’s love.

St. Paul has given us an unforgettable picture of what God’s love looks like so that we can recognize it anywhere...and so that we can *speak it* and *act it out* everywhere.

The love of God is patient. The love of God is kind. God’s love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. The truth is that God’s love does not insist on its own way, nor is it irritable or resentful. This love rejoices in what is true, *not* in what is wrong. Incredibly, God’s love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and, ultimately, endures all things. The best news of all is that *God’s love* never dies.

Even though this love *belongs to God*, by some mystery...God has caused this love to shine *in our hearts*—a light for *all people*, a *floodlight* which enlightens *everyone*.

For now, we may not see all of this clearly. For now, we can only know this in part. But, these are not excuses, because in the words and deeds of Jesus we have seen and heard *enough* to recognize what his faith...and hope...and love look like and sound like.

So, go out *with love* this week to all to whom God sends you. No excuses. Speak (and act) *with love* this week in whatever God calls you to say and do. No excuses. Do not be afraid, for it is nothing less than the love of God which will enable you to do these things.

We don’t *need* excuses, because we already have God’s gifts...of faith, and hope, and love...and the greatest of these *is love*.

Amen.