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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
February 3, 2019 4th Sunday of Year C Luke 4:21-30

In a few weeks the Oscars will be awarded for the best films of the past year. The films that were nominated are not necessarily the ones that made the most money. Those blockbusters fell into the category of the "superhero" genre, the heroic character, usually possessing some supernatural or superhuman power, who is dedicated to fighting the evil of their own particular universe, and usually battling super villains. Their popularity is due to the fact that they portray or embody the idea of "redemptive violence." Redemptive violence enshrines the belief that violence can save us, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is enshrined in stories that go back to the beginning of recorded history in the Babylonia sagas up to children's cartoon shows with the virtuous Popeye, thanks to his can of spinach, rescuing his helpless and forlorn girl friend Olive Oyle from the abusive, and certainly evil, Bluto. The myth of redemptive violence relies upon a schema of "us against them," and because we are convinced that we have right on our side, we believe we are entitled to use any means necessary to see that justice is served. Violence appears as the first resort in time of conflict; it is what we turn to when everything else fails; and it demands from its devotees an absolute allegiance-until-death. Jesus' rejection of this idea is what makes those who are listening to his sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth so mad, so mad that they want to kill Him.

To understand what Jesus said that made His audience turn on Him so violently, we have to return to last Sunday's Gospel, and recall what was going on there. Jesus had been healing and preaching in the neighboring towns. He was attracting a great deal of attention; His reputation was spreading. There was a "buzz" in the air about Jesus; people were no doubt wondering could this be the Messiah? To use the language of our day we might say that Jesus had achieved "rock star" status. He was a celebrity and He is making His first public statement in the local synagogue. He is laying out His goals and objectives. This is His platform speech. Naturally, the people are interested in what He is going to say.

What Jesus does is comment on a passage from the prophet Isaiah, with which His audience was very familiar. In the passage Isaiah speaks of all the wonderful things the Jewish people could expect when the Messiah finally arrives. Jesus announces, "Today this Scripture passage is being fulfilled in your hearing." It's happening right now, folks, not tomorrow, not years from now, but now. No wonder they are happy. Jesus is a hometown boy; He's going to be "their guy." They will want Him to do for them all the wonderful things they heard He had done in the neighboring

towns. They feel they have a special connection with Him. This after all is a society where family, clan and tribal relationships are very important. They see themselves as “insiders” in all that Jesus will eventually accomplish.

So far, so good, but then Jesus says something that is rather upsetting—basically, “Don’t count on it folks.” He reminds them of two of the great prophets in their religious tradition, Elisha and Elijah, who, when they performed miracles, it was not for the benefit of their own people, the Jews, but for two pagans, two Gentiles, from nations that were often their enemies. What Jesus is saying is that in His ministry there will be no distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders,” between “us” and “them,” between “friend” and “foe.” All are equally valued, equally loved, in God’s sight.

But more important than what Jesus says, is what He does not say. The passage Jesus reads from Isaiah was one with which His audience was very familiar—they could probably recite it by heart. What Jesus did not say, and which no doubt the congregation was expecting Him to say, was the concluding line from that passage, that the Messiah would bring “a day of vengeance from our God.” Besides all the healings they had heard Jesus had accomplished in the neighboring towns, there was something more they wanted, “a day of vengeance” against the Roman who had conquered their homeland, the Romans who had imposed so much suffering and hardship upon the Jewish people. This was the kind of Messiah they wanted Jesus to be, someone who would make the Romans pay, and pay dearly. But Jesus refuses to play the role of an avenging Messiah. To say He was a disappointment to them is putting it mildly. They felt betrayed, so much so that they wanted to kill Him. What Jesus will show is that there is no vengeance, no violence, no anger in God. Jesus will not employ violence to make things right.

Still, their reaction is not all that surprising. Had we been there, we might have been surprised too. When we read the Bible, it sometimes appears as if there is a very different kind of God in the Old Testament than the God who appears in the New Testament; that there is a rather avenging, severe, judgmental, punishing God in the Old Testament and a loving, merciful, forgiving God in the New. God appears as almost having a split personality, or something like “bad cop, good cop.” How do we make sense of that; what’s going on here? We have to realize that God begins revealing Who God is with a people who are just emerging out of the bronze age, barely civilized, who are inclined to imagine the Deity as One very much like themselves, possessing some of their most violent characteristics. What we see happening over the centuries is that God inspires the prophets to critique, to correct those images, until finally in Jesus we see the clearest representation, the clearest

image of who and what God is like. It's as if God is playing poker with humanity, gradually revealing God's hand one card at a time, until finally in Jesus we see the complete hand, a "royal flush." Jesus reveals what God has been from the very beginning--limitless Love, a Love to be shared with whoever is willing to accept It, a Love that excludes no one, a Love that unites all humanity into one family.

A few years ago during the observance of Holocaust Memorial Day in Washington D.C., one of the people honored for saving Jewish lives was an American army sergeant who was interned in a P.O.W. camp during World War II. One day the Nazi commander came to the camp and asked those prisoners who were Jews to identify themselves, at which point an American soldier, who was a Christian, stepped forward and said, "We are all Jews." It is the awareness of that fundamental unity that transcends all man-made distinctions of us-against-them, which stands at the heart of today's Gospel.

It is only natural for us to want to associate with people with whom we share some affinity, identity or commonality. It is when those groups believe themselves to be superior over others, when they try to maintain some hold on privilege for themselves at the expense of others, that they run against the vision and message of Jesus enunciated in today's Gospel. As Christians, we are called to move beyond any exclusivity based upon religion, race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, politics or sexual orientation. Let us pray that we can work to put an end to all those divisions that create envy, hostility and rivalry among people, that we can live as God's people, a people of peace, mercy and compassion, a people who do not look to violence in any form as a solution for society's problems.