

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,²¹ and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

²³ Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

²⁴ “I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

³¹ Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people.³² They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. (Luke 4:20-32)

Some Things are Hard to Hear

I think it must be really hard to be a doctor, especially an oncologist – a cancer doctor. Sometimes they have to tell a person something that he or she really doesn’t want to hear. Yet, it’s absolutely necessary to do that. If the doctor doesn’t tell the patient that he or she has cancer, that patient will never seek treatment. If the doctor doesn’t tell the patient that the treatment isn’t working, or that they’ve reached the end of their options, that patient probably won’t do the spiritual and emotional and physical things that he or she needs to do in the time that’s left. The patient may not appreciate what the doctor has to say, but some things need to be said. That’s true spiritually, too. Some things just need to be said. But as our gospel lesson for today illustrates, that doesn’t mean people are going to thank us for saying them. Jesus’ own life and ministry shows us, **some things are hard to hear.**

I.

So, why do we say them? Jesus shows us that, too. The lesson before us this morning is really a continuation of last week’s lesson. Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth to preach in the synagogue there. He read a prophecy of the coming Savior’s ministry, and he told them that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy. But even at that point, Jesus didn’t have to make that day about hard things. Luke tells us, “**All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.**” Even after claiming to be the Messiah, the people of Nazareth were still enjoying seeing how well he did as a rabbi.

But then Jesus chose to say things that he knew would be hard for these people to hear. In fact, they were so hard that the people he had grown up with and who had watched him grow up – possibly even some of his own relatives – became so angry that they tried to kill him by throwing him off the cliff the town was built on. What did Jesus say that caused such an extreme reaction? He told them that no prophet was accepted in his own home town. So even though they were talking about what a good speaker he was, they really hadn’t accepted that he was their Savior. Then he used a couple of Old Testament examples: in the days of Elijah there was a three year famine. During that time, many widows were starving in Israel, but God didn’t send Elijah to any of them. Instead, God sent him to a gentile widow just north of the border. Likewise in the time of Elisha, there were lots of people in Israel who suffered from leprosy. But the only person God had Elisha heal was the commander of the enemy army.

Why did that infuriate the people of his hometown? Because it struck at the very heart of their self-image. They believed that God loved them because they were the descendants of Abraham. In their hearts, they believed that they deserved that because they did such a good job keeping the law of Moses. They believed they were better than other people, so they didn’t need a Messiah who would pay for their sins. They needed a general would lead them in conquest of the rest of the world. Jesus’ words condemned their pride and

their assumptions about God's favoritism. He was telling them that God would pass them by if they were unfaithful and go to the gentiles. Those words provoked them to mob violence and attempted murder.

Jesus knew that that's how they would react. So why did he say all that? Because he loved them. They needed to recognize that their attitude was sinful and repent of it. Jesus chose to confront it at a moment when it would've been far more pleasant for him just to take the easy way out and say nothing. But you know what? The easy way out is almost always wrong. Jesus knew better than to put his comfort and even his personal safety first. He rebuked their pride and unbelief because that was the only way they were going to repent.

There are so many situations in which it would just be easier for us just to say nothing. We all know people who need to hear things that they don't want to hear. Many times I've heard grandparents lamenting the fact that their grandchildren are living with a girlfriend or boyfriend, maybe even having children, but not getting married. Those grandparents will say, "But it's not my place to say anything." Why not? Because they're afraid that if they say something, those grandchildren will just cut them out of their lives. They're afraid of an ugly argument. Even though their grandchildren are not going to drag them off a cliff, the mere possibility of angry words and hurt feelings is enough to silence them. And it's not just grandparents that are paralyzed by that fear. We see the same thing in co-workers and church members and family members. That refusal to speak is finally sin.

But there's another trap here for us. Sometimes, when we do speak, we do it in such a loveless manner that we make matters worse. Sometimes in our hearts, we echo the prayer of the Pharisee, "I thank you Lord that I'm not like this miserable sinner." And sometimes, we don't do a good job of identifying clear sinful behavior on the one hand, and character flaws and weakness on the other. Both do need to be addressed in their proper time and both do come from the fact that we are imperfect sinners. But there is a difference between calling someone to repent and helping someone see things in their lives that are unhealthy and that drive other people away.

Some things are hard to hear. And that makes those things especially hard to say. I hate saying them as much as you do. I mess up in saying them and make things worse as often as you do. My sinful pride ruins my good intentions as much as yours does. All that failure to love and to act in love is sin on our part. It deserves God's punishment in hell. But Jesus came and he stood up in the synagogue in his own hometown and he said exactly what the people he loved needed to hear. He did that over and over again, in many different places to many different people. And he did it in love even when he pronounced God's judgment. So often, he did it in a way we never would, because he was the perfect child of God who lived and spoke in our place. His testimony replaces all our failures. And he died and paid for all the times we didn't love each other enough to speak the hard truths. He died and paid for all the times we thought we were better than the person we were talking to and we drove them away with our prideful attitude. He died and paid for all the times we confused overt sin with spiritual weakness and made matters worse. He died and he paid for it all. Then he rose and wiped all that sin away. He rose and God has declared that we are holy and blameless in his sight.

Then Jesus made us new through the gospel. Now he calls us to trust him and say the hard things the people we love need to hear. He promises that he will work through the law and the gospel and accomplish his purpose. He promises to strengthen us and give us wisdom. He promises to be with us when we do it and to forgive our sin and weakness and failure. Trust those promises and do this important work.

II.

Of course, there is the flip side to this question. What about when I have to hear the hard things? **Some things are hard to hear. How do we respond to them?** Sadly, the people of Nazareth give us an example of how not to respond. But their response was really not that unusual. Jesus pointed out that their attitude was sinful. Each one of them had an old man – a sinful nature – in his heart. That sinful nature simply does not believe that it's guilty of anything. It says, "Sure, I'm not perfect. But there are lots of people out there who are worse than me!" It bristles at any suggestion that we might be guilty of something serious.

But at the same time, God has built a conscience into our hearts. What is it? It's the ability to compare what I do and say and think and feel with the law that I know. When I do what I think I'm supposed to do, the conscience says, "Good job!" When I don't do what I'm supposed to do, it says, "Sinner! You blew it!" We feel guilty because our conscience reacts to what we do and say. Jesus told the people of Nazareth that they had a problem with sinful pride. Their old man revolted at that idea, and at the very same time, their consciences

condemned them. Both feelings were painful. Very often, when people feel hurt and guilty, they react with rage.

That's often how we respond when we hear hard things, especially when someone accuses us of sin. Even when they talk about things that might be considered weaknesses, it's hard for us to hear. So sometimes we get defensive and we argue. Sometimes we go on the offensive and accuse the person talking to us of all kinds of things to make ourselves feel better. Sometimes we sink into a deep depression because we are such failures. Sometimes we pout and stop talking to the people who said those things to us. We make them the bad guy. And without a doubt, it might be true that they handled the situation badly. They might have been hurtful in the way they addressed it. They might even be wrong about what they're saying. But in the end, being defensive or going on the offensive or feeling sorry for ourselves or pouting doesn't help us with the spiritual realities of our situation.

What is the Christian response? Very simply, it's humility. Now, certainly, I can and should review what's been said to me to determine how accurate it is. I can and should talk to other people about the issues that have been raised and ask for their counsel and advice. I may very well reach the conclusion that the person who spoke to me was wrong. If that is my truthful belief, I have to act on that. But humility always listens. Humility accepts that no matter how hard I've worked to be a good Christian, a good neighbor, a good spouse, a good church member, I will never be perfect. It may very well be true that other people see things about me that I simply don't see. They might sin – King David taught us to pray, **“Forgive my hidden faults.”** They might be more in the area of weakness that comes from my sinful nature. But as a humble child of God, I need to listen and think carefully about what a brother or sister in Christ brings to my attention, even when it's a really hard thing to hear.

If I find there is truth in what they're saying, what do I do? Always, we begin at the cross. We kneel before our Savior and confess our sin and our weakness and our hidden faults and ask him to forgive us. We remember his promise that his blood covers all that we have failed to do and to be, all that we have consciously done wrong and all that we did without realizing it. If we can't find peace by remembering that ourselves, we go to our pastor and we confess our sin and hear him announce Jesus' forgiveness to us. Then where we have sinned or just been weak, we work to the best of our humble ability to make things right. We apologize and ask for forgiveness from people we've hurt or offended. We take stock of our weaknesses and identify how we get into those situations in hopes of fleeing from temptation in the future. We find people we can trust who will help to see the things we need to see and encourage us to do better. We pray and ask the Holy Spirit for strength and we ask those who love us to pray as well. We trust that our Father in heaven answers those prayers. We trust that he lets us struggle with these painful things because he loves us and he is purifying our character like gold is purified by fire. Fire is hot. It hurts. But in the end, we will give more glory to God because he passed us through the flames.

We all have to stumble through life doing the best we can, living every day in the shadow of the cross. We all are going to have to hear and say things that are hard. We are going to struggle with that. But we are never alone. Our Savior is with us to the very end of the age. The Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts by faith. Our Father in heaven never leaves us or forsakes us and he hears all our prayers. Trust our Savior God and have the courage to say things that need to be said and the love to do it well. Trust him and hear the things you need to hear and seek his strength as you strive to live for him down here until you live a perfect life with him in heaven. Amen.