



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Expansiveness Is Close to Godliness

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 3, 2013*

*The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Luke 4:21-30*

In his op-ed piece on Friday, columnist David Brooks makes a compelling argument for reform in our immigration policy. And he does so without playing the morality card, citing one statistic after another that points to the economic value of reform. Though the points are fascinating, I won't recite them, as they are not my primary interest this morning; you can read the article if you are so inclined. My purpose in mentioning the piece is that it addresses, I believe, an issue that lies at the heart of the gospel: the question of expansiveness. Are we or aren't we? Is our view of the world expansive and open, or is it restrained and tight? This is not a new question; in fact, our gospel for this morning, a piece of our treasured and ancient scripture, addresses the question head on.

Jesus' visit to Nazareth, his hometown, began quite positively. Probably known for his piety, his being in the synagogue was not extraordinary. One of the things we know about Jesus is that he practiced his faith with great devotion. The scripture says, "as was his custom," he went to the synagogue. There is a lot to be said for worship as the custom of our lives, the regularity of sanctifying ordinary days by our presence and worship in a holy place. That will, as they say, preach. Prior to this appearance in Nazareth, his former townspeople had no doubt heard of his recent activities, his teaching and healing. There were tales of his great and growing power, mystifying to those who had known him but fascinating, too. When he began to read from the beloved prophet Isaiah, the gospel says the people were "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." They were proud of him. I imagine that he read with passion and meaning in tones melodious and compelling.

So what went wrong? What happened that turned a receptive crowd into one filled with rage enough to want to hurl him off the cliff? The issue is not abstruse or nuanced; it is quite direct and remains one that divides God's people even today: Jesus declared his expansiveness to a tribe that was completely comfortable with its closed borders. The kingdom of God, he dared to proclaim, was not just for the people of Israel, but for all people. So inflammatory, these words were instantly fighting words that almost got him killed at this very early stage in his ministry. Tribalism was and is cherished.

In his rhetorical style, Jesus made his point by citing two uncomfortable and not widely considered stories from the tradition. Though both stories were certainly known to the Hebrew people, it is likely that both were viewed as incidental, not central to the story of Israel's salvation. Jesus' claim instead that they were primary to the good news he had come to proclaim, not some side story, was incendiary. Elijah, surrounded by Hebrew widows whom he declined to help, instead gave assistance, life-saving assistance, to a widow and her son in Zarephath, which was in what we know as Lebanon, not Israel. Elisha, surrounded by lepers in Israel, chose to cleanse Naaman, the Syrian leper. Jesus' use of these two stories from the tradition was intentional and confrontational: the Kingdom of God was much broader than these people of God had come to believe. Meek and mild he was, we are sometimes told; Jesus was quite the opposite in the cause of justice and goodness. He spoke and let the chips fall where they might.

And what precisely was it that was so hard to hear from Jesus, something so disturbing that it remains hard today for us to hear? It was this: God's mercy is wider than we imagine, and it belongs to no one unless it belongs to everyone. It's perplexing that this is hard to hear, but it is. It is almost as though people through the ages have felt that unless God's love is particular only to them, it must not be worth much. Religion, then, has seemed to make us narrow and definitive; the people in the temple listening to Jesus were expecting him to verify all that they already believed

and held to be important. It was their God, their land, their tradition; and everyone else's was wrong and inferior. I believe it grieved the heart of God to hear that then and that it still does.

Jesus, though, would have none of it; he was expansive. I imagine he was even more expansive than our extant gospels suggest. I imagine that his expansiveness was uncontainable and frightening to his closest followers, so much so, I suppose, that the narrators of his life omitted some of the most outrageous details. And surely none will argue the truth that much of the church has grown more and more comfortable with a sanitized version of Jesus who celebrates its sectarianism and absolutism without question.

Somehow our call and hope as God's people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as God's people here at St. Bart's, is to find the courage and love to become more expansive, not less. When because of fear we find ourselves wanting to tighten and harden our hearts, we are most in need of God. When because of fear we find ourselves wanting to lessen what we do for others, we are most in need of God. When because of fear we find ourselves clinging desperately to our way over any other way, we are most in need of God.

I don't have a blueprint for how to live expansively, particularly in a world where suicide bombers bomb embassies, where annual murders in Chicago outnumber American military deaths in the most dangerous country in the world, where religious practices of some include hacking off hands of thieves, where the Dow soars and, yet, the poor get poorer with fewer jobs. But our commitment to be among those who would attempt to follow Jesus demands that we struggle with the conversation, that we ask the hard questions, that we deliberate our complicity in systems that keep the resources of the world in the hands of the few, and that we use the power and money we have to bring about the kingdom of God for which we say we long even if it means less for us.

It always sounds like a cop-out to say that the transformation starts with small steps, but I believe that it does—inch by inch, step by step, one small conversion at a time, one act of love overriding a moment of not loving. Though he lived with the foibles known to all of us, the Apostle Paul, I believe, got this. In this portion of his letter to the Corinthians, which is unmistakably and authentically Paul, he writes about love in words that have become so familiar to us that we miss the radical claims they contain. In the opening words of the passage, he labels intense religious practice, long-revered prophecy, faith of mythic proportion, and even the divesting of all that one has for the poor as nothing without love. Extraordinary. All of this—our grandest worship and our most noble faith and action—is nothing, he writes, without love.

Love is the beginning and the end of expansiveness, not anything else. And it begins small and grows from the tiniest circle to geography without boundary, growing without a business plan or a policy statement but with a transformed heart. I want St. Bart's to be a place where we don't refer to our homeless guests as "guests" simply because it sounds good, but because they are: guests at a table that belongs to God, not to us. I want St. Bart's to be a place where people of other faiths can find resonance in our words or worship and we in theirs and a place where neither they nor we must be wrong for the other to be right. I want St. Bart's to be a place where those in the most need physically and spiritually find genuine sanctuary. I want St. Bart's to be a place where *yes* is on our lips much more often than *no*—in a word, an expansive place where God softens our hearts and then grants us the wildest imaginations of them.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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