



First United Church of Oak Park

Be Like Jesus: Make Some People Mad

Luke 4:14-24

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

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I'm going to start this sermon by spilling some tea. I have a story of another church, which shall remain nameless to protect the guilty. This church had an interim pastor after the departure of a beloved lead pastor. The interim pastor had been doing the important work of an interim. He led the church through processing sessions about the church's past and visioning sessions about its future. In these sessions and in sermons, this interim had pointed out to the church the laser focus the church had during previous times in history that were called out as "the good old days." It had been the church of pacifists, with a very intense focus on ending war. Now, the church had lost that identity and seemed to flit from activity to activity, cause to cause, without a lot of energy behind anything in particular. The pastor got up in the pulpit one week and talked about how some churches are neighborhood churches, existing to meet the needs of very local community members, and some are niche churches, drawing people from all around because of a particular niche. He demonstrated how far-flung the members of the congregation were, but talked about how the church was and had been in a state of decline for some time because they no longer had a niche. It used to be the peace church and draw people interested in pacifism from all around. Now, there was no focus. They just tried this and that and the other. This Bible study, that protest, this mission effort, that program. Each one a flash in the pan, but usually, when the time came to commit deeply, the members worried about putting all their eggs in one basket. If they put all their time and resources into this one ministry, what would happen if another one came along? They wouldn't have time for prison reform if they spent too much energy on immigration. What if they spent too much time on gay rights and didn't attract straight people any more? The interim pastor said this aversion to having a particular identity was part of the reason the church was a dying church. Well, that sermon sparked outrage. It was talked about with fiery passion in meetings that week and I'm sure in more than a few Sunday afternoon phone calls. This happened to take place during the stewardship campaign, when there was a member testimony before the offering each week. The next week, a member got up to give their testimony and instead proceeded to critique the prior week's

sermon. “I like this church because it’s not a neighborhood church and it’s not a niche church. It’s just a church.” “Just a church.” Well, put that on the sign out front and why not get some t-shirts printed while you’re at it! Describe your church’s mission and vision: “Just a church.” A recipe for growth and sustainability if I’ve ever heard one! But, this interim was encouraging a boundary around who this church was, and boundary setting can evoke anger in those who would benefit from the lack of boundaries. In this case, that was the folks who feared change.

Jesus had been doing amazing things and word had gotten to his hometown. When they realized he was coming home, they were stoked. There were people in Nazareth who needed healing and were waiting for a miracle and they were going to get it, because their boy had come home! Roll out the red carpet and let’s go! Jesus says, “God has called me and I know what my ministry is.” “Yes!” They thought! “Your ministry is to the poor and oppressed and the prisoners, and we are ready for that!” We heard that part of the Scripture last week. But then in this week’s Scripture he said, “And I also know *where* my ministry is and it’s not here, so I’ve got to go.” Jesus set a boundary. For whatever reason, he wasn’t going to minister in his hometown. I can think of some good reasons why a person might not be called to minister in their own hometown. Once someone from the church I grew up in said to me, “I remember seeing you dance on the tables in the fellowship hall!” Keep in mind, I was two years old, but I don’t think I’m ready to be that person’s pastor. So when Jesus told the people who had seen him dance in the fellowship hall and get pulled out of the service to have his diaper changed that he wouldn’t be ministering to them, what did they do? They tried to drive him off a cliff. Boundary setting can evoke anger in those who would benefit from a lack of boundaries.

It was easy for the church in the first story to remain “just a church” with no focus, definition, or boundaries. It would have been easy for Jesus to say, “Okay, fine, I’ll do this ministry even though this is not where God wants me.” But you know what, if that church continued on as “just a church” they would eventually be left with a few folks who didn’t want anything to change, just going to one another’s funerals until there were none of them left. If Jesus had done ministry that wasn’t his to do at the time, he would have become ineffective, burnt out, and would have missed out on his true calling. Boundaries around who we are and who we are not, what we do and what we do not do, that makes a life. That gives definition and meaning to a life.

In a seminary classroom, we were asked to use a metaphor for inclusivity. For my metaphor, I described people gathered in a circle. My professor said, "A circle is not inclusive because it has an inside and an outside. That's a boundary. It's not inclusive." I said, "Things that do not have a boundary do not exist, because boundaries are definitions. If we could not tell where I ended and you began, I would not exist. If we could not tell where this institution began and ended or explain what it was and was not, it would not be a seminary. Just because the circle has a boundary doesn't mean you're excluded; it just means when what you need is to be in a circle, you'll be able to find and easily navigate your way into it."

Trying to be all things to all people, to give ourselves over to every task or priority that enters our field of vision, is not sustainable. We will become ineffective at best. What's worse is when people really need the gift and the spark that you bring to the world, they won't be able to find it, because you will have been pulled in a thousand different directions and had your spark dimmed until it fades out completely.

I am a pastor. You know that about me. You know what I do. Because you know what I am, you come to me or one of your other pastors, when you are having a crisis of faith, you need a listening ear, you are struggling with a Biblical passage, or you are going through a big transition in your life like getting married, planning a funeral, or baptizing your new baby. You also know that I am not an accountant, I am not a doctor, and I am not a veterinarian. You don't come to me when you need your taxes done, you have a sore throat, or your dog needs its shots. You know what I am and what I am not. If you came to me with one of those other things and I tried to help you, it would not end well for either of us!

During this pandemic, many of you have had to be parent, spouse, teacher, coach, cook, nurse, counselor, chauffeur, IT specialist, activity director, and so much more. On top of that, you were also supposed to do whatever it is that you actually do. This has caused some of you more stress than you can adequately express. You have been pushed so far beyond your limits that you don't even remember where they are any more. You are so used to saying "yes" to every need that arises whether you know how to help... whether it's your job or any of your business to help... whether it is good for you and your community for you to be the one doing that thing or not. Your spark has dimmed or even burnt out.

It doesn't help that over-functioning is praised in our society. Did you know that other cultures, both ancient and modern, did not work as much as we do? They worked when there was work that needed to be done to survive, and when there was less to do, they did less. And many modern societies provide ample time off

to workers because everyone who stops for a moment to consider it knows that it is not necessary for every member of our society to hustle 60-70 hours a week for us to survive.

Capitalism in America is not set up to allow you to keep your spark. Neither is a pandemic. I don't claim to have all the answers. I don't know what for you is an essential task and what is not, what is going to bring you more joy and light your spark again, what is standing between you and saying no to the things that are not yours to do. I can't always answer those questions for myself, much less for you. But, I can tell you this. Jesus set boundaries and people got mad at him for it. Jesus said "This is not where I'm called to do my ministry." Jesus walked through the angry crowd he said "no" to, and went on to Capernaum where he proceeded to look for some folks who he could train to share the load so he wouldn't have to do it all himself. I am not a perfect example of this holding boundaries thing. But can I introduce you to Jesus of Nazareth, who knew his boundaries so well that his "no" to that first century congregation in Nazareth allowed him to say "yes" to being the one in whose footsteps people around the world and throughout all of history might follow?