

WGUMC February 3, 2019 “Don’t Mess With God”
Luke 4:22-30

Several weeks ago, I got a call from one of our Boy Scout leaders. He needed me to sign some papers. As CEO of their sponsoring organization, I had to approve of the Boy Scouts’ decision to start up a troop for girls. Boy Scouts of America have changed their name to Scouts BSA. After allowing gays to be Scouts in 2013 and to be leaders in 2015 and then welcoming transgender youth in 2017, now they are creating troops just for girls, though they will share group activities with the boys. As you can imagine, these decisions have not been without controversy. Some churches pulled out, and the Girl Scouts have filed a lawsuit.

I have to admit that I have some mixed feelings about girls being in the Boy Scouts. On the one hand, my dad was a Scout master and I always wanted to be in his troop. I wanted to camp and hike with the Boy Scouts rather than do craft projects with the Girl Scouts. I would have welcomed the chance to join back then.

On the other hand, my grandmother was a Girl Scout executive, and she didn't think Girl Scouts was about craft projects. I now think it's important to support organizations that are laser-focused on empowering girls to grow up to be strong women.

I mention the changes in Scouting only because it's just the latest example of how boundaries are shifting, and how many people find it unsettling. The truth is that we human beings have always been obsessed with boundaries, who's in and who's out, who's one of us and who's not. It's literally in our DNA.

Hank and I take *Scientific American* and this summer I was reading an article about how we humans got such big brains. One of the reasons *homo sapiens* have been so successful is because we are social animals. We evolved to cooperate in food gathering and protection from predators. And the more complex that our social relationships became, the bigger the brain we needed to manage them.

Looking back, we can see that having a group to belong to, one that will protect and defend us, has been a key to our survival. But going forward, it may also be the cause of our demise. For our main predators are not big cats or wild dogs anymore. For a long time now they have been other people. Look at the conflicts that are going on in our world today. People are divided by gender, class, culture, politics, religion, race, and nationality. At any moment, these group conflicts can and do break out into violence.

If we want to survive as a species, we're going to have to be able to navigate across lots of boundaries. We're going to have to learn how to manage ever-more complex social relationships. As the world gets smaller, our brains and hearts need to get a lot bigger. We need to learn to get along with a much larger, more diverse group of people so that we won't end up destroying ourselves. Unfortunately, we can't wait for our brains to evolve which is why it's a good thing we have Jesus.

Paul says in Philippians that we should have the same mind that was in Christ. And that's why we study the Bible, so we can get into the head of Jesus. So let's look at our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Here we have the second half of the story about Jesus coming back to his hometown in Nazareth. It isn't a big enough town to have a wall around it, but they don't need one. Because they have walls in their minds and hearts instead. What we see in this story is that their minds are only broad enough to include other Jews like them. Their hearts are only big enough to hold the children of Abraham and not even all of them.

The first thing they do when Jesus shows up is to demand that he do for them what they heard he did in Capernaum. Come on, Jesus, shouldn't you love the people you have known all your life more than you love them? That would be like being from Boston and rooting for the Rams. But Jesus doesn't work any miracles for them. Instead, he tells them stories about a God who is happy to work miracles for Gentiles as well as Jews. He tells them that while there

were many widows in Israel, the Prophet Elijah saved a widow in Sidon. He tells them that while there were many lepers in Israel, the Prophet Elisha cured a Syrian. For a moment, the people don't understand what he is trying to say. And then his words sink in and they can't stand what he is saying.

They flare up in anger at Jesus. Now if we can dig down and figure out what is fueling that anger, maybe we can understand what fuels our own. I have a good idea that their anger is based on fear. But it's not just the fear that someone outside their group is going to hurt them or dominate them or take their stuff away. No, in this case, I believe that their anger comes from a fear that God loves other people just as much as God loves them.

Let's be honest. A lot of us have the same fear. We are desperate for God to love us, but we often don't feel very loved or very loveable. So when we hear stories about how much God loves other people, it stirs in us old doubts, worries that we can't keep buried, about God not really loving us. In our subconscious minds, we

are wondering, why did God bless that other person, but not me?

Why is God so good to that group of people over there? It's just not fair!

We have what you might call a greed for grace. It's like the smart kid in the class who is the teacher's pet. We hate that kid because she's getting more affirmation than we get. Or the captain of the football team because he's getting the applause we don't get. Or the member of another ethnic group that gets into the college we couldn't get into. We often operate as if getting to know God is like getting into Stanford. Deep down we fear that there is a very low acceptance rate at God U. We seem to think that there is a limited supply of grace out there, and we aren't getting our share.

None of us want to admit it, but we are not so very different from the people in Nazareth. We are jealous of the love that God so freely gives to people who we think couldn't possibly deserve it or need it as much as we do!

One of the things that happens when Jesus comes into our lives is that he exposes the littleness of our love. And he blows up the boundaries we try to put on God's grace. Like the folk in Nazareth, we get into trouble when we try to limit Jesus to doing miracles only in our town, for our folk. We beg him to come and change our situation and don't realize that he's come to change us. Rev. William Barber has a warning for us.

My former classmate at Duke says, "Don't mess around with God, because he'll grow you. Don't mess around with the Holy Ghost cause It'll stretch you. If you want to stay comfortable, if you want to stay where you are...leave Jesus alone."

You can always tell when someone doesn't leave Jesus alone. They have to go and be born again. That's because their old lives are not adequate anymore. They have to learn a new way of being in the world. They have to take risks they don't want to take. They have to go places they weren't planning to go. They have to carry burdens they didn't think they could carry. But at the same time,

they realize that Someone is carrying them. In the process, they not only receive a blessing; they become one. And everyone around them knows it.

Isabella Baumfree was born into slavery in 1797 in upstate New York. Like her masters, she spoke Dutch until she was 9 years old. After being sold several times, she finally escaped to freedom in 1826. Shortly thereafter, she felt the love of Jesus and became a Christian. In 1843, she joined the Methodist Church and asked God to give her a new name. She would call herself Sojourner Truth, because God was going to ask her to sojourn all over the country, so she could tell people the truth.

Truth did not leave Jesus alone. God grew her and the Holy Spirit stretched her. Marianne Wright Edelman tells this story about her:

One day during an antislavery speech [Sojourner Truth] was heckled by an old man. “Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Why I don’t care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea.” “Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I’ll keep you scratching,” she replied. [Edelman goes on to say] Enough committed fleas biting strategically

can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation.... [in Edelman's *The Measure of Our Success*, pp 59-60.]

The problem with too many of us Christians is that we don't want to be fleas for Jesus. We don't want to be bothered, we don't have time to be born again or to reboot our lives, so we leave Jesus alone. We go months, years, even decades thinking that Jesus is not coming to us, the Holy Spirit is not moving in us and God is not working miracles for us. Even if we occasionally hear what Jesus has to say, it hits too close to home and we send him away. We spend too much time being judgmental about or jealous of other people's relationships with Jesus and we push him to the edge of our lives. But when we banish him to the borders of our busy-ness, we banish the abundant blessings that we could be receiving. So let's be careful not to throw him off the cliff of our consciousness because if we do we'll never get the chance to discover who we really are and what God has put us here to do.

At the end of our story, when the people in Nazareth are trying to hurl Jesus off the cliff, he passes through the midst of them and goes on his way. I've always wondered how he managed to escape the mob. But when you think about it, Jesus often eludes us. Whenever anger or fear or jealousy gets hold of us, we can't hear his truth, we can't see his light, and we can't receive his love.

But we should know and the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (as it meets to decide its future regarding LGBTQ persons in the church) should know that Jesus is not going to stay in any Nazareth where the love is too little, where minds are too narrow, where the walls are too high, the fear is too deep and the greed is too great. Jesus is going on from that town. He's living life, soaked in blessing, drowning in grace. Are you coming, too?