

Trespassing In Your Own Back Yard
Luke 4:14-30
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Jesus was a trespasser. He was no respecter of boundaries. As a child, he colored outside the lines of his coloring books and ignored the correct color schemes. As a teenager, he sat at the table in the lunchroom with the students no one else would sit with, and carried home the books of smaller, weaker kids. When he went off to college, he wrote every week to tell the folks back home about how things were going in the big city, and he never went to any keg parties. Yes, Jesus was a real rule breaker, at least of the real rules which govern us, the ones which bring an order to our community's life, however at odds with God's order our own rules may be. Every family has them. Every community has them. Every church has them. They are the unwritten rules that keep the members of their groups from straying too far from the fold, from bringing discomfort, disgrace, or disunity to the rest. "My enemy is your enemy." "My country right or wrong." "He who shall not be named." And when the careless or provocative member of the group transgresses one of these rules, trespasses, so to speak, in his own back yard, the consequences are often more severe than if he or she had trespassed on a stranger's property. And here is Jesus, trespassing in broad daylight. In his own backyard. In church. As if he were God. No wonder people got upset. You just don't say "those" things, especially when we changed your diapers, young man.

But here is Jesus, returning to his hometown of Nazareth, reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, and finally presenting himself as the fulfillment of God's Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal. Jesus says, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," and he is referring to the fulfillment of God's promises that the poor will hear good news, the captives will be released, the blind will see, and the oppressed go free. He is announcing that what God intends for all people, their health, safety, and well being, is no longer a dream deferred. And by placing himself at the center of God's mission by appropriating Isaiah's language for himself -- "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" -- Jesus has raised the stakes and heightened the expectations, for himself, and for those who would call themselves the body of Christ, and who would continue to proclaim that we are agents of God's Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal.

Some of you will remember that it has been attributed to the US author Mark Twain that he said when a boy turned about 14, he should be put in a barrel and fed through the knot hole. In elaborating on this, he reflected on his own life and said, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years." Reading the rest of the story of Jesus' time in Nazareth, one gets the sense that his fellow townsfolk would be looking for a barrel with a knothole to put him in. Who does this punk think he is? What right does he have to come trespassing in his own back yard? Where with hindsight we

might label Jesus audacious, and his friends and neighbors called it shameless, Jesus himself just called it faithful.

But why would the townsfolk get so upset with Jesus sharing this good news? Well, it's just that Jesus didn't leave well enough alone. He had to rub a little Dead Sea salt in the wound. Look here, he says, don't get the idea that this news is just for you. In fact, it may not do you much good at all. But let me tell you this, he says: that good news is for all people, not just we insiders. The healing is for all people, not just we chosen few. Hey, look back in your own Scriptures and see how God has seen fit to open the door to those Gentiles you despise so much. And so he reminds them of the widow at Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, both of them Gentiles, and both of them chosen over and above others of the Israelites who suffered from the same maladies. And so it is no wonder that they tried to run him out of town, trespasser as he was across the boundaries of their good judgment and their interpretation of Scripture.

Jesus Christ, trespasser, crosser of boundaries one ought not to cross if one values one's life. Trespassers get filled with buckshot, chased by snarling dogs, verbally abused by nasty neighbors. Trespassers are people who respect no boundaries, or at least those they deem arbitrary, and Jesus is no exception. But Jesus is not trespassing for the thrill of it or to take a shortcut from point A to point B. Jesus is trespassing to show that the artificial boundaries erected around the Divine are just that: artificial. You see, the boundaries of us versus them don't

apply in the Kingdom of God. The boundaries of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, school district, body piercing, shoe size, or IQ are not really boundaries at all for God who longs to bring to each person the shalom Jesus announces. The only boundaries that matter to Jesus are the ones which relate to grace and righteousness, forgiveness and repentance. All people are part of the year of the Lord's favor and no one is going to tell Jesus where he can or cannot go to preach that message.

Now, it's a good thing that there was another kind of boundary which also did not apply to Jesus that day, the one which might have prevented him from passing through the midst of a raging crowd to go on his way. At least for a time. But for those of us who claim to be followers of this trespasser, we may not always be that lucky. The cliff off of which we may be hurled by those through whose spiritual or political or economic territory we trespass to follow Jesus -- that cliff is high, the fall is long, and the bottom is painful. But the trail has been marked for we trespassers who follow, marked by the witness of Jesus Christ beginning in this story.

If Jesus has declared that boundaries of nationhood, ignorance, and greed are to be ignored for the sake of the Gospel, where might those boundaries be in our own times, in our own workaday lives, in our spiritual lives? If the only boundaries that matter are those established by God, why do we allow ourselves or others to impose anything smaller on us? If trespassing as a way of life was Jesus' way, is it

ours too? These are more than rhetorical questions. They are questions that each of us must ask ourselves all the time. I would suggest that it is only when we tread boldly in God's name where we are prohibited to be by others' claims that we will be bring God's shalom to a world in greater need of nothing else.

Maybe you are wondering what that looks like in our time, given the territory that Jesus has already mapped out. Let me share a couple of examples, and see if they don't illuminate the issue. As I was absent last Sunday, I did not have the opportunity to share anything about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday is celebrated as a national holiday in the United States each third Monday on January. So I will this week, as his own witness offers us a great example. In the spring of 1968, after quite a number of legislative victories against discrimination, and after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, during a time when he might have concluded that he could kick back a little and take it easier, King began to realize that civil rights laws could only do so much. The true threat to blacks was the systemic poverty that the civil rights laws recently passed would have no effect on. Friends close to him advised against speaking out against economic injustice since he would lose hard-won allies in Washington. But King began trespassing in his own backyard, speaking out against the Vietnam War and making connections that had even his own people marching him toward a cliff to throw him off. Jesus declared the reign of God with his list of those to be blessed by God; Martin Luther King, Jr. put twentieth century flesh to that list and named

it this way: "... it's inevitable that we've got to bring out the question of the tragic mix-up in priorities. We are spending all of this money for death and destruction, and not nearly enough money for life and constructive development... When the guns of war become a national obsession, social needs inevitably suffer." Prophetic words still today, and words that can still get you into hot water with friends, family, and congregation.

When we place ourselves in the midst of the story of Jesus and his hometown debut, we may begin to see that the only responsible way to live is authentically, speaking the truth, even if it means trespassing in the very backyards of those whom we love the most, and who love us the most. I am reminded of the end of one of my favorite films, called *Mass Appeal*. It is the story of two Catholic priests who learn a great deal from one another. Father Farley is an older parish priest, beloved by his flock, but dependent on their love, and their gifts of wine, for his own sense of self. Deacon Mark Dolson is a young, brash, some would say tactless, seminarian who is dependent for his sense of self worth, on serving the people in need and shocking the rest. In the climactic scene of the film, after they have both begun to come to terms with themselves and each other, this is what happens: (Watch clip at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI6TE0fZA_8 or continue to read the story) Father Farley has his epiphany. As he is beginning to say the Mass, he stops and confesses his own sin — his failure to tell the people anything but what they want to hear — and pleads with his congregation to do

something on behalf of the controversial Mark Dolson who is on the verge of expulsion from the seminary, even though breaking his silence means that Father Farley will risk his popularity and maybe even his parish. After his appeal he concludes, saying, “This is the first time I’ve ever said what I wanted to say to you. Only now is love possible.”

“Only now is love possible.” Love is only truly possible when we place God’s interests above our own, when we are willing to run the risk of losing even the things that mean the most to us, our families, our friends, our jobs, our possessions, our nations. That doesn’t mean we foolishly squander these things to make a vain point about our commitment to Christ. We are not called to sacrifice the gifts God has given us to try to prove anything about our faith. But we are called to hold those things loosely, to be prepared to let them go if they truly impede our following that divine trespasser on his travels. If we continue to traffic in injustice to justify our position, how is love possible? If we hold on to cherished traditions at the expense of cherishing God’s creation, how is love possible? If we allow what others believe about us to be more important than what we believe about God, or what God believes about us, how is love possible?

I don’t know what all of your backyards look like, or what rules guide the groups of which you are member. But you do. You know what is right about them and what is wrong about them. You know how tightly or loosely you hold them. You know what price you will pay for trespassing. But you also know that “The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." All of this you know. But what you may not know is, that by the act of trespassing in your own back yard, sometimes you not only help bring to life God's big, hairy, audacious goal in the lives of others, but also in your own. You see, another nugget of Martin Luther King Jr.'s wisdom applies here, that "No one really knows why they are alive until they know what they'd die for." Until we are prepared to be marched to the top of a cliff to be hurled off by the people who ought to be protecting us, we remain captive, we remain blind, we remain oppressed, we remain poor, and we remain just as far from the year of the Lord's favor as everyone else. May God help us to follow in the footsteps of the faithful trespassers of every age, as we seek what God desires for us all. Amen.