

A few years ago, a young man named Stu sat out in a congregation in Bay City. He was attending church at Trinity with my daughter. He had only been to church a few times when he was a small child, and that was it. Now he was sitting back there, critiquing me and our Lutheran church. Out of all the Sundays I have preached at Trinity, I have to say I was extremely nervous. I wanted to give him a positive 1<sup>st</sup> impression of our church. I wanted to preach that Academy Award winning sermon. And I didn't. When the service was over, and he talked with a few people, I was relieved that this pressure cooker was over. I think the last time I was that nervous was when I preached my first Seminary sermon at St. Paul's Lutheran in Saginaw. On that Sunday, I saw Doug Stindt. Doug Stindt was my 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at St. Paul's. It was Mr. Stindt who once said, "Homework is for other kids, its not for Mark." Then there was Mrs. Gensmer and Mabel Toepel, who used to be in my mom's 500 club. Those two used to call me, "Markie Schulz boy". Then there was George Schmiede who my mom once thought about dating after my father's death. Why was I so nervous back then? I think I know why. I wasn't preaching to people who only knew me as "Pastor Schulz. I was preaching to people who knew me as "Little Markie" or "Carolyn's Dad", people who had experienced me as a parent or a kid. They knew the good and the bad about me. They would have had a hard time looking upon me as their pastor, should I have been offered a call to St. Paul's Lutheran.

Jesus had an opportunity to preach to his hometown people early in his 3 year ministry. You might say it was his Seminary sermon. His listeners like mine, saw him as that kid from Nazareth or that kid from St. Paul's. They saw him as that boy who did well in school. However, now Jesus was a renowned public speaker. He spoke before sellout crowds. He did miracles. That they could handle. Maybe he could deliver them from those oppressive Romans. So they thought, "Let's see a few miracles like you supposedly did in Capernaum"! Impress us! But when Jesus didn't do any fancy miracles, they got impatient with him. And then he told them that God was ticked with their sinfulness, so ticked that in the OT in a time of famine and leprosy, God sent his messengers Elijah and Elisha to go and feed and heal a couple of Gentile people rather than to help the Israelites. With these words, the locals got so upset that they wanted to drive him off of a cliff. I marvel at how cool, calm and collected Jesus was. Jesus didn't soft pedal his message. He told it like it was, even if it meant persecution. As we look at Jesus today, we want to ask God to help us to be more like him, when we talk to friends or family about our faith. That means, we are not always going to tell what you want to hear, but what you need to hear. So then, Jesus help us all to "Tell it Like it Is!"

The town of Nazareth was a remote village that had only had one claim to fame. It was the place where Jesus grew up. Jesus probably lived here from ages 5-30. Remember when he was under 2 years of age, he fled with his parents to Egypt for a couple of years, when Herod wanted all the boy babies in Bethlehem put to death. After his family returned from Egypt, they lived in Nazareth. Mary probably continued to live there and Joseph seems to have died since no mention of him is made after the story of the 12 year old Jesus in the temple. Back to today's story. It was a Saturday. Jesus enters the village synagogue. The synagogue service included the reading of the Old Testament law and the prophets. When the people of Nazareth saw that Jesus was among them, they asked him to read from the Scriptures. It was their way of showing Him respect. Jesus is asked to read a section from Isaiah 61. The passage which Jesus read was a passage prophesying about the coming Messiah. He read, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19).

At this point Jesus sat down and said, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" In other words, "The one about whom Isaiah was talking--the promised Messiah? I am he." Jesus spoke very clearly. (In fact, the reaction of the people made it clear that they had understood

exactly what claim Jesus was making.) He wanted there to be no misunderstanding about who he was.

Jesus' message brought him initial popularity. He was treated like a celebrity. He was the topic of conversation. And at least at the beginning of his address, the people held him in high esteem. And I think that we can find some parallels today. There are plenty of people in the world who have only a limited knowledge of Jesus Christ. They don't believe that Jesus is God. They don't believe that Jesus is a Savior. But the same people aren't necessarily looking to bash Jesus either. He is held up as a moral leader, a model citizen, a great teacher.

On a certain level, what Jesus says has a broad appeal. "Don't worry. Don't judge other people. Come to me for rest." But when you go beneath the service, when you dig a little deeper, when Jesus starts to poke his nose into your personal business, when Jesus tells you that you are doing things you shouldn't be doing and that you aren't doing the things you should be doing, it doesn't take long for that initial popularity to disappear. Jesus basically told the hometown crew that they were spiritual losers. They resembled the hometown people in the days of Elijah and Elisha. These hometown people refused to repent of their sins.

In the time of Elijah, there was a severe drought in Israel, a drought that lasted over three years and caused a severe famine in the land. Instead of sending Elijah to help the thousands of needy people at home, God sent him into enemy territory to help a widow in Sidon. Not long after that Elisha succeeded Elijah as prophet. In Elisha's day there was no shortage of sick people in Israel, but God chose to heal Naaman, the commander of the neighboring Syrian army. By telling them of times when God took his love and gracious promises to foreigners, to Gentiles, Jesus was warning them that a continued failure to repent would result in God turning his back on them. In no uncertain terms, Jesus was telling his hometown crowd: "I don't owe you anything. God didn't send me to entertain you. My mission is much wider than simply to impress you. God sent me to save you. And not just you either. My mission is a worldwide mission. The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost, no matter who they are or where they live."

This time there was no confusion. This time the people understood exactly what Jesus was saying. And their intense emotion moved them to immediate action: "**All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 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 off the cliff**" (29). Within minutes, the same people who were amazed by Jesus were trying to kill Jesus. Maybe the reaction is not exactly the same, maybe the hatred is more controlled, but God's message continues to create intense hostility today.

The hate starts in here. The fire burns inside sinful human hearts. "What gives God the right to dictate to me? I can live my life the way I want to live it. It's my life. I'm better than so-and-so. I go to church. I give my offerings. I do more good than bad. Punish me? If anything, God owes me." God says: "What gives you the right to dictate to me? I know what you did last week. I know what you said last night. I know what you are thinking every minute of every day, and you and I both know that I don't like what I see. The truth is that you aren't as good as you think you are. You aren't good enough. You are not good at all." We don't want to hear that. We don't want to admit that. We don't want to draw the personal conclusion to passages like "**The wages of sin is death**" (Romans 6:23). The natural defense mechanism is to fight back, to excuse sin, to deny accountability, to react to the truth with aggression instead of confession.

We try to push Jesus off the cliff when we try to weasel our way out of the responsibility for sinning. Every time we make up an excuse, we push Jesus further out of our lives and closer to the edge. "I didn't know better." One step closer. "I didn't think anyone would care." One step closer. "I'm not hurting anyone." One step closer. "Everyone else is doing it." One step closer. "You would

have done it too in my position.” One step closer. “I can’t help it; I was made this way.” Teetering on the edge. “God wants me to be happy., doesn’t he? We attempt to push Jesus off the cliff with our lack of responsibility for our sins.

The good news is that Jesus foiled our plans. It was not yet His time to die for the sins of the world. When they tried to kill him, **“Jesus walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (30)**. Jesus’ miraculous escape confirms the fact that his message possesses divine authority.

Jesus made his way to Capernaum and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. The procedure was basically the same, but this time the results were very different: **“They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority” (32)**. Jesus didn’t attract large crowds because of his speaking style. Jesus gathered a following because of the substance of his message. People were amazed at his teaching because his teaching was amazing. Every other religion in the world tells you what you need to do. Jesus tells you what he has done for you. Every other religion puts the burden on the individual. Jesus put the burden on his cross. Every other religion strives to help people find God. Jesus gives you the assurance that God has found you.

The message of Jesus Christ is unique because it isn’t a message about God. It is a message from God. And this is what he says: “I love you. I love you so much that I gave up my life for you. Remember all those sins you committed. They’re gone. You are forgiven. You are mine. Trust in me now, and join me in heaven.”

An elderly gentleman in his 80’s arrived at the doctor’s office to have his stitches removed from his thumb. His appointment was at 8:15. As 8:15 came and went, he kept looking at his watch. Finally, he was taken into an examining room at 8:45, again looking at his watch as he went. A nurse observed him looking at his watch. She asked him as he entered the examining room, “Do you have another appointment? The man said “Yes” At 9:15 A.M. he ate breakfast with his wife at the nursing home. The man told the nurse she had been there for quite sometime and was a victim of Alzheimer’s disease. As they talked the nurse asked him if his wife would be mad if he was late. He said “No”, she no longer knows who I am. She hasn’t recognized me for the last 5 years now.

The nurse was surprised and asked, “And you still go every morning, even though she doesn’t know who you are?” He smiled and patted the nurses hand and said, “She doesn’t know me, but I still know who she is.”

That’s the kind of love that Christ has for us. Even though there are times that we live as if we don’t know him anymore; even though there are times that our excuses push him away from us, he still knows who we are and loves us. He comes to us desiring to forgive us for our wrongs and wanting to bring positive change to our lives. We need to listen to him. He didn’t come to entertain us. He didn’t come to impress us. He came to save us. He didn’t sugarcoat sin. He told is like it was.