A Good Offense Is the Best Defense
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Luke 4:14-30

The devastation in Haiti defies our powers of comprehension. The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere in the best of times, the earthquake and its powerful aftershocks have shaken the foundations of its infrastructure, government, and housing. As many as 200,000 people are dead, and 2 million are homeless. Tales of heartbreak and horror emerge afresh every day—as well as images that reveal the resilience and even nobility of the human spirit, as neighbors help neighbors across every boundary whether of human or natural creation. In fact, the tremendous outpouring of aid and assistance from governments and humanitarian and religious organizations is credited with saving thousands of lives and sparking hope in the face of unimaginable misery.

The scenes from Haiti have dominated my mind and heart this week, as I know they have yours. I heard the gospel text for today through this lens, and found it to be both encouraging and troubling as it describes the servant anointed to bring good news to the poor and freedom to the captives. The gospel writer records it as Jesus' first sermon, at the outset of his public ministry. He'd created something of a buzz in the region. There were stories of his powerful teaching and amazing healings. He was the hometown boy, whose parents everybody knew. The atmosphere in the synagogue that day must have been electric with anticipation. In your mind's eye, picture the scene as we read it from the gospel according to Luke, in the fourth chapter at the 14th verse.
Listen for God's Word: [READ JOHN 4:14-22]

Honestly, friends, if you think this isn't what tempts preachers every week, then let me tell you. To take ancient words of prophecy and hope and make them sing for the congregation today; to apply the truth of Scripture to our contemporary lives in a way that resonates so well that you come through the line and say "Wow, you were preaching to me this morning!" Well, any preacher who tells you she doesn't care about that is lying through her teeth.

At this point, Jesus has clearly hit a home run. Today….*today* these long-cherished promises of redemption, freedom, and healing have been fulfilled in your hearing. *Today. Fulfilled.*
Wow! This guy's great!

But Jesus isn't finished. Onward he preaches and damn if the home run suddenly is called foul. Keep listening for God's Word as the text continues: [READ LUKE 4:23-30]

What could turn the approving smiles into violent rage? Well, we can do a little background check. If you Google "city of Sidon in Zarephath" and "ancient Syria" you'll discover that these two regions were beyond Israel, and in fact, Syria was its sworn enemy, always threatening and destabilizing their sense of security. Both the widow and Naaman practiced rogue religions, outside the covenant God made with Israel; in fact the city of Sidon was notorious for its….hmmmm…. voodoo worship. Yet Jesus cites these two individuals as worthy of God's healing and creative power. God told Elijah to go and address the economic and social security of the widow. God told Elisha to go and heal the Syrian general.

But a background check isn't really enough to understand the offense taken by Jesus' listeners. To understand that, we have to substitute our contemporary enemies and outsiders. We could say, for example, there were many widows in need in the United States, but God sent support to a widow of a Hamas freedom fighter. We could say that there were many Americans struggling with illness, but God sent healing to the likes of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran.

Jesus says it explicitly: The Kingdom of God moves beyond established borders and boundaries to bring healing and justice, personal wholeness and community flourishing to the ones out there. Jesus seems to take sacred promises that were intended for the chosen few, the insiders who felt entitled to them, and gave them to ….everybody! Then, he even goes so far as to suggest that their resentment of the wideness of God's love limits their ability to experience it.

And honestly, I don't know anyone who WOULDN'T be offended at that! As the implications of his words swept over them, their fury united them as an angry mob acting as one to drive him out: out of earshot, out of town, up into the hills that surround the city, where they hoped to hurl him off a cliff and be rid of the blasphemer. Preserve the purity of the true religion! He escaped. That time.

But friends, Jesus' first sermon is an almost perfect template for everything that came after. Jesus came to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom—a message that would have been music to the ears of the Israelite people who longed for a spiritual and political Messiah to free them from the yoke of Rome's oppression. But Jesus fulfilled that good news by applying it not only

to “us” but also to “them.” From here on his ministry was about eating and drinking with sinners, blurring the boundary lines between “accepted and “rejected,” broadening his follower’s vision of the Kingdom to see that it included each one and everyone.

And the reaction from the religious community grew more hostile, until finally, when he’d crossed the line one too many times, they got him and this time he didn’t escape. He submitted to death on the cross as one final reconciling act to bring insider and outsider together under the saving grace of God poured out upon all.

So come back to Haiti with me. I heard Pat Robertson say that the earthquake struck at God’s command, as punishment for their sinfulness (which ironically resulted in one of history’s few successful slave revolts. Whatever powers they invoked, they were liberated from oppression, which sounds a whole lot like our text!) Presbyterians don’t believe God acts like that, nor do other Christians, Jews, and Muslims who have responded to the crisis with generosity and compassion. Fact is, none of us can say definitively why bad things happen to good people. Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose book of the same title offers perhaps the best explanation which is that it’s a great mystery. *I think that it’s supreme hubris to think you can read God’s mind. [quoted by Lisa Miller in Newsweek, January 25, p. 14]*

So why speculate? Why not instead pay attention to the part of God’s mind and heart we *do* see, revealed in Jesus Christ, who proclaimed that today God *is* acting to fulfill ancient promises of peace and good will over all the earth. Oh yeah? Oh yeah, whenever and wherever God’s people are following Christ’s example, doing the things he did, reaching out to the people he loved. Today is the day in which captives can be freed, little children fed, the sorrowing comforted, and walls that seem so huge can be brought down. In the merciful outpouring of aid to Haiti we catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. I don’t think any one of us doubts that or isn’t committed to doing something towards alleviating such profound suffering.

But I keep wondering about Jesus’ first sermon. Why didn’t he stop with the proclamation of good news that would result in compassionate actions taken on behalf of others in profound need? Clearly that is angel’s work, often requiring great sacrifice and courage.

….because, my friends, sometimes a good offense is the best defense: the best defense against a down-sized version of faith; the best defense against a vision of God that is too small and too determined by our own human-bounded, self-centered thinking, the best defense against leading lives of reaction rather

than righteous purpose. Look, Jesus called his followers to do more than charity; he called us to do justice, to envision it and work for it not only when crises arise, but every day.

Even before the earthquake, Haiti was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; half of its population lived on less than a dollar a day; little children were dying of preventable causes. We heard research last week in Faith Matters from Elder Sharon Milligan about chronic poverty levels in our own city: elderly folk who must choose between rent and prescription medications; children whose brain development is impaired by exposure to lead paint in the more than 2 million housing units containing it. Recently we were saddened to learn of the demise of Garden Valley Neighborhood House—long supported by Fairmount---serving in the troubled Kinsman neighborhood, and the scramble by other organizations to pick up the slack. The Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope of which Fairmount is a member is calling upon faith communities to adopt public school libraries in East Cleveland – libraries that are woefully out of date and substandard, without computer resources or even systematic cataloguing. This is not a matter of "either/or"---as if responding to the crisis in Haiti might somehow dilute our efforts to do right by our City. No, today is the day to bring good news to the poor be they in Cleveland or Port-au-Prince. Today is the day to investigate the captivities—all kinds of captivities-- that hold people back and down; today is the day to pursue healing and freedom for all God's people, as Jesus commanded, as he demonstrated. When Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, he noted that we are called to minister to those who are wounded on life's roadside. But no less, he went on, must we transform the whole Jericho Road so that people will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey. "True compassion," he said, "comes to see that a system that produces beggars needs restructuring."

If this were a best-selling novel instead of a sermon, I'd end right now with a provocative teaser to entice you to read more. Well, it IS a sermon, but I DO want you to come back to this same space one week from now to discover what happens next. It has something to do with you [TAKE PHOTOGRAPH OF CONGREGATION] and everything to do with the Spirit of the Lord who fulfills the promise of life, restored and reconciled, in our very hearing, right before our very eyes. See you next Sunday! AMEN.