

Home Fired

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*Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
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Text: Luke 4:21-30

Yesterday I heard that NFL quarterback Tom Brady is about to retire—then he denied it, and now everybody's confused. But with his name out there, I remembered something that happened on the day he won his first Super Bowl in 2002, when Brady led the New England Patriots to a victory over the St. Louis Rams. I was a first-year seminary student, and I went to a church not too far from campus on the morning of Super Bowl Sunday. The pastor invited all the children to come up. And he talked to them about the Super Bowl, and whether they were excited about it (spoiler: they were *very* excited!), and he asked them who they were hoping was going to win. This being New England, the kids shouted out with one voice, "The Patriots!" Then the pastor turned more serious. He asked the kids, quite earnestly, who they thought *God* wanted to win the Super Bowl. ... And this being New England, the kids shouted back with one voice, "The Patriots!" The pastor was taken aback. He genuinely hadn't expected that response, although he really should have known better. So he stammered out the rest of his message, which was something like, "God cares about sportsmanship and fair play and safety, not who wins." But the children were having none of it. They shouted all the more, "The Patriots!" They couldn't conceive of a good and just God who wasn't a Patriots fan, a God who didn't cheer what they cheered for, a God who willed the same outcome that they wanted. Happily for those kids, the Patriots won that year, and so their faith wasn't tested in that particular way.

God made us in God's image, the Bible tells us, but so much of the time we want it to be the other way around. We want God to lift our team to victory. We want God to bless our nation above the others. We sometimes pray, "My will be done," instead of "Thy will be done."

Something like that tendency is at work in the gospel lesson this morning, as the people of Jesus' home town hear him preach at their synagogue, and they swing from amazement and appreciation to murderous rage. Apparently, if you do a good job of preaching like Jesus, the result is that the congregation tries to throw you off a cliff! I take some comfort in knowing that Jesus the preacher was fired by his home congregation, in spectacular fashion, after giving just one sermon. But it's worth pondering what Jesus says that provokes such anger and rejection. God's gift of forgiveness, redemption, and new life comes wrapped in a Yes and a No, and if we're going to receive this gift, we have to be willing to hear them both.

First the Yes. Jesus has just read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. We heard last week about these words reach back into the ancient traditions of Israel, to the practice of Jubilee. Every forty-nine years, debts would be cancelled, slaves freed. Property that had been separated from its ancestral owners would be returned, without charge. It was a periodic reset, a fresh start that ensured all of God's people would continue to benefit equally from the blessings of the promised land. Flash forward in time to the people of Judah in exile in Babylon, longing for a renewal of God's promise

and a return to their homeland. Isaiah announced that the time had come, that he, Isaiah, had received an anointing from God to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, when prisoners are to be freed, the blind are to receive their sight, and the poor to receive good news—a fresh start, God's Jubilee for the chosen people. And flash forward again to Jesus, who quotes Isaiah's words, looks out purposefully at the people of his hometown Nazareth, and tells them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He, Jesus, is the one anointed to announce a new beginning.

This is God's Yes, a message of hope and deliverance. And the people of Nazareth believe it. They are awed, astonished, and not a little proud that one of their own, Jeshua bar Joseph, the son of the carpenter, has been gifted with such a message, and with the spiritual power to carry it out through acts of healing and feeding and other miracles. Maybe, just maybe this will put their dusty little town on the map. Maybe they'll become a pilgrimage site, as Jews from all over the world stream to their synagogue to hear this golden-tongued rabbi and receive the spiritual gifts he so freely gives. God's Yes is wonderful, and the people of Nazareth begin to imagine themselves as uniquely blessed and favored.

But it's just when they start to think this that Jesus, sensing what's in their hearts, hits them with God's No. "I know what you're thinking," he says. "You want me to stay here and do some miracles. Well it's not going to happen!" And he reminds them of two stories from the Old Testament where God's grace has overflowed the borders of Israel to bless those outside the covenant family—a foreign widow saved from famine, and a foreign military general healed of his leprosy. God's generosity, God's goodness, God's blessing can't be contained, Jesus is saying. It can't be domesticated and harnessed for the advantage of a particular town or nation. It's always looking for someone on the outside to sweep into its embrace. If Jesus' mission had a slogan, it wouldn't be "Nazareth First," but, "Hurting People First." The Yes of God's new beginning is at the same time a No to anyone who wants to claim ownership of it. It's a No to those who would cut to the front of the line on the basis of their privileged ancestry or position, or hoard God's gifts for themselves. God is not a Patriots fan or a Rams fan. God is not American or Mexican or Russian or Nigerian. God is not Jewish or Christian or Muslim or Hindu. God is not partial, and one of the psalms says it best: "The Lord is good to *all*, with compassion that extends over *all* that God has made" (Psalm 145:9, emphasis added).

It's a funny thing—I can say all that, and it sounds obvious to me, and maybe to you too. But when it comes down to it, I'm more like those people in the congregation at Nazareth than I like to admit. As a college student living in the campus ministry's house, I resented it when our chaplain threw a newcomer in with us, someone who was different from me in every way I could imagine. (God had the last laugh in the end, though, because this guy turned out to be one of my closest friends in that period of my life.) In an exercise at a church gathering once, I kept a scorecard, tallying up the people who spoke by sex and ethnicity. And as I went along, I said to myself, "The women in this group are really talkative today." But the numbers, when I added them up, didn't lie—the men and women in the group had spoken an equal number of times. So I know there's something unconscious in me that thinks it's out of place, even that something is wrong and out of balance, when people who aren't like me lift up their voice in conversation. That was a sobering and distressing realization, but that part of me is there, whether I like it or not, and it stands against the scripture that tells us that in Christ there is no longer male and female (Galatians 3:28). The point is this—I know God's grace is for everybody, but I struggle to live it out. I wonder how I would have felt, in that synagogue in Nazareth, if Jesus had put his finger on my own prejudices,

my own sense of privilege before God. I think I might have been angry too. In his words, I hear the force of God's No to partiality and parsimony with God's grace.

We don't all struggle in the same way. With the NFL conference championships today, some people are praying for the Chiefs, the Bengals (bless you!), the Rams, or the 49ers. Some struggle, as I have, with unconscious bias toward God's children. But part of the reason we come together is to be reminded that God's grace is so big, so expansive that it can't possibly be all about us, that to accept God's rich gifts is at the same time to ask God to break our too-small hearts wide open. It's right there in the prayer we say every week: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." There is no grace for us without our having grace for others. It's all connected.

God's Yes comes back to embrace even those who reject it. At the end of our gospel story today, we hear that Jesus gave this angry crowd the slip and skipped town. He leaves because he has more work to do, and in doing that work he is working for the good of the people of his hometown, whether they see it or not. God's Yes comes back to embrace those who try to block it with a No. But those who accept it, those who meet God's Yes with a Yes of their own, however hesitant and tentative, get to experience the fullness of God's embrace here and now.

Echoing God's Yes looks different for different people. Sometimes it looks like giving the floor to somebody whose voice is thought to count for less than yours. Sometimes it looks like sharing your abundance with someone outside your usual circle of care and concern. Sometimes it means letting go of a grudge or a prejudice. Whatever form it takes, meeting God's Yes with a Yes means following Jesus to carry God's grace away from the comfortable and familiar places, away from Nazareth, away from home — to the stranger on the outside. Who is being overlooked? Who is being left out? That's where God's Yes needs to be spoken today.

God's mercy is wider than the limits of our imaginations, wild, fierce, untamable, and big enough to hold us all in its embrace. It brings release, new vision, and good news for those who had given up all hope. May God's mercy take shape in us, as we forgive and proclaim hope and build up our neighbors in God's name, and may we come to see that Jesus is right—that in precisely this way, the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. Amen.