

Sermon
Epiphany 4—C
St. Andrew's, Methuen
January 30, 2022
William Bradbury

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Today we hear the second half of Jesus's sermon to his hometown synagogue. It started so well last week as Jesus lays out his agenda, quoting Isaiah, **"to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

But then something goes terribly wrong, as a worshipping congregation turns into a violent mob.

And we are confused, because we can't imagine how anyone could be angry at someone as nice as Jesus.

Maybe we can't always be smart or brave or giving or creative, but at least we can be nice just like Jesus. And by nice, I mean not just being friendly and pleasant, but also being conventional in our thinking and acting.

Sad to say that for many churchgoers the gospel is not about the new thing God in Christ is doing for us, **but about how we are supposed to be nice and conventional in order to not rock the boat.**

This was certainly true in the South. But occasionally a Northerner would move in and shake things up.

We raised our kids in Washington, NC, a town of 20,000 on the Pamlico River in the eastern part of the state and my five-year-old daughter, Katie took ballet lessons from a retired ballet instructor from New York City, they called Miss Christina.

At the first class, Miss Christina lines up the 12 little girls in front of the big mirror, with the proud parents looking on. Miss Christina said, "Okay, girls, look at yourselves in the mirror. You are all cute. Every one of you is cute beyond belief. So my job is not to teach you how to be cute, my job is to teach you how to dance, which is a lot harder."

This reminded me of growing up in Atlanta when I played trumpet the Northside Highlanders Elementary Band. We got to wear cool uniforms with plaids and sashes and spats on our shoes. It was directed by a severe woman named Mrs. Sisk, who would come to my school once a month to listen to me play our music. I got one point for each measure I played correctly and she'd write this in a little notebook and add up my total points for the year to determine which chair in the trumpet section I'd sit. I was both nice and conventional, but that played no role in the calculation. What counted was playing the music.

 Jesus comes to his hometown to teach his friends and relatives how to play God's music and do Jesus's dance, which involves feeding the hungry and healing the sick, **no matter who they are.**

In synagogue that morning they love seeing the local boy that has turned out to be a handsome and well-mannered rabbi. They **probably are a bit annoyed when he instructs them on Bible stories they taught him as a child—Elijah feeding the starving widow in Sidon and Elisha healing, Naaman, the leprous general from Syria.**

But they go from annoyed to angry when Jesus refuses to produce the same signs of Messianic healing and feeding that he'd been giving to the people in Capernaum. **Who does he think he is, treating us this way—after all we did for him!**

Through the centuries church people have often turned inward, wanting God's blessings for themselves and ignoring the suffering of others.

 I think of Martin Niemöller (1892-1954) —the Lutheran pastor in Nazi Germany who famously said:

In Germany they came first for the Communists,
 and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
 Then they came for the Jews,
 and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
 Then they came for the trade unionists,
 and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
 Then they came for the Catholics,
 and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.
 Then they came for me,
 and by that time no one was left to speak up.

But I have had church members who were neither nice nor conventional, but who did listen to Jesus.

I remember Robert Hodges—he was retired military and was in my office once a week complaining about my ministry and the lack of faith he saw in the church. Robert had his charms, but being nice or conventional weren't among them.

He had obviously never learned the social skills of a southern Christian gentleman.

But Robert had learned God's music and Jesus's dance: one day Robert goes around our small town looking for the homeless. He found a guy living under a bridge, another living in cardboard boxes, and another living in a broken-down van. Robert gathers up 20 homeless people, we didn't know existed, and then he starts looking for a place that would give them shelter at night.

None of the mainline churches could find room, but the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church did and they helped Robert turn their parish hall into a homeless shelter, so the music and the dance could keep going.

And our mainline churches finally caught on and we started serving supper at the shelter and providing members to volunteer to spend the night on a cot in the kitchen.

After Miss Christina told the girls that her job was to teach them to dance, one mother got upset took her child to the competition across town, the "Moulin Rouge De Danse", where they taught girls how to be cuter by shaking their hind parts.

Some churches herniate themselves to be conventional and nice, thinking this will attract new members. But what visitors to churches are really looking for is a community that can help them play God's music and dance with the outsiders Jesus loves.