

**Chapel Hill United Church of Christ**

**Sunday Sermon**

# **The Dickey Business of Ministry**

1 Corinthians 13  
Luke 4: 21-30

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January 31, 2010

*Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."*

Prayer: May your word come true to us in our hearing today, O God. Amen.

Years ago, there was a young lad who would sit in the back of a big church, in the highest last row, up in the balcony that was pitched at about a 30 degree angle. He was up there with his brothers while the pastor led worship and preached the standard 20 to 25 minute sermons. Now, for this young lad, sitting still was no easy task, and the preacher was no easy orator to listen to for a young lad. So, this young fellow and his brothers would sit on the very end of the pew, tear of corners of the bulletin, roll them up into nice, round spit wads, and would roll them down the six-inch wide banister, right past worshipping members of the congregation. One Sunday, one of those worshipping members noticed a nice, round spit wad rolling past him on the banister. The young lad knew that this man noticed the wad rolling on by, and he knew that after the service, he was in trouble. Sure enough, the pastor heard about it, and confronted the young lad, who 'fessed up. And a new rule was put forth by the pastor. The young lad could no longer sit in the back

row, high up in the balcony. He and his brothers had to sit in the front row, right in front of the preacher, not for the one service, but for both services each Sunday!

Yep. You guessed it. That young lad was me, and the church was St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Pekin, Illinois. I sometimes wonder if I could go back as a guest preacher some day at that church. It would be difficult, I think, because for sure, some of the old-timers and others who are my age and are still at that church would know, even before I said a word, that I was the pastor's kid with a checkered history. I was the one in the front row. I was all over the place. Their hearing would be affected. And, they may say, "Aw, look how he grew up; isn't that nice." Or, they may say, "Ugh, look how he grew up!"

Jesus, is dealing with the same situation. Last week, we heard how the hometown boy makes good. He read from Isaiah. He spoke articulately. But, today... he said that this scripture has come true in their hearing. And, after a few moments, he goes from hometown hero to hometown zero!

How does this happen? It's not so much that Jesus is dealing with a tough crowd at home. Nor is it so much that he is known too well by these folks—"Isn't this Joseph's kid? We knew him when he was growing up?" It's not so much about those ideas as it is about the message that Jesus brought to them. The message that comes home to roost in their minds is that Jesus declares that he is the

one that has the Messiah-qualities Isaiah describes. He is the one who preaches good news to the poor, who proclaims release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. Not only that, there are two more messages that enrage them. One is that the people of God didn't desire God or God's Son. They only wanted to be impressed by the miraculous acts they heard that Jesus performed in other places.

Jesus calls them on it and essentially says that they were no different than the Israelites centuries ago. And centuries ago, God caused a famine due to their lack of faith and desire for God. In fact, the only person the prophet Elijah was sent to in those days was a non-Jewish widow at Zarephath in Sidon!

A third message Jesus said which rubbed them the wrong way was that they focused on themselves first, then the rules, and then maybe other people. Finally, God might have been on their list. Jesus calls them on that too. Making the message sink in, he again illustrates from their Israelite history, citing the days when Elisha was alive and there were many Jewish lepers in Israel, yet the only one who was cleansed was not a Jew at all; rather it was Naaman, the Syrian commander!

Jesus, as a prophetic minister, got into trouble with the hometown crowd because he held up a mirror for them to see themselves. Jesus, the Rabbi, the teacher/minister pointed out where errors of faithlessness were occurring and

where growth needs to happen. Being a prophetic minister of God, a teacher minister of God sometimes gets dicey!

The truth is, any type of ministry for God gets dicey sometimes. Ministry gets dicey because it calls out for people to prioritize with God first. Love God first, in all things. This means respect and live with God's ways over and above the ways of culture. Love what God loves. This can get dicey!

Some say and believe that politics should be kept out of church. Generally, this can be considered a good rule of thumb. The church is often best suited when it doesn't take sides on political issues. But, sometimes, you can't keep politics out of church. Sometimes the injustice surrounding political issues, the oppression against people, the violation of human rights, these must provoke the church and church people to practice God's way of loving first. These must also encourage people of faith to turn away from oppressive ways and practice God's way.

Back in the day when Billy Sunday was the premier traveling preacher of the day, once in a sermon, he made critical remarks regarding unfair labor practices for workers in that area. Several businessmen sent him a message after the service and told him to "leave labor matters alone. Concentrate on getting people saved. Stay away from political issues. You're rubbing the fur the wrong way." Billy Sunday wrote a message in response, "If I'm rubbing the fur the wrong way, tell the cats to

turn around!” (Sermon Resources for January 31, 2010, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com), retrieved January 25, 2010).

If in ministry, we are to love God first, then in ministry, loving people is next on the list. The late preacher William Sloan Coffin said, “There are people and things in this world, and people are to be loved and things are to be used. And it is increasingly important that we love people and use things, for there is so much in our gadget-minded, consumer-oriented society that is encouraging us to love things and use people”—William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Westminster, 2005), 35, *Homiletics*,

[http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations\\_for\\_installment.asp?installment\\_id=93040507](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93040507), retrieved January 30, 2010).

The church must bear witness to loving God and loving people first, even if it gets dicey sometimes. Author Kenda Creasy Dean describes a United Methodist Church in southeast Washington D.C. that has a memory burned into its consciousness. A brutal murder took place on the church’s front steps. One Sunday evening during worship, a young man fleeing gang assassins ran to the church’s locked doors, trying literally to gain sanctuary. He collapsed on the front steps from gunshot wounds. Following his death, the congregation voted that “the church doors will always remain open so that young people can come into the

church. If they are being chased by dealers and gangsters, there is no better place for them to run than to God's house. Today, despite the neighborhood's high crime rate, the Shaw United Methodist Church keeps its front doors open" (Dean, Kenda, *Practicing Passion*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2004, p. 75). Ministry for God can get dicey sometimes.

Now, in about two minutes, we are going to welcome new members into the life of our church. And then, a few minutes after that, we will review the 2009 year in ministry. But, I want all of us to know, that whether you are a new member just joining us, or whether you are a long-time member, we all bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, first and foremost. And because of that, sometimes things will get a little dicey around here. Sometimes we will need to prioritize in such a way that causes us some conflict within our conscience. Sometimes we will hear words or stances that hold a mirror to our faces inviting us to look at ourselves and change to grow closer to God's will and way. Sometimes viewpoints offered may not be popular, but know this, practicing God's call to be love, to be faithful over and above all other things and persuasions.. this binds us together.

Even with differing viewpoints, we are held together by love. Holy love. A love of God that is patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude. It's the kind of love that can bear all things, hope all things, and endure all things. The

kind of love that never ends. As we stay quiet for a moment, pray to God that this holy love is infused into your inner life, your spirit, your conscience, your heart.

Moment of Quiet Meditation

Amen.