

I'm in the middle of a rather dense book called "Jesus in the Drama of Salvation" by Raymund Schwager. It was written in German, and the English translation is not always clear to me, so I have to keep rereading paragraphs and it's a slow process. Also it's a lot to take in.

The author is focusing on a question that bothers me and I know bothers many of you. If Jesus was preaching a message of reconciliation with God why do we hear all those parables and sayings about judgement – like the sheep and the goats, the good fish and the bad fish, the wheat and the chaff? I tend to deal with those in one of three ways:

- they were later traditions or emphases added by the early Christians because of their historical situation
- we must read scripture through the lens of Jesus' message of God's love, or
- just ignore them

None of these are quite satisfactory and I wonder whether I'm not dumbing down Jesus' message in some way.

I mention this because today's gospel reading contains some puzzling statements. Jesus has just finished reading the passage from Isaiah that we heard last week – the beautiful prophetic statement that starts "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." And we are told, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

But a few sentences later, "all in the synagogue were filled with rage." They got up and drove him out of the town and tried to lynch him. What happened between the gracious words and the mob violence?

It seems that Jesus provoked them. For some reason, perhaps in response to their saying, "Is not this Joseph's son?" or perhaps in response to a deeper issue that is not fully explained by the gospel writer, Jesus declared, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" Some commentators suggest that the people of Nazareth had a sense of entitlement because he was a home town boy and Jesus was reacting against that. They base that on the fact that Jesus quotes two events from the Hebrew scriptures, and in both cases a Gentile was the only one saved.

So maybe, what happened between the gracious words and the anger were that Jesus challenged their idea that just because he grew up in Nazareth he was obligated to do the miraculous things they had heard about happening in Capernaum. Or perhaps the people were wanting him to prove himself by using supernatural powers without themselves having any commitment to healing, which is why he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

Mr. Schwager, author of "Jesus in the Drama of Salvation" suggests that Jesus' overall message had two phases – the initial one that the kingdom of God was open to all and forgiveness freely given, then the follow up that if you turned away from this gracious offer you would bring judgement upon yourself. So perhaps, Jesus' apparently un-gracious and even angry statements came because he could read the room and he knew that even as they were speaking well of him they were actually belittling his declaration that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,".

Jesus referred to Naaman the leper and the widow of Sidon. Both of them were initially hesitant about the promise of healing (in the case of Naaman) and food in famine in the case of the widow. But both stepped

out in faith. Both of them were people who Jews would consider to be on the fringes of society – Naaman was an unclean leper and the widow was, well a widow, who had no family to support her. Both of them were Gentiles. So, according to Jesus, these foreigners listened more carefully and followed the gracious words of God in a way the good, clean-living people of the Nazareth synagogue were not willing to do.

And apparently Jesus was right in his reading of the people's response to his message, because instead of arguing with him or declaring their desire to be part of the kingdom, they ran him out of town.

I imagine that they were disappointed. And out of their disappointment came rage. They wanted a spectacle. They wanted to be entertained and amazed even more. They did not want to be challenged.

But a relationship with Jesus and his Dad is never a spectator sport.

Neither is it one size fits all. The gracious words you hear may be different from the gracious words I hear. They will be words of love and of unconditional acceptance but they will also be words of challenge.

Just as Jeremiah heard, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations," and pushed back... our initial response to God's gracious invitation into healing and ministry may be muted. Yes we want to follow Jesus, we want to deepen our relationship with God but we don't want to give up the habits that we have formed. We want **God** to sort out certain difficult things in our lives, but that's not the basis on which God calls us. God is primarily relational rather than transactional.

It is just about a year since our friend, Dr. Jean died. On one occasion I was with her at the doctor and we were talking about her falling in her home. She often talked about an earlier time when she had opened her

elevator door and stepped in but the elevator was not there. She said it was three days before she was able to get out. So at this doctor's visit I said, "You don't want to fall down your elevator shaft again," and she replied, "Well, it was very character forming."

It is in the back and forth of relationship with God that our spiritual characters are formed. I hope that God will never ask us to spend three days in an elevator shaft, but we can be sure that our response to God's gracious words of invitation will lead us to challenges as well as joy and it is in the living out of the challenges, trusting in God's love to sustain us, that we grow into the deeper relationship we long for.

As those who come to church and listen regularly to the word of God, we are in danger of being like the good people of the Nazareth synagogue. We are in danger of thinking that somehow we are special and that God is therefore on our side, on our team, and so we need not listen and respond to God's gracious words. We are in danger of thinking that we are doing everything right and so God's blessing is assured, when we are not really choosing to go deeper into relationship. We are not choosing to listen for God's words of challenge and when we do hear them we are not ready for the change that healing brings.

My prayer for each one of us as individuals and as a community, is that we hear the gracious invitation of God and that we have the courage to reply, with Dag Hammersjold, "For all that has been, Thanks. To all that shall be, Yes."