

Monsignor Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on February 4, 2007
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Liturgical Year C

The first-grade teacher gave her students an unforgettable gift: she taught them all to read. She loved them all into the excitement of words, stories, and books. The teacher's classroom was a place of obvious comfort and real joy. But – there's always a "but" – in a way, she taught them too well. They were so happy and so "at home" that the prospect of moving to second grade simply terrified them. Many of the children froze in a kind of panic at the invitation to move up to a new experience. Of course, in the end, it all worked out. But their experience of facing something new takes us somewhat into the minds and hearts of those in the Nazareth synagogue who heard the words of Jesus.

First, Jesus reads the words from Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

They've heard the passage before. Jesus then takes the teacher's seat. They're hoping he'll give them a comforting word. Then he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It's a surprise to them. An electric murmur runs through the usually-silent listeners. Their hometown boy is telling them the great day has come. And it's all going to happen here. Nazareth is where the Messiah will be. Hooray! Maybe he'll work a miracle or two right here and now just to get the ball rolling.

Jesus raises his voice again. He's got them figured out: They're looking for pyrotechnics to put Nazareth on the map. That stuff he did over in Capernaum – that's peanuts. Wait till you see what Jesus will do for us! If he's been a do-gooder over there, he certainly owes more to the hometown crowd who knew him when he was Joseph and Mary's little kid.

What Jesus says next really throws them. No prophet, he says, ever gets a hearing in his hometown. They're not really listening. They're just wrapped up in themselves, in the small hopes and petty quarrels of a little hill town. Like so many, they are not prepared for a bigger picture. Like the first graders, they're so smug and comfortable that they get terrified and angry when Jesus calls them to something new and different.

The issue Jesus raises is infuriating and, to be sure, insulting. These are good, traditional Jewish townsfolk. But Jesus is telling them stories about something that they'd probably rather forget. Their ancestors had driven the great prophet Elijah into hiding. The only one who shelters him is not a Jew at all but a Gentile widow. The other story he calls to mind is even stronger. Naaman was a hated Syrian, and God cured him through the prophet Elisha.

Now they are getting the point – but not liking it at all. Jesus is needling them. He's reminding them that real prophets generally got recognized by pagans, not by Israelites. He'll conclude that their way of looking at God has to move and change. They get furious.

Is it so different today? Did Desmond Tutu or Martin Luther King Jr. get a comfortable murmur of assent in their home countries? King was regarded by our FBI as the greatest troublemaker and most dangerous man in the country. How is that so different from Nazareth and the angry reaction in the synagogue?

Are we the in-group? We might well pray today for a little eye opening. The difficulty with faith in Jesus – real faith – is that it never leaves us in peace with the way things are. God wants us always to be open to new ways of thinking, acting, and relating. No, it's not easy. It wouldn't be easy for the folk at Nazareth to see pagans in God's plan of salvation. But Jesus is cheeky, irritating, and insistent. God sees it that way. So must they. And they can't manage it. So – in the best tradition then and now – they move to get rid of him.

There's an old theological saying: God is like a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. That's what Jesus is telling us today. The compassion of God is like that circle. Its heart is everywhere and its limits are nowhere.

We're the ones who draw the circle tighter. We exclude on the basis of nationality, religion, and lifestyle. We exclude on the basis of appearance or social class. The circles we draw are stifling and defeatist. God draws circles whose heart is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere. God will not stop doing that. Jesus tells us that today. Thanks be to God.