

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
January 31, 2010
Luke 4:21-30

“Practice Being Unpopular”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Passover is the Jewish holy day and festival, observed in the spring, that commemorates the Exodus—the freedom from slavery of the Hebrew people from ancient Egypt that followed the ten plagues. It is a special time for Jewish families to gather and celebrate their history, identity and faith. This year Passover begins at sundown on March 29th. That will be a special evening for many Jewish families, but a difficult one for Kayla Gilman-Solomon. Our Kayla.

Kayla grew up Jewish in New York City. She will spend Passover with relatives this year, as she has in years past. But this year Kayla thinks she will have to tell her family members that she has joined a Christian Church. She feels it is time to come out as having found a Christian community that she loves, that she is committed to and that she felt called to join. That will be hard and she is nervous. Kayla will reassure family members that she will always be culturally and historically Jewish...that will never change. But she will have to look her relatives in the eye and say she is now a card-carrying member of a Christian Church.

Kayla knows this will be difficult—she thinks it will be much more difficult than it was to come out as a lesbian.

She needs to be brave.

Family members may be angry at her, they may withdraw from her.

But Kayla is willing to risk their disapproval. She feels she **MUST** tell them this Passover about her church. This week Kayla told me, “I am less concerned about their reaction than I am about regaining my integrity as an honest, forthright person. They will come to see that I am still me and maybe even better than I was now that I have found a faith-filled, loving, supportive, justice-serving, service-oriented, life-affirming community.”

Those are her words.

Imagine that setting in your own life. Would you be able to see family members at a big gathering and tell them what your church means to you?

Would you feel called to put together remarkable words, like Kayla did, and talk about your faith-filled, loving, supportive, justice-serving, service-oriented, life-affirming church?

I worry when I pose that question to you that some of you GREW UP CHRISTIAN and you are still not willing to talk about your church to family and friends! And yet in March Kayla is going to tell her JEWISH relatives about her church.

Are you willing to risk rejection and come out as a Christian?

Are you willing to talk about what your Church means to you?

Are you willing to mention JESUS in polite conversation and maybe that he (God forbid) guides your life and influences your daily decisions and behaviors?

Are you willing to be unpopular for God?

If we are Jesus' contemporary disciples, if we are modeling our lives after his, we must acknowledge that Jesus said what he believed he was called to say and did what he believed he was called to do and his words and actions made people angry. Jesus was faithful to his call, carried out his purpose during his earthly life, and he was unpopular.

People did not like Jesus.

And I am sure he was a person, like you and me, who wanted to be accepted and liked.

Like us, Jesus wanted to be cozy and chummy with those around him.

Like us, he wanted to be loved.

He must have fought against the impulse to be accepted and loved because over and over again he said and did things that made him unpopular...things that made those around him angry, things that put his life in danger.

Jesus must have fought hard against the impulse to just fit in, get along, get on well with everyone, be the popular, charismatic preacher who people flocked to hear and applauded after the last Amen.

He must have fought against those impulses because instead he talked about and dined with outcasts, untouchables, people on the margins; he preached a Gospel of justice and creating the kingdom of God on earth; he healed people on the Sabbath and broke other sacred and purity laws; and he turned over the tables of the money changers because they were defiling the temple and he thought that was unacceptable.

Jesus did what he felt called to do, and said what he believed he was called to say. And he was unpopular because of that. He was scorned, mocked, followed, threatened, harassed, and nearly killed before he was murdered at the end.

Today's reading from the Book of Luke comes just after the passage we heard last Sunday—Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, he has read from the scroll of the Book of Isaiah. He has just finished reading powerful words from Isaiah and he announces, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" At first everyone is amazed, moved and touched by his presence and his preaching...listen,
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?"

The crowd loves him. He has read from the Book of Isaiah, he stands before them with power and dignity. He is charismatic and holy. He tells them "...*this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" They are impressed and amazed. Their response is: isn't this our hometown kid? Isn't this impressive figure one of our very own boys from Nazareth?

But the warm reception last all of two verses. Jesus probably heard those around him gushing about him. But he was not one to bask in the glow of their admiration. He must have thought they missed his point. Did they really hear the part about bringing good news to the poor, liberation to the oppressed and release to the captives? Did they really get it? Jesus' faithfulness to his mission on earth, his understanding of who he is and what he must accomplish makes him speak out and burst their bubble of adoration. And so he goes on and he speaks about severe famine in the land of Israel, and how during that time of trial the prophet Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon. Jesus continues and talks about the many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha and how one of them, Naaman the Syrian, was cleansed.

Instead of basking in the glow of his fame and adoration, Jesus speaks about how God cares for widows, foreigners and enemies.

That is what he is doing. And his words infuriate the crowd.

Rather than just sitting pretty and being quiet after he has dazzled the crowd, Jesus takes a risk; he hammers home his point, he talks about God's love for widows, foreigners and enemies. And widows, foreigners and enemies are not just nobodies, they are less than nobodies and Jesus is saying that God loves and cares for those less than nobodies.

Jesus could have just kept quiet...let well enough alone. You've done a good job preaching in the synagogue, the crowd loves you.

Now just stop talking and get going while the going is good. But no. Jesus says what he thinks he must say, what he believes the crowd must hear. And they become furious. The Bible says,

“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Keep in mind that in this story in Luke the crowd is trying to throw Jesus off the cliff and we are only in Chapter 4. This is early in the Jesus story. We still have 20 more chapters in the Book of Luke—20 more chapters for Jesus to preach what he calls the good news, twenty more chapters for Jesus to get into good trouble.

Jesus was willing to be unpopular for God. Are we?

Do we stand up for our faith, do we defend our beliefs, do we come out as Christians? Do we say what we believe we are called to say and do what we think we are called to do?

Or do we betray God by our silence and inaction?

I know that in some churches there are “designated Christians.” They are not actually NAMED that, like a designated driver at a party. But there are those in the congregation who are very “out” about their faith while others are more careful and guarded. I don't believe that happens here in this Church but I do want to encourage us to be “out” about who we are and what we believe in. The world needs us now.

The psychologist M. Scott Peck, who wrote The Road Less Traveled, used to say that people get married for two reasons: to have babies and to have friction. Perhaps we are Christians for the same reasons: to give birth to new ideas, new ways of viewing the world, new experiences with God. And to create friction—to bump up against the truth, to say brave and radical things about justice, fairness, generosity and love, to refer to a living, present and powerful God.

The neon orange traffic cone you pass every Sunday when you enter the Sanctuary from the Dining Room says “Caution Holy Spirit at Work” and I think it's good advice. Because when the Holy Spirit is at work you'd better get ready and be aware....you are going to say things that need to be said and do things that need to be done and you might not be loved for it all. I doubt someone will drag you to a nearby cliff and try to toss you off the edge, but you might encounter silence,

disapproval, muttering and rejection if you talk about the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. Get ready all you closet Christians out there, the Holy Spirit is at work in this place and you're not safe here.

The Holy Spirit is gusting through this place and you might find you have the guts, the chutzpah, the courage to say things about compassion and forgiveness when people are talking about vigilante justice. Oh Dear. The Holy Spirit is at work here and you might find yourself in the cot shelter downtown conversing with people who have not showered in a week and you have the urge to embrace them. Watch out. The Holy Spirit is at work here and like Jesus you might alienate those around you by talking about the God's love and care for foreigners and enemies. Be warned. You might find you are willing to be unpopular for God.

When I was in Seminary we had to take several preaching courses. During our second year, when we were doing internships in local churches, we had opportunities to preach to real congregations (not just to each other in classrooms). One Monday a student came to class quite forlorn. Apparently his sermon the day before in the church where he was interning had not gone over well. His sermon made some congregants angry. One couple even walked out when he said the final "Amen." The student felt badly and confused. All of us, his classmates, jumped in to analyze the situation...maybe he overstated his arguments in the sermon? Maybe he had not sufficiently developed his rapport with the congregation? Maybe he came on too strong and alienated people with his content and his tone?

After we had batted these possible explanations around for a while, our professor, now quite frustrated, said, "Maybe his sermon was just fine. Maybe he didn't do anything wrong. Maybe what he did was just right. You all are assuming that there are ways to talk about Jesus without anyone getting hurt. Let me be clear: Jesus got into big trouble when he preached. And I hope you will too."

Kayla Gilman-Solomon is spending Passover with her relatives. And she has decided to tell them that she has joined a Christian church. Most of you do not face such a challenge. You were born into Christian families. And yet you still refrain from talking about your faith. If Kayla, born and raised a Jew, can talk about her faith and her church to her family, YOU can talk about your faith and your church to your family.

My dear sisters and brothers, you are not called to perfect Christians.

There is no such thing. But you are called to try each day to be brave and outspoken, clear and committed, visible and caring and to live the values Jesus modeled for us.

You are called to be open and bold: to say what needs to be said, to do what needs to be done and to risk being unpopular for God.

Remember, Jesus was basking in the glow of his preaching in the synagogue. He had dazzled the crowd. But they seemed complacent. They didn't get it. They were more interested in praising him than understanding him, more eager to admire him than follow him. And so he pushed them and talked about God's love for widows, foreigners and enemies. And they turned on him. Praise one moment, rage the next. And they took him to a cliff to throw him off the edge.

We will not face those risks and dangers in our daily life. No one will drag us to a hillside and try to toss us off because of our faith. When we talk about God and the inbreaking of God's kingdom on earth, people might retreat, they might withdraw, we might be unpopular. Okay. But maybe...maybe when we talk about God and our faith we might arouse interest, inspire contemplation, bring hope, encourage reflection, enhance understanding, increase compassion, and create change.

As this long winter slowly transforms into spring, let us pray that our Kayla has the courage to say what she needs to say and do what she needs to do.

And let us pray that we all can do the same.

Amen.