

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

## **There's Enough for the Birds, the Boys, and You.**

The Rev. Sue Sommer

Some of you have heard me share memories of living in a rented duplex in Ann Arbor, MI when I was very young. Our landlord was an ancient Sicilian immigrant whom everyone knew as Gramps. I've spoken before of the grape arbor directly behind the house, but the grape arbor wasn't the only source of bountiful fruit. In the backyard were 4 cherry trees – 2 sweet and 2 sour. Gramps gave my mom permission to harvest as much as she wanted; and she did, and preserved that bounty in jars that lined the fruit cellar shelves. Separating the backyard from the alley was a chain link fence -- a fence which neighborhood boys routinely scaled in order to climb the sweet cherry trees to eat the fruit. The fence took quite a pounding, and its decrepit condition only made it easier for them. I remember Mom routinely dashing out the backdoor, all five feet two inches of fury, and shooing the kids out of the trees. The price of canning backyard fruit, apparently, was eternal vigilance. Mom would tell, years later, of how she had complained to Gramps, asking him to repair the fence; and of Gramps saying to her, "There is plenty of fruit for the birds and for the boys and for you." And she would acknowledge, in re-telling the story, of how angry she was at Gramps at the time. See, my parents rented that shabby duplex because they were saving for eventual home ownership. With her frugal homemaking skills, honed in her childhood on a farm during the Great Depression, she saw the neighborhood boys as the enemy. Here she was, doing the best she could with the little she had, and here were some freeloading slacker boys who had no right to the fruit, getting in the way.

In our gospel for today, we hear the rest of the story, as Fr. Tom alluded to last week in a homiletical spoiler alert. Jesus is in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He has been handed the scroll of Isaiah, and what he chooses to read comes from what we know as Isaiah, chapter 61. It is an astonishingly beautiful, hope-filled passage about how God will restore the fortunes of those who suffer. It was written at a time when the captives in Babylon were returning to a home they knew about only through stories. A home that had been ruined by warfare, which God had perhaps permanently forsaken for all they knew. This passage brings good news of God's continued love for his people and for the land, and it mentions specifically the Year of the Lord's Favor. That's a direct allusion to the Jubilee – a year to be observed every 70 years where all debts were to be forgiven and lands restored. The Torah directed the Jubilee to be observed, though there is scant historical evidence that it ever was. But how you hear of the Jubilee has everything to do with whether you are in debt and about to be released, or whether you hold the debt and are about to lose money. So, lovely as that passage is, there is nothing neutral about it. Nor was there anything neutral about Jesus selecting it, nor the way he escalated things from there. He went on to cherry-pick two examples from Scripture – one involving Elijah the prophet and one involving Elijah's successor, Elisha. In both cases, they went out of their way to perform miracles of grace and abundance for people who were historic enemies of the Jewish people, who had no theological "right" to that grace. Okay then. Gauntlet thrown, game on. Seems that God, whom Jesus incarnates, is bigger than we thought. Seems that the fulfillment of God's intention for creation – of justice and freedom, of peace and plenty – is not reserved for a few, but for everyone -- including, it seems, the people we really don't like. The people who harmed us or our ancestors. People whom we think threaten our well-being.

No wonder the people of Nazareth rose up and tried to off Jesus. These were regular joes in small town Nazareth. They weren't the religious policy-makers in Jerusalem. They themselves were victims of Temple policies and taxes, to say nothing of what the Roman Empire dished out. No one was powerful in Nazareth. No one was getting rich. Was it too much to ask that they be allowed to

cling to their view that God's preferential grace was for them but not for others? Kind of like my mom and the backyard cherry tree?

The good news is that God loves us. The bad news – or at least the challenging news -- is that God loves ALL of us, including the people we don't much like, the ones who scare the pants off of us, the people we whom we see as a threat, maybe even an enemy. People whom we prefer to treat stereotypically, to build into straw men. Whatever our political leanings are, we humans have a tendency to want to build and maintain the chain link fence to guard the fruit tree from neighborhood boys, so to speak. And yet, the God in whom we place our trust is a God whose love for creation is such that there IS enough, as it were, for the birds and the boys and for you. We don't get to put limits on that love. That was the point that Paul was making to that irascible church in Corinth, a famous portion of which we heard in our epistle for today. This isn't familial love that Paul writes of, nor is it romantic love, despite the fact that it gets read at weddings all the time. It's consequential love. Agape, self-emptying love. A love that empties itself of self-interest; that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Paul was describing Christ-like love, and was placing it as the highest value in a community whose culture was, in many ways, as status-conscious, scarcity-bound, and competitive as our own.

Jesus revealed something extraordinarily important about God there in the synagogue in Nazareth. He has set his ministry agenda, and it will lead him to the cross. And when we follow him, it will lead us there as well. And God's love will win. Because there is always enough for the birds and the boys and you.