

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
January 31, 2010  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-20  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

### ***RAVES AND RANTS***

They raved. They cheered. They applauded. Jesus' first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth was a big success. Even without the help of a preaching class or a mentor, they were amazed at Jesus' rhetoric. They were impressed with his delivery. They were moved by the gracious words that came out of his mouth. They asked one another, "Who is this?" They could barely believe that it was their hometown boy back among them.

But then everything changed. You could call them fickle. Jesus says a few challenging words they don't like and they try to hurl him off a cliff!

The Jesus of the scriptures stirred things up. And it got him in trouble! Would we think it would be any different today? Sure, our faith is a comfort in time of need. Sure, our spirituality can make us feel good and help us to appreciate the wonders of life. But sometimes Jesus reveals the truth in our lives so clearly that we're downright offended. And it may be the very thing that will propel us to grow in our faith, as individuals and as a community.

We'd rather rave about the nice, smile-God-loves-you Jesus. But with a gospel reading like this, we may feel like the ranting crowd at Nazareth. We'd like to shut him up, to tell him to not make waves, to be politically correct and not offend anyone.

So what got the people so worked up, you ask? So angry they tried to run him out of town? What turned their raves into rants?

Well, they had high expectations for him, they did. They considered him one of their own, one of their kin, a like-minded, reasonable man. They remembered his level-headed father, Joseph. And they had heard the rave reviews. The news traveled fast. It was simple. The Nazareth folk wanted Jesus to do for them the same wonderful things he did in nearby Capernaum.

Then he dropped the bomb. He gave two examples of God seeming to pass over their kind in favor of downright shocking folks. First the widow from the wrong side of the tracks in Zarephath. And then Naaman, the Syrian, an officer in the army of Israel's enemies. It would be as if God passed over a devout Christian who was ill to take care of an atheist. Or as if Jesus became chaplain to a group of Islamist terrorists!

Call them fickle, but a comment like that was enough to turn their faces red with anger. Who do you think you are, Jesus? How dare you say that our enemies are your friends? First Corinthians 13 may be beautiful poetry, but how dare you suggest that love does not insist on its own way? That we should be patient and kind toward the folks that disturb us, offend us, and yank our chain? We get teary to hear those lovely words about love at a wedding, but don't you dare throw them at us now! Because we'll rant and rave like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal until we drown out your words!

A column by Gail Collins this past week was titled, "United We Rant." After the president's speech on Wednesday, she said the state of our union is strongly angry. Everybody is ticked off with somebody.

Not to mention that our loyalties are constantly changing. Like the hometown folk at Nazareth, we're rather fickle ourselves. As one writer put it, "In an accelerated culture, our loyalties toward just about everything—laundry detergents, celebrities, even churches and spouses—transfer more readily than our grandparents could have every imagined... (New York Times magazine, January 24, 2010, p. 15)

We are a fickle people and a ranting people. We're ranting on blogs. We're ranting on cable TV. We're ranting on a call-in talk shows. Always blaming someone else. Always finding an enemy and a scapegoat. Rarely looking honestly at ourselves. Rarely looking at the person who offends us with compassion. Rarely finding ways to be constructive or helpful.

You wonder if all our ranting and raving is the “childish ways” that Paul talks about in First Corinthians 13. Let’s be honest. We are plenty irritable and boastful. We love to rejoice in someone else’s wrongdoing. Our public discourse is often nothing, if not arrogant and rude. It’s easy to praise love with the wedding couple in front of us, looking rapturously in each other’s eyes. It’s something altogether different to put into practice in our complicated world.

The preacher man Jesus, both gracious and offensive, comes into our midst this day. He comes among us as one unknown. Not just the Jesus of our own making. Not just the God of people like us. He comes among us to both pull down our pride and to transform us with his tough love and his gracious mercy.

After we rant and rave a bit. After we get over being a bit shocked and offended by hearing all this in church, we face the liberating truth that we all stand in need of reconciliation. We have more in common with our enemies and our fellow-ranters than we first thought. We all want to make the world a better place. We are sometimes overwhelmed by fear. Fear of ourselves, fear of the other, fear of the unknown. Maybe underneath all our ranting and raving is our vulnerability in the face of a world that seems all too threatening. And there seems so little that we can do.

And how blessed are we to hear again gracious words for us and our world. Words of hope and words of promise. Words of mercy and words of grace. Good news for the poor. Release to the captives. Recovery of sight for the blind. The year of the Lord’s favor for all those in bondage and fear.

These words are for us, both fickle and faithful, both ranting and reverent. These words are fulfilled in our hearing as Christ comes among us this day. We may not rave with cheers and applause. But we stand to acclaim this gospel. We invite it to be in our thinking, in our speaking, in our living. *Glory to you, O Lord.* We welcome it in our minds, on our lips, in our hearts. *Praise, to you, O Christ!*