



*First United Church of Christ*  
300 Union Street  
Northfield, MN 55057  
507-645-7532  
*church@firstucc.org*

*"No Limits"*  
Luke 4: 16-30  
January 27, 2013

In the Summer of 2011, I got a phone call the Rev. Kelly Volk, the pastor of the United Church of Christ of Larchwood, IA, my home church. And she explained that the church was celebrating their 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary in September and they were wondering if I would be the preacher for the anniversary service. The story of Jesus returning to Nazareth floated through my mind as I was on the phone. But, I said I was honored to be asked, which I was, and that I'd be happy to preach.

The anniversary weekend rolled around, and I had a Saturday meeting in Wisconsin which I couldn't miss, so I drove across Wisconsin and Minnesota and arrived late Saturday night in Larchwood, a town of 700 people in Northwest corner of Iowa. I only took one detour on my way and that was to see the new Larchwood casino on the Iowa, South Dakota, and Minnesota border. The County board passed a resolution a few years back that would allow for a casino and resort to be developed. And a development group from southern Iowa approached the parents of a friend of mine offering 1.2 million dollars for some of their farmland to build a casino. My friend's parents are devout Baptists and they turned down the offer. So, the tribe went to the neighbors and offered them 1.2 million dollars, and the neighbors said, "You betcha."

It's late at night, I'm approaching the casino and five miles out there's a glow in the sky, that gets brighter and brighter and finally I turn into the parking lot with my jaw in my lap. There's a huge complex, vast parking lot, large hotel, casino, convention center and performing venue ready to welcome some chiseled country star in a tight t shirt, and to top it all off there's a life-size replica of the Sioux Falls waterfalls – it's the Grand Falls casino. I had to see this hotbed of sinfulness for myself, and it did not disappoint.

On the five mile drive into Larchwood, I'm thinking about how the town and the county are depending on the casino for jobs and tax revenue, for salvation, really. And I'm thinking about the fact that among those who will provide revenue from this casino that will go back to local schools, are people addicted to gambling, poor people hoping to strike it rich, and the large number of Latinos who are apparently coming in from Worthington, MN, after their shifts at the meat packing plant are finished . It's a tangled web of economic development to say the least. I arrive in Larchwood, my former youth group leader welcomes me into his home and asks me if I've seen the casino. Then he tells me about all the people who work there and all the gossip about where the people who sold the land live now. And I go to bed.

I wake up in the morning and drive across town to the church. Larchwood is the picture of the progression of rural poverty. Farms are disappearing, the local economy is fading, people like my family have moved away and nice houses 25 years ago are now rundown and overgrown. The town was never beautiful, but it was in much better shape than this not too long ago.

I have strong opinions about these issues, and so it's with some feelings of sadness and anger that I step into the pulpit on that Sunday morning. And I think to myself, what would Jesus do if he was handed the microphone at a time like this? And the answer is clear. And then

I think, “Well I’m not going to do that!” My mom’s here, and the woman who was my babysitter. And all these people that I grew up with are here, many of whom I didn’t really get along with, most of whom I never ever thought I would see in church, but there they were.

So I stuck to what I had prepared. I talked about the pew we sat in and told stories of the extended family the church provided me, and pointed out that in a Catholic town this church was where the other people could belong, and they smiled and invited me to eat roast beef and mashed potatoes with them. That’s how our story in Luke today could end, but Jesus has a different threshold for discomfort than I do.

Jesus has just been baptized and the Holy Spirit sends him into his ministry. He’s preaching around the region of Galilee and he makes a stop in his hometown of Nazareth. He unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and begins to preach. He’s the Messiah, and he’s here to bring in God’s long awaited realm of blessing and peace. And that realm of blessing and peace is about justice, the way of God overwhelming the way of Rome. “What we’ve waited for is beginning,” Jesus says.

And everyone in Nazareth is fine with that. When Jesus is preaching about justice and jubilee the people of Nazareth are eating it up. They are all poor, they’re peasants. They don’t want Rome to occupy them anymore either. It doesn’t take much to convince them that the way of Rome is bad news and the way of God is good news. They’re ready for God to take over and make the world right. At this point everyone is impressed with Jesus, smiling, “Is that Jesus, Joseph’s son? Huh, I never thought he would turn out. Isn’t he a good speaker, oh he’s such a good speaker.”

But then Jesus crosses a line. Even though his mom is probably there and his baby sitter and all of these people that he grew up with, he challenges them and shatters their comfortable

world. Jesus says, “Doubtless you will say to me, ‘Do here in Nazareth the things we heard you have been doing in Capernaum. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when there was drought for 3 years but Elijah was sent to none of them but the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. There were many lepers in the time of Elisha but none were cleansed except Namaan the Syrian.’” Now everybody in the synagogue is outraged. So what did Jesus say?

The stories that Jesus quotes, that of the widow of Zarephath and Namaan the Syrian, are stories of God saving Gentiles. A Gentile is anyone who isn't a Jew, a foreigner. Gentiles included not just foreigners, but enemies, Romans, the occupiers, were Gentiles. Jesus is saying that not only is God's salvation for more than Nazareth, God's salvation is for more than Israel. God's salvation is not only for us, it's also for the people who oppress us, the Romans, Gentiles.

If I had preached in my home church shortly after 9/11 and told the congregation, God is going to be saving us, but God is going to save the Muslims first, I would have been given a frosty reception. If I had walked directly into a conversation about the ethics of a casino on that Sunday morning in Larchwood, I would have done something similar to what Jesus is doing in our story today. To point out that a casino preys on the poor, to point out that a casino will save some but will deepen brokenness for many others, is to attempt to extend the boundary of who is valuable. Who is valuable? Not just the residents of our town or our county, but also the people for whom this casino is not a good thing. Everyone is valuable and important.

Jesus has just said that the people that the people of Nazareth love to hate are going to be saved too. God loves them and wants to rescue them too. And he's just touched on a volatile topic.

The main question the early church wrestled with was, “What do we do with the Gentiles? Can they be God's chosen people too? Is God bigger than we thought? Does God's

love include more people and more of creation than we ever imagined? And Jesus answers a clear “Yes.” Yes, God is bigger than you think. God’s love includes more people and more of creation than you thought possible. God wants to save you, and your nation and the whole world and all of creation, together. God’s love is that big, that inclusive.

Last week I mentioned that we’re in the season of Epiphany and as we walk through the stories of the beginnings of Jesus ministry, we should be ready for new revelations about God, and about Christian faith. We are to be ready for surprises that will change our perspective. And the surprise for the day is not only, “God’s love is bigger than you think,” but also that this is the heart of the New Testament. There are no limits to God’s love.

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are written by the same writer. They’re like books one and two in the Harry Potter series, and they provide the central story of Jesus and the early church. In the fourth chapter of Luke Jesus tells us that God’s love is for everyone, for the Gentiles too. And the rest of the story of Luke and Acts will be a story of God’s love spreading wider and wider and wider. Jesus loves the unlovable, welcomes in Gentiles over and over and then in Acts, the church welcomes in Gentiles and Paul goes out into Gentile territory to share news of God’s love and God’s saving way in every place imaginable. Our central story of Christ and the church is a story about God’s inclusive love stretching to everyone and everything.

This is helpful to know since so many of the debates in religion are about whether we can keep God contained. The loudest voices always seem to be proclaiming that God is small. We, though, proclaim that God’s love is inclusive, with no limits, but we often do so in an uncertain way. No need to be uncertain, this is at the center of the New Testament, we have ground to stand on here.

Does God's love extend beyond the traditional family, and traditional marriage, to gay marriage, whose time may be coming in Minnesota? Many Christians say no, God's love can't go that far. And we say, "God's love is bigger than you think."

Does God's love extend beyond Christianity to Judaism, to Islam, to Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, to new religions that are forming as we speak? Does God's love extend to those who are suspicious of religion because of its sins or because of Jerry Falwell or because honestly it can be hard to make sense of God in our modern scientific world? Some Christians say no, God is contained within Christianity alone, God's love can't go any farther. And we say, "God's love is bigger than you think."

This message isn't just about big issues, it is also about our own lives. God's big, inclusive, limitless love also challenges us to love those people we would rather not. If God's love expands beyond imagination, then maybe our love can stretch a little too. If God can love something about this person who scares us, or bothers us, or offends us, or hurts us so deeply, then maybe we can keep working to honor the Christ that is in them. Christianity refuses to allow us to cast people aside.

But there's one more thing. If God's love is bigger we think. If there no limits to where God's love can go or what God can do, then maybe, just maybe we can begin to trust that God's love can also touch our lives in a powerful way. It's easy for us to get behind values of justice and inclusivity and caring for the poor. But it is sometimes another to trust that there is a Sacred Power that desires wholeness for us, and that is present and powerful and moving in our lives. There are those who say that God is as outmoded as paper money and sometimes we wonder if they are right. But our ancestors are telling us to listen, to reconsider, to trust that God's love is big enough to reach into the present and grab hold of us. God's love is big enough to take hold

of our lives and lead us on a journey toward wholeness and meaning and purpose that truly gives us and others life. Is that possible?

Yes. God's love is bigger than we think. Thanks be to God. Amen.