

Luke 4:14-30
Spiritual Dissonance
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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In the field of psychology, there are two concepts known as Cognitive Consistency and Cognitive Dissonance. One suggests that at the core of our lives is a desire to have consistency in our beliefs. We want what we believe about the world around us to be consistent with the way things actually are. For example: Each and every year around about this time, there is one group of people who begin framing a mental picture in which their dreamed of and deeply desired outcome comes true. However, for a century, their reality has never matched up with their desire. That group of people...Cubs fans.

Maintaining this consistency is a powerful motive. It can even lead people to behave in irrational—even maladaptive ways—just to preserve the feeling of consistency, even though it poses a threat to their grip of reality.

When Jesus begins his teaching in Nazareth, the people of his hometown marveled at what he was saying. “This is Joseph’s son, the hometown boy, here in our midst; listen to the wonderful things he’s saying.” The crowds went wild. And everyone waited eagerly for Jesus to step up and knock one out of the park. As they sat expectantly, eager to hear Jesus confirm their special identity, their *chosenness*, Jesus took the conversation in a different direction. Jesus’ words were like a wrong note in the ears of his hearers.

The concept of Cognitive Dissonance, on the other hand, is when we have conflicting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This produces discomfort. We’re thrown off our axis, taken out of our comfort zone, and forced to wrestle with new information. Cognitive Dissonance is one of the most powerful factors in positive growth in cognitive development. This feeling of discomfort is not a bad thing; in fact, it is actually a very good thing.

As Jesus steps into the pulpit, the people of Nazareth are giddy with excitement, and when he opens the scroll to Isaiah, they’re thinking to themselves, “Here it comes, blessings pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing.” But after giving an absolutely divine exposition of the prophet, strangely enough, the people are left befuddled.

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”**

Only Jesus leaves out one key clause in verse 2. There’s one key phrase of that’s curiously missing, one that reads **“...and the day of vengeance for our God.”** To the Jewish hearers, Isaiah 61:1-2 was about them: they were the poor; they were the captive (which, at the time, they were); they were the blind and oppressed. And the Jewish audience listening to Jesus read Isaiah thought to

themselves, “Now we’re getting the reward for all our waiting, and for our oppressors, vengeance...” But instead, Jesus flips the script.

New Testament Commentator Ken Bailey puts it this way: “The people know that Isaiah 61 promises material benefits for the believing community. Jesus shifts the text from ‘Here is what you will receive’ into ‘Here is what you are expected to give.’ ‘I am the anointed one,’ Jesus says, ‘and if you’re going to follow me these are the people and the causes I want you to be about.’ This shift enrages the congregation who are still focused on what they will receive if he is the Messiah.”

To some degree, we all have areas of our lives we expect God to stand with us and see things our way. My wife Amy says that all Cornell men have very particular ways of doing things, and there is always an explanation behind them. For example: Did you know that there is a right and a wrong way to make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich? I thought it was plainly obvious and everybody would just know that my way was the right way, and when confronted with another way, I just assumed that God was on my side, because, of course, my way is the right way. Guess how far that got me?

But we do this in other areas, as well. Whether it’s politics, or theology, or family matters, personal practices, there are times when we just expect God to endorse our way. But Jesus is not so easily pinned down.

When Jesus introduces a full vision of what his kingdom looks like, he uses a bit of Cognitive Dissonance with the folks of Nazareth. **“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown.”**

Tragically, there are times when we are more interested in Jesus endorsing our righteousness, than in him doing the difficult work of surgically reforming and renewing our hearts. In my view, the biggest threat to the American Church is not the people and values of Capernaum getting in; the biggest threat we face is our own hometown arrogance and self-righteousness that blinds us to what Jesus is actually doing.

1 Timothy says: **I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people... This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.**

Author Fred Craddock puts it this way: “Anger is the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced” (Craddock 63). If we’re going to live into the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims, we’re going to have to deal with what he says to the home team, and to the visiting team alike.

A few months ago, there was a letter that spread like wildfire over the internet. It was written by a college president, addressed to his undergraduate students, and it bore the snappy title, “This is Not a Daycare. It’s a University!”

Dr. Everett Piper, President of Oklahoma Wesleyan University, penned this scathing critique of the climate of Christian undergraduate institutions and their students: “Our culture has taught our kids to be self-absorbed and narcissistic. Any time their feelings are hurt, they are victims. Anyone who dares challenge them, and thus make them ‘feel bad’ about themselves is a hater, a bigot, an oppressor, and a victimizer.” Yowza!

Now you’re probably asking: “What inspired this cry of righteous indignation?” A sermon. Ok. A sermon on what? Love. The sermon was given by the Vice President of Student Development, and his topic was love, as it comes to us from 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s famous Love Chapter.

Following his message—in which he suggests that each and every one of us is culpable of not always being perfectly loving—a student approached him, telling him that the man was wrong for making him, and his peers, feel uncomfortable.

The President continues... “This is not a safe place, but rather a place to learn: to learn that life isn’t about you, but about others; that the bad feeling you have while listening to a sermon is called guilt; that the way to address it is to repent of the things that are wrong with you rather than blame others for everything that’s wrong with them. This is not a daycare. This is a university.”

Cognitive dissonance – that uncomfortable, even scandalizing feeling that these students felt, and that the people of Nazareth felt in Luke chapter 4 – is the very beginning of Spiritual Growth and Maturity. The church is not a daycare, it’s not the waiting room for heaven. It’s a hospital for sinners and a haven for the unrighteous.

God’s love and grace comes to us, to you and I, not as a birthright, something to be held up as a way to make ourselves feel spiritually superior to others; it comes only as a freely lavished gift. The people of Nazareth weren’t capable of understanding and receiving with humble hearts the perfect love of God because they believed it was something they had coming to them because of where they were born.

Jesus wants to show us what authentic faith looks like. So he tells the stories of two Gentiles, two foreigners who embodied the kind of humble faith representative of his Kingdom. First is the story of Elijah and the woman of Zarephath. In the 8th century BC, Elijah denounced the evil King Ahab for worshipping false gods. Oh, and he also pronounced a famine in the land. When the famine struck, Elijah went to a little town called Zarephath, where he met a widow preparing to eat her final meal with her son. Food gone, and no one to care for her, Elijah asks her to give him her last morsels.

In her view, each god’s power was limited to his territory. Yahweh, the God of Israel, could only help those who were in Israel. Sidon, where she was, was Baal’s territory. The widow naturally thought that Yahweh didn’t have jurisdiction over her hometown. But what she does, her leap of faith is astounding, and because of it, she is saved by her faith in Yahweh. And ever since, she has been a model of faith for all Israel.

The second story, from 2 Kings, tells of the Commander-in-chief of the Syrian army, right hand man to the King of Damascus: Naaman, who is suddenly struck with leprosy. And receiving a tip from his maid, he travels to Israel for a cure. Naaman is powerful and dangerous, and he expected the red carpet rolled out wherever he went. But when he arrives at the Prophet Elisha’s house, to his

surprise and offense, he is not invited in. Instead, Elisha sends a servant out to deal with him. Outrageous!

Via the prophet's servant, Naaman is instructed to go down to the filthy Jordan River—a far cry from the crystal clear waters of Mt. Hermon that flowed down to his hometown—and wash himself seven times. How could he be expected to bathe in such dirty water? And after some brief, but effective convincing on the part of his servants, Naaman agrees, takes a bath, and is healed.

By telling these stories to the congregation in Nazareth, Jesus shows his followers what authentic faith really looks like. Reaching beyond their tribe, he illustrates how broad and expansive God's vision for the Kingdom really is.

Again, Ken Baily writes: “If you want to receive the benefits of the new golden age of the Messiah, you must imitate the faith of these Gentiles. I am not asking you merely tolerate or accept them. You must see such Gentiles as your spiritual superiors and acknowledge that they can instruct you in the nature of authentic faith.”

When we have spiritual blinders on because the message is so familiar, so second nature, so domesticated, God sends the stranger into our lives to introduce some holy dissonance and faith stretching. And like the folks of First Church Nazareth, this usually comes with some pretty heavy resistance, even out and out hostility.

But if we are going to become the authentic, mature, spiritually malleable people Jesus wants us to be, we all need to engage in regular times of Spiritual Dissonance. It's good to let God pound down the hard edges of our ego, our arrogance, our deservedness. It's good to come before God and admit that I don't have a clue. It's good to have our perceptions of the limits of God's generosity and grace expanded, because it reminds us—thankfully—we're not God. If we think that God is going to fit neatly into our small expectations, then we're not worshipping the God of the Bible; we're worshipping the God of our own creation.

I don't know about you, but I sure am glad it's not up to me to determine who is and is not, who can and cannot. And you know what? It's good for us to learn the Spiritual Discipline of being humbled and dumbstruck, because it's then with mouths agape, minds spinning, that we can understand that only God is capable of sorting this all out.

Where is God humbling you? Where is he leading you to the limits of your understanding, and inviting you to authentic real faith?

In just a moment, we're going to close, and as we do, I want to let the closing scene of this passage be our guide in these final moments. As the incensed mob gets ready to hurl Jesus off the cliff, something shifts in them, and miraculously Jesus calmly passes through—remarkably leaving the scene in stunned silence. In this critical moment, Jesus' words finally hit home, and it left them speechless. And being regularly speechless is a very good thing.

Where is God challenging the bounds of his Kingdom in your life? Where do you need to repent of your pride, your ego? Where do you need God to introduce some holy Spirit Dissonance in your life?