

The Non Profit in Nazareth

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, (31Jan), 2010.

Text: Luke 4:24 “And [Jesus] said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.’”

No, the title is not a typo. Betsie emailed me early this week while I was in Washington. She wanted to know if my sermon title was the same as I had written on the schedule last July. I said, “Yes, *No Prophet in Nazareth*, except at the Glen Ridge Congregational Church it perhaps should be *No P-r-o-f-i-t.*” So amusing, I changed today’s sermon to *The Non Profit in Nazareth*.

The carpenter’s son, Mary’s boy, they all knew him. Some may have even whispered in their seats in the Nazareth synagogue, “*Do you remember that gossip about him before his parents were married?*” Jesus had gone through school at this very synagogue. They had heard stories about what he had done in Capernaum. Now they assembled on Sabbath to hear him for themselves. His oratory moved them: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”¹ But that was about the extent of their response. There was no faith, only fascination and questioning. Mark was starker in his description about what happened in Nazareth. He wrote, “[Jesus] could do no deed of power there.... He was amazed at their unbelief.”² There was about the place an air of skepticism and distrust that colored everything, even Jesus’ power. So he told them, “No one is a prophet in his own hometown.” Perhaps when we know someone too well there is a tendency not to listen carefully to what he says and not to expect him to speak wisdom. Yet, if an outsider comes whom we do not know, we lap up everything she says. Ms Reynolds has been here eight years. I have been preaching for 18 years from this spot. At times I know exactly what Jesus meant. I am not being cranky about you—just stating a fact. Sometimes we preach and you look back at us as if we were from Mars.

Here is a proposition: *We are all sinners and stand in need of forgiveness by God.* From the perspective of Biblical religion it is not surprising, but from the perspective of modernity it is debatable. The reality of sin comes up often in my sermons. It must have also been a belief of earlier members of this church, since for time out of remembering we have said a general confession of sin every Sunday here. I have been reading and praying with the help of John Baillie’s *A Diary of Private Prayer*.³ Dr. Baillie first wrote these prayers in 1949. As are most Scots, he was convinced of our need for repentance. Perhaps that is a reason I love the antique patina of the words in his prayers. Two of them I altered slightly, taking them out of the private form and making them communal and used them recently for our general confessions. They are

¹ Luke 4:22.

² Mark 6:5-6.

³ Baillie, John. *A Diary of Private Prayer*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996)

markedly direct about our failings and foibles—strikingly so. One of you was so jarred by the language that you told me, “*I didn’t think I was that bad.*”

My initial response was, “If the prayers of confession make you think about your life, that is their job.” But on further reflection, I need to address this more carefully. We are not alone in this conviction that we are not sinners. It is a thoroughly modern take on Christian piety, but on examination, I hope you will discover the validity of the church’s understanding of human sin. I have also been reading Dr. Baillie’s brother’s book God Was in Christ,⁴ and there I found an answer that makes great sense to me about sin and forgiveness and our need for both.

Despite the fact that we just lived through the bloodiest human century in history with constant warfare, a holocaust, and the detonation of atomic weapons, people still think talk of sin is too dour. Since the beginning of this new century, we have seen things equally horrific. Several of us in this room were eyewitnesses in 2001 of a ghastly example of human cruelty, not twelve miles from where we sit. Despite the evidence modern people still remain unconvinced that sin is a problem in the human soul. Dr. Baillie explained such thinking:

‘Why,’ many a serious-minded [person] will ask, consciously or unconsciously, ‘should I brood over my sins and the need of having them forgiven? If my [ancestors] did so, it seems to have been because they were troubled about the *punishment* of their misdeeds in this world or the next. But it is not the penalty that matters most, but the wrongdoing in itself. And that now belongs to the past and cannot be changed by ‘penitential tears’ or any other process. Therefore, why waste time on ‘crying over spilt milk’? ... It is the future that matters now. No one can atone for my misdeeds except myself, and I can do it only by leaving them behind, making any possible reparation to any whom I may have wronged, and then forgetting the past and going blithely on to better things. Therefore I will not trouble myself about my sins and their forgiveness.’⁵

Though this makes sense to many of you, it makes nonsense of the Christian message. Is the modern view really as true as we believe? To my thinking, it betrays an extremely naïve view of human nature and psychology, as I will explain. Any serious minded person concerned about his or her moral life will brood over failings. It does not matter a whit that we ought not to brood over them. *We will*. The advice not to worry is always futile.⁶ Dr. Baillie reminded us:

⁴ Baillie, D.M. God Was In Christ. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949). See particularly the section “*The Need for Divine Forgiveness*,” 160-167. This Baillie brother taught at St. Andrews University until his death in 1954.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

If I set my heart on riches or honour or anything else, and miss or lose the beloved object, I shall inevitably feel sorrow or disappointment in exact proportion to the strength of my desire and the place it occupied in my life. And if my moral ideal, my quest for good, takes first place, then I shall be more troubled about my misdeeds, my moral failures, than about anything else in the world. It is idle to talk of forgetting them quickly and going on blithely to better things.⁷

If we treat our sins casually, we most definitely will not go onto better things, but to the same behaviors over and over again.

In the area of morality, though we do not think we need to confess sins to God, many of us also have *an uneasy dissatisfaction* with ourselves and with what we have made of our moral lives.⁸ Some call it malaise, others angst. It is that particular modern feeling we sense because we know things are not right in us and the world. Instead of referring to it as sinfulness, we prefer to talk about something we call the inferiority complex. We do not openly accuse ourselves because of the protective coating of pride we believe is healthy. If anyone makes us admit mistakes, this seems to fertilize the inferiority complex and, hence, is also unhealthy. An inferiority complex, however, easily passes over into what the psychologists call over-compensation, into a superiority complex. We repress our own private failures, and over-compensate by calls for others, particularly our government leaders, to get things right. One form of over-compensation is moral crusading. It can and does breed a false sense of moralistic superiority, what the Bible calls self righteousness. What can we do? We need to own up to our repressed sense of failing, of not living up to our ideals and our better natures. A good psychologist will tell us the only way the sting can be taken out of our deep-buried repression is by opening our failures to the light. That is what consciousness of our sin or confession does. Far from being unhealthy, it is very good for us.

A related problem is that many of us think sin is only about morals. In the Christian view, sin is first and foremost the break in our relationship with God. So long as we think we can forget our wrongs and move on, our efforts are self-defeating. Why? Because the root of our problem is being self-centered instead of God-centered. The more earnest we become, the more hopeless is this strategy. Dr. Baillie wrote, “The poor moralist is too proud to forgive himself, and so self-righteousness and self-despair meet together....”⁹ Only when we turn our true selves towards God do we make progress. As we clean the dark recesses of our lives by the light of God’s grace, we discover our sense of failure is met by a greater sense of God’s love. When we turn these things over to God our sorrow for sin is not at all about humiliation or mortification.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

Rather it becomes a helpful sorrow, always turning into joy.¹⁰ Far from being morbid, consciousness and confession of sin is the ultimate way to graceful living and far more conducive to it than a moralism that demands human perfection. Forgiveness is the foundation of healthy living. Again, Dr. Baillie quoting the apostle John:

‘If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.’ We are using an ‘escape mechanism’ and running away from reality. But ‘if we confess our sins, [God who] is faithful and just forgives us our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.’¹¹

Of course, the full understanding of this comes when we believe Christ died on the cross to reconcile us to God. It is in that confidence that the acknowledgment of sin is not self-defeating but leads rather to the self discovery of God’s great love for us, to liberation, to release, to a new start and to power to live for Christ. It is grace, not human achievement. And therein is the gospel in a nutshell.

If it turns out I am a non-prophet in my home church, well, I will keep trying....

End

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 167. Quoting 1John 1:8,9.