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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Epiphany IV C
Luke 4:21-30

South Carolina Lieutenant Governor Andre Bauer said this about feeding hungry people:

My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce, especially ones that don't think too much further than that. And so what you've got to do is you've got to curtail that type of behavior. They don't know any better.

His observation would include the school lunch program in South Carolina, which feeds 58% of that state's students. It would include food stamps for single moms who work at demeaning and low-paying jobs because the deadbeat dad won't support their children. It would include seniors who must decide between blood pressure medicine and food. And, of course, the list goes on.

Now I've never heard of Lt. Gov. Bauer until now. Actually, I hadn't heard about his boss, Mark Sanford, until the news broke that he had hiked the Appalachian Trail all the way to Argentina to visit his mistress. *What's that in the water down there?!?* Mary Lou, I'm glad you and Gabriel escaped the Carolinas before the Carolina Kool-Aid got to you.

The Lieutenant Governor also said that the schools that give out the most free lunches are also the schools with the lowest test scores. He obviously doesn't get the difference between causation and correlation. One blogger pointed out that since more murders happen when ice cream sales are high, we should ban the sale of ice cream. It's that sort of argument.

It's refreshing to hear a gubernatorial candidate speak his mind, isn't it? Perhaps this will bring a swift end to his candidacy.

But then again, maybe not...

Jesus has just announced to the congregation, "Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He's just been baptized, tested by the powers of evil in the desert, who offered him all sorts of ways to become powerful. Which he rejected.

And then he began to say to them, "Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all who heard him were amazed — impressed, even! Here was Joseph's son, a peasant by our standards, appearing wise and learned.

But then he let the bomb drop, because they hadn't gotten the point.

Elijah, Israel's prophet, didn't save his own people during the great famine — he was sent to a *foreign* widow at Zarephath to bring God's help and relief. And Elisha was next in the line of Israel's prophets; but it wasn't a *native* leper that God healed through him, it was *Naaman*, the general of Syria's armies — armies that engaged in intermittent war with Israel — who was cleansed.

"What's this?" the people grumbled. "Outsiders? God is on *our* side!" And they became so angry with this issue that they drove Jesus from the synagogue and would have been very happy to send him headlong over the nearby cliff.

Beware of thinking you know whose side God is on. And beware of becoming a prophet — sometimes it's not healthy. And beware of trying to live a spiritual life — it's not easy.

The spiritual life goes against everything our culture pushes us toward. It doesn't double your income or reduce your credit card debt, it doesn't give frequent flyer miles, it doesn't make you slim or give you abs of steel, it doesn't whiten your teeth or freshen your breath.

Instead, it caresses your heart.

Saying "yes" to God gets you where you really live. Down deep. Under your skin. It's not *complicated*. But it's not easy.

Saying "yes" to God can blind us to illusions of power and grandeur — and they're false, placed there by the opposition.

Saying "yes" to God makes us leave the comfort zone and run toward the goal in the end zone. (Bet you didn't think I'd ever work football into a sermon, did you?!?)

Saying "yes" to God can mean hard work. But the rewards. The reward of working *with* God instead of *against* or *around* God. The reward of knowing you're doing the right thing — not necessarily the *smart* thing, or the *productive* thing, but the *right* thing.

Jesus knew that feeling at the synagogue.

It would have been so easy for him to simply give a nice little sermon that didn't challenge the hearers. It would have been so easy to assure them that yes, God is on their side. But he had to rattle their cages, shake them up a bit, make them a little uncomfortable.

He had to remind them that we humans have a lot to learn about God — and that we'll never know it all.

And remember: this is just the start of his ministry! He's going to rattle a few more cages before his time is up!

But this is a foretaste.

What Luke is getting at in this passage, I think, are two things.

First, it's not easy to speak the truth. And that's what I meant when I said that saying "yes" to God isn't complicated, for the truth rarely is – but it's not easy. Jesus gave a simple little sermon, expressing the truth of God's universal, preposterous love of *all* humankind – and they threw him out! (The Lord mercifully made Episcopalians a bit more polite...)

Second, sometimes it's not the best idea to preach to your own kindred: "Physician, heal thyself!" In fact, some advice given to seminarians early on is, "Don't try to evangelize your own family!"

Don't worry – they'll watch you, they'll pay attention, but you probably won't convert them. We don't convert people, anyway, God does. Lord knows, I've been trying to turn my father into a Democrat for years. This passage tells me I should give up.

It's all about letting go, isn't it? All about dropping our suppositions, waving the illusions aside, bowing down and saying a humble "yes" to God.

It's about a willingness to be uncomfortable so that we might comfort.

It's about a willingness to give up – so that we can give.

It's about a willingness to surrender to the truth.

Because the only truth is God. The truest love is God. And the greatest comfort – for you, for me, and for all humankind, is God.

The Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina is so far off the charts in terms of my understanding of Christianity. What doesn't he get about "Love your neighbor?"

It seems to me that in that one brief speech Mr. Bauer exemplified the me-ism, the us-ism, that is all too common in modern culture. The self-centered life is not the Christian life, it is diametrically opposed to my understanding of our faith. His blithe lack of care for the poor, his astonishing lack of compassion – it is unfortunate that Jesus isn't around to give him a slap.

Jesus is warning us in today's Gospel: I'm not here to preserve the status quo. I'm here to be a prophet – and prophets aren't always what you expect. The kingdom of God isn't what you think it might be – it's not just for you. But it is for you and for the poor and for the Samaritan and for the oppressed and the different.

In the kingdom of God the poor are fed and the prisoners are free.

And in the kingdom of God I hope Lieutenant Governor Bauer will get an education.

May peace be with you.

Amen.