

**“Bad Sermon”**  
**Luke 4:21-30**

**Ben Johnston-Krase**  
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<sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup>All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” <sup>23</sup>He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” <sup>24</sup>And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. <sup>25</sup>But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup>yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup>There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” <sup>28</sup>When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup>They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup>But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Let’s begin today with a quick show of hands. How many of you are on Facebook? Just curious. How many of you have a Facebook account online that you check with any frequency at all? Thank you. If you raised your hand, you and 1.2 billion other Facebook users are currently accounting for 1 out of every 5 page views on the internet worldwide *while you are on Facebook*. Every day, more than 250 million photographs are shared on Facebook alone, and here in the United States, usership has now topped 50% of the population. So if you raised your hand, you are in good—or at least numerous—company.

For the uninitiated or the resistant or those of you who are quite happy having absolutely nothing to do with Facebook, a nutshell definition of Facebook may be in order. Facebook is a place on the internet where you can set up a profile of yourself—your life, your work, your job, your kids, your house, what you ate for breakfast this morning, the music you listen to, your favorite TV show, where you go to church, etc... It’s a place where others can see your profile and read *with enthusiastic interest* about what you had for breakfast this morning, and where they can post comments about that breakfast. Likewise, you can spend time gazing at others’ profiles. That guy who sat behind you during French your sophomore year of high school? Chances are that he’s on Facebook, so you can visit his profile, see what he’s up to, where he’s living, what his kids look like, see if he’s still using his French...

And here’s a weird but everyday part of being on Facebook. If you see something you *like*, you can officially *like* it. For example, the guy who sat behind you in French your sophomore year happens to mention on his Facebook page that he’s currently biking from Marseille in the South of France to Paris, so you might click the “thumbs up” button under his post, just to let him know that you *like* what he’s doing. And on Facebook, you can *like* just about anything—the picture of your coworker’s schnauzer eating cake, your cousin’s announcement that she’s chosen UW Madison over Minnesota, your former college roommate’s announcement that he’s chosen to watch X-Factor over American Idol. You can officially like it all. And here’s one more interesting online statistic: *there are more than 2.7 billion likes every single day on Facebook*.

You can like your church on Facebook. I checked this morning and First Presbyterian Church has 112 likes. So if you've done so already, thank you, I guess, for *liking* us on Facebook. And if not, you can go home and declare your love for this church by liking us today.

There's certainly some pressure on Facebook *to be likeable*—to share comments and photos that attract attention and inspire—things that are funny, quirky, unusual, sentimental—to share these things and receive confirmation on your Facebook profile that yes, indeed, you—or at least some facet of you—is *likeable*. Consequently, our Facebook profiles tend to exist as slightly varnished versions of our lives—our habits and hobbies, family photos and vacation highlights, all polished and presented for public consumption.

For some, this is all just too much. Maybe you have a hard enough time as it is keeping it together in this life, let alone making it *look like* you're keeping it together online. So maybe you're opting out of Facebook or looking for something else. A new website has appeared and it exists as at least somewhat of a backlash against Facebook. It's called "Social Number" and it is a completely anonymous online social network where you can connect with other people without revealing who you are. Their tagline is simple: "Here you are just a number." [1] The advantage for some of being anonymous is the absence of any pressure to be likeable.

Do you have a place in this world carved out where you're allowed to not be likeable? Where you're allowed to have warts and unexamined prejudices and ugly sides? (which we all have, by the way) Maybe it's family or maybe it's a friendship or two—a place in this world where you can let something fly out of your mouth and know that even if it's not *likeable* it will still be received with some grace—a place where the worst of you doesn't define you. That can be hard to find. The pressure to be *liked* didn't begin with Facebook, of course.

The desire to present to the world varnished, polished, more likeable versions of ourselves is not new. We like to be liked. We always have. This makes what Jesus does in Luke's gospel all the more uncommon and compelling, because Jesus is definitely not likeable in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. As Luke tells it, Jesus is just beginning his ministry, just getting started—he doesn't even have disciples yet. He's been traveling around, teaching a bit here and there, and now he's back home with a pretty good reputation preceding him.

We have to imagine that the synagogue was packed that day with people who knew Jesus as a boy and who'd watched him grow up. They *liked* Jesus, liked his family, and they were excited to see him now as a teacher in the faith and to know that their hometown boy was becoming something of a celebrity in the region. He was doing them proud! They came to the synagogue that day to hear him teach, but also to cheer him on a bit, maybe even to receive from Jesus some thanksgiving for their part in his upbringing. What they got, however, was a *bad sermon*.

There are all kinds of bad sermons in this world. Sermons that go on too long, sermons with 2, 3, 4, or 5 endings, sermons with no point, sermons with no depth, sermons that repeat themselves, sermons that repeat themselves... There are lots of bad sermons in this world, but preachers everywhere can be grateful that they're unlikely to preach a sermon as bad as the one Jesus preached that day in Nazareth. How bad was it? It was so bad that when it was over, the

congregation became enraged, rushed Jesus out of the synagogue, and tried to throw him off a cliff. In the church that's what we preachers call "negative sermon feedback."

For any pastor interested in keeping a job, let alone being likeable, that's the kind of response that'll make you question your career choice. Fortunately, Jesus didn't care about keeping his job *or being likeable*, and on that day in Nazareth, he wasn't presenting a polished or varnished version of himself.

Author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about being at a retreat once, where the keynote speaker asked those gathered to think of someone who represented Christ to them in their lives. When it came time for them to share their answers, one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'" [2]

We forget that about Jesus, I think—that in his ministry, Jesus preached one bad sermon after another, so many that, in the end, they killed him. We forget that. In fact, we imagine a more likeable version of Jesus for ourselves—a varnished, polished version of Jesus, who preaches nice sermons—encouraging, keep-your-chin-up sermons—thoughtful, deep sermons... We like a likeable Jesus who preaches likeable sermons.

We might do well to remember, though, that Jesus' likeability ratings weren't all that good in his day. The sinners liked him. The outcasts, the lepers and prostitutes and sick people—they all liked him. But in the end, remember, even his friends betrayed, deserted, and denied him. In the end, a whole city cried out for his crucifixion.

It all began with a bad sermon. That day in Nazareth, the bad sermon topic was simple and it was this: "You are Not *Entitled* to God's Good Favor." Thank goodness the people failed to throw him off of that cliff, or we wouldn't have heard all those other bad sermons Jesus delivered over the years, sermons with titles like, "Give All Your Money To The Poor" and "Love Your Enemies" and "If Your Right Hand Causes You to Sin, Cut It Off!"

Jesus had a knack for these *bad sermons*—time after time: "Pray for Those Who Persecute You" and "If Someone Strikes You, Turn the Other Cheek" and "It is Easier for a Camel to Go through the Eye of a Needle than for a Rich Person to Enter the Kingdom of God." Long title, bad sermon. No one files out, shakes hands, and says "Nice sermon" after *bad sermons* like these. But Jesus delivered them, one after another.

Thank goodness. Thank God and thank goodness the gospels don't look like our Facebook pages—brimming with likeable, audience-friendly details of our censored lives. Thank God that the gospels offer a radicle, revolutionary Jesus who didn't care much about being liked, but who was passionately driven to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Thank God for the bad sermons that still proclaim the Good News today, because the bad sermon often contains the truth we need to hear, sometimes contains the truth we long to hear.

In the synagogue in Nazareth, a bad sermon shared the truth that those gathered were no more entitled to God's Kingdom than the poor, the lepers, the outcasts.

In the church in Racine, a bad sermon might unfold a bit differently. We might hear, for example, after a great fiscal year, that God doesn't care about our budget—that God only cares that we depend on Jesus.

Or we might hear, one Sunday shy of our 174<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and one year shy of our 175<sup>th</sup> year, that our history, our building, our decades of good service, our longstanding traditions—that it all means nothing, that God only cares that we depend on Jesus.

Our bad sermon might be simply an infuriating reminder that our talents don't matter, our foundation doesn't matter, our safety nets don't matter, our nest eggs don't matter, our good deeds don't matter, our successes as we measure them almost *all* of the time don't matter.

What matters is that we depend with our lives entirely on God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Everything after that bad sermon is good news.

1. Ran across this in a CNN article - <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/29/tech/social-media/social-number-anonymous/index.html?iref=allsearch>
2. "The Perfect Mirror," by Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998.