

Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

Luke 4:14-21
(The Feast of St. Luke)
18 October 2009

Wild Mercy

Just this past Friday, a remarkable children's book was released as a full-length, live-action film. *Where the Wild Things Are* was one of my favorite stories as a child. Although I have yet to see the movie, I remember the drama of the book and its timeless message of mercy. In the story, a little boy named Max is punished for "making mischief" around the house while wearing a wolf costume and is sent to bed without supper. Angry and upset, Max goes to his room, only to get lost in his imagination. Right before his eyes, Max's bedroom transforms into a forest, and an ocean expands into the distance with a little boat on the shore. He jumps into the little boat and sails across the water to the land of the Wild Things. Now the Wild Things are huge, fierce-looking monsters, but Max conquers them by "staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once," and he becomes their king. Max has an excellent time with the Wild Things, playing and making all kinds of wild rumpus that his mother would never let him do at home. But eventually, Max becomes homesick, wanting to be back "where someone loved him best of all." Max sails back to his room, despite protests from the Wild Things and the potential punishment that may await him. But when he returns to his room, he does not find punishment, he finds his dinner waiting for him ...and it's still hot.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus reads a passage of Isaiah that addresses God's chosen one, the Messiah. This passage from the 61st chapter of Isaiah points to the promise of a spirit-filled figure that would manifest God's mercy in the world – a figure that would bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. When Jesus finished reading, he sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In that moment, Jesus declares that he is the one – the spirit-filled figure – who will bear God's mercy to the world.

This passage is an excellent example of the message of St. Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. More than any other gospel writer, St. Luke, our patron saint, wrote a narrative that focused on the idea of mercy. Luke's gospel has the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son. Luke's gospel is radically inclusive of women, Gentiles, and outcasts, declaring them all first-class citizens in the kingdom of God. And in today's gospel, Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah that emphasizes that message of mercy explicitly.

St. Luke didn't emphasize God's mercy in order to cause trouble or to simply push the social envelope. St. Luke had a very clear purpose in writing his gospel. St. Luke wrote his gospel to a group of Christians outside the Jewish world who were struggling with real questions of God's goodness and mercy, of God's strength and authority. St. Luke wanted to make Jesus' message clear to non-Jews. His Gentile audience would have known about the Jews, particularly the destruction of their Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans. Those Gentiles wouldn't know what to make of a God who let his chosen people – the Jews – suffer so greatly. Even though they may have heard great things about this man, Jesus, how could they reconcile the seeming abandonment of God?

From all of that confusion and misunderstanding, St. Luke takes control of his gospel narrative by making two points very clear: one, we can count on God to fulfill His promises, and two, we can count on God to fulfill those promises in ways we could never expect or imagine. But like any good teacher, St. Luke doesn't lecture his audience about God. St. Luke teaches his audience through the beauty of stories. More than any other gospel writer, St. Luke invites us to enter into relationship with God, to try to understand the mystery of God's mercy, through stories.

St. Luke's Gospel contains many of our most beloved parables, using these stories to shape our understanding of our relationship with God. But he doesn't just tell Jesus' story. In the Acts of the Apostles, a book chronicling the life of the early church, St. Luke tells the stories of many of the church's earliest leaders, including Peter and Paul. Yet St. Luke does something unexpected – he highlights disagreements and arguments, he features misbehavior and mistakes. He shows our early leaders at their best moments and at their worst, he shows them when they succeed and when they fail. With the skill of a master story-teller, St. Luke helps his audience realize that the church is built on the shoulders of people – of beautiful, fallible people just like you and me. His stories of early successes and failures make the point of his Gospel parables – God's mercy – clear. God loves us no matter who we are, God takes us as we are, and God works through our perfect imperfections to show us things we could never imagine and to transform the world around us.

60 years ago, one of the most tumultuous decades in human history was coming to an end. World War II had brought the world to its knees, showing us the horror of true evil. The 1940s also saw countries such as India, Pakistan, China, and Israel declaring independence and sovereignty, and the seeds of the cold war were beginning to sprout. The world of the 1940s was, by any definition, a fragile and uncertain place. Yet just as St. Luke bravely wrote about human struggle in the face of uncertainty, a small group of courageous visionaries became inspired by his message and started a little house church in the his name.

In this little suburb of Birmingham, a group of people saw beyond the fragility and fear of the day and looked to the future, trusting God to work through them to glorify Him in the world. They were quickly joined by many others and the movement took off. In only a few years, that small band of dreamers had established a faith community that has grown to be one of the great Christian churches of Birmingham.

On this St. Luke's Day, we celebrate our patron. To celebrate St. Luke is to look at the story of Jesus and the story of the early church and to see ourselves. Luke's characters fall victim to shipwreck, snakebite, and heartbreak; they quarrel between themselves and even preach totally ineffective sermons. But the one thing St. Luke's characters never do, is get discouraged or worry about how unworthy or unloved they are. They have seen how dependably God has provided a constant witness that all human life is precious, redeemable, and useful. They have seen Jesus die and rise *for them*.

St. Luke was the inspiration for our founders, but we are their benefactors. Each of us has inherited a piece of the dream that began in the first century as a way of teaching Gentiles about the truth of Jesus of Nazareth and of God's wild mercy. That dream was reignited 60 years ago when our little church began just down the street as a way of teaching the city of Birmingham about Jesus, and the dream is here with us tonight – the dream is alive in us tonight. We are here because God still works in mysterious ways through imperfect people.

We carry the light of God's wild mercy in our hearts. We are here because God's mercy is great and God's mercy is true. We are here because there is still work to be done. Here, in this place, we have inherited the good work of the last 60 years, and now we begin the work of the next 60.

Amen.