

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE NEW FRONTIER WITHIN”
Luke 4:21-30
JANUARY 31, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

When I was in high school, a young president talked about the “New Frontier”; landing a man on the moon and bringing him home safely within the decade. What an exciting time it was. We were young and encouraged to have dreams. We dreamed of going to the moon. We dreamed of a better future than our parents had seen.

We encourage the young to have dreams and to pursue them. The culture interprets this admonition in terms of outward goals and ambitions. A hunger for spiritual reality dims the enchantment of the external world and turns us inward. Quests for physical horizons become hollow when we do not pursue the frontiers within.

The world is blessed by those whose frontiers have been extended beyond self-interest and typical pursuits. A third-world dictator, an ambitious CEO, and a religious tyrant may have dreams that seem large to them, but are small and unworthy in the eyes of God.

The westward expansion of the United States seemed to be an endless opportunity for exploration and incorporation. The vastness of the continent was both awe-inspiring and overwhelming to people whose homelands had been the comparatively small countries of the Old World. It was felt that the wagon train’s “**Westward, ho!**” would be a permanent call to eager settlers. Eventually, however, the movement reached the shores of the Pacific Ocean, and what some considered the last frontier disappeared. But aren’t their always new frontiers?

Nazareth was an insignificant little agricultural town in Galilee. The news that Jesus came from Nazareth was generally considered a mark against him. The reaction of one of Jesus' future disciples was, "***Can anything good come from Nazareth?***" (Jn 1:46) After his baptism and temptation experiences, Jesus returned to Galilee, where he was well-received. It made perfect sense that he would begin his ministry there, just as candidates for public office often begin their campaigns in their hometowns or home states.

On the Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth, and was asked to read the lesson. The reading was from Isaiah 61, which could hardly have been more appropriate. He read: "***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.***" When he sat down, he said, "***Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.***" The people were impressed with the "**gracious words**" he spoke. "***Isn't this Joseph's son?***" they asked in wonder. What a wonderful homecoming!

Then everything exploded! Never has the mood of a congregation changed so quickly or drastically. This requires an explanation. Jesus knew the ingrained prejudice that existed in his hometown. He said, "***You will ask me to do the mighty works here that I did in Capernaum. But, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.***" Then he reminded them of episodes in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, two prophets who had bypassed their own people to help Gentiles (non-Jews). In Jesus' time, many Jews understood their "**chosen**" status to mean that Gentiles were an abomination to God. Some of the expressions of this prejudice were quite literally inhumane. The life of a Gentile was thought by many to have no value whatsoever. The extent to which the people attributed this attitude to God is almost beyond belief. This is why the response to Jesus' words was so extreme, and why the very people among whom he had grown up tried to kill him.

Although he knew he would be given no hearing, Jesus chose to challenge the close-minded perspective of his own people. He knew that many in Israel needed a radical change of heart and mind on this issue. There was a frontier deep within each one of them that had never been seen. It was the frontier of an open mind. It is difficult for us to imagine our own spiritual ancestors believing that they alone

were recipients of God's favor, and that Gentiles had no value to God at all. The absurdity of such a view is so obvious to us that it does not merit discussion. How could people be so foolish and so blind?

The absurdity of the mind that is closed and padlocked comes into clear focus when we see it in someone else. How can they possibly think that way? When our own minds are locked down with regard to an individual, a group, a race, or a nation, it is much more difficult to see.

The greatest frontier in the universe is the open mind. We must not think of narrow-mindedness as a relic from the past, or as the unique characteristic of some particular group. History is bloated with examples of otherwise sophisticated and intelligent people having 20-20 vision concerning the flaws of their enemies and being all but blind with regard to their own. As Jesus put it, ***“Why do you seek the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”*** (Mt 7:3)

We cannot dismiss this as a problem only for primitive or uneducated types. It is a phenomenon that exists at the highest levels of academia, government, business, and religion.

Human beings are uniquely equipped to transform both the inner and outer aspects of their lives. It is part of our being created in the image of God, and it has been confirmed by all sorts of disciplines. William James, in the early days of psychology, said that human beings alone, of all the creatures of the earth, can change their own patterns and become the architects of their own destinies. ***“The greatest discovery in our generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.”*** (*The Principles of Psychology*)

We are perfectly capable of seeing the logs in our eyes, if we will, and of making appropriate changes in the world about us.

In World War I, a Catholic priest stopped to minister to a wounded soldier. The boy looked up and said, ***“Padre, I do not belong to your church.”*** The priest replied, ***“No, but you belong to my God.”*** One by one, the walls that divide people in our world are coming down. We are going to be exposed to other

cultures and other ideas, whether we like it or not. The challenges of the frontier within will not go away.

Elizabeth O'Connor's book, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, not only stresses the importance of both of these spiritual journeys, but says that each is vitally dependent on the other. We hold dual-citizenship in the worlds of the physical and the spiritual. We cannot live effectively and meaningfully in one without the other. This is true both globally and individually. It is true for humankind as a whole, and for you and me.

The people of Nazareth knew Jesus and were anxious for him to do well. But when he suggested that God loves Gentiles as well as Jews, they became enraged and tried to destroy him. We are often captives of our own limited understanding. Our horizons change as we grow. The world becomes larger for the growing child on a daily basis, and our horizons continue to change as long as we keep growing. If you are ready to broaden your horizons and grow your spirit with us, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.