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 4 Epiphany C: Luke 4:21-30  
 St Anne's Episcopal Parish, Annapolis MD  
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*Over the Edge*

Helen Keller wrote, "Security is mostly a superstition . . . Life is a daring adventure, or it is nothing." Helen Keller, who had no sight, hearing, or ability to speak, wrote that life is to be lived on the edge.

Today's gospel is about Jesus living on the edge. Jesus lived on the margins and moved the margins to include all people. And it's this sort of behavior that led the people in the worship service that day to want to drive Jesus over the edge of a cliff. Jesus is dragged to the edge of a cliff by his townspeople because they do not want to hear that God's margins are wider than ours, that God's love can include strangers, foreigners, enemies.

Who is included in God's love? Where are the edges of God's love?

Controversy around this question is as old as our Bible. Toward the end of the time in which the books of our Old Testament were written, a controversy arose about how far God's grace and care can extend. Who should be included? The question arose, not in a vacuum, not in posing hypothetical situations, but because of the very real concerns of our ancestors in faith to live in a way that maintained the purity of worship and faith that God commanded, and also to reflect the grace and care they saw God showing. Some people said that in order to maintain purity and faithfulness, all foreign influences should be eliminated. It's understandable why they would say this. They remembered how much trouble they got into, for example, when Solomon's foreign wives introduced foreign gods. The people of Israel had been carried off into exile because their idolatry and worship of foreign gods had taken them away from living out the

compassionate justice their own God, our God, demanded of them. When they got back from exile and it was time to rebuild their lives, their leaders said they couldn't risk foreign influences. So the priest Ezra declared, "No foreign wives." God's people need to be safeguarded against the dangerous influences of foreigners.

At the same time, there were those on the other side of the argument who had a different view of the expanse of God's providence. While holding concern about following God's law, these people did not believe that God's grace and care was limited to their own people. This group told stories like the story of Jonah who wanted no part of God's plan to bring the Ninevites into God's fold. So Jonah ran away from God's command to go preach to them. Only after he spends a time out in the belly of a very large fish, does Jonah reluctantly go preach the good news to those "others." They also told the story of Ruth, a Moabite, whose faithfulness to her Israelite mother-in-law results in her being accepted into the community by marriage, and becoming part of the bloodline of no less than King David.

So, there was the argument: "No intermarriage!" said the one side. "What about Ruth?" shot back the other. "Foreigners are dangerous," said the one. "Some of us are foreigners." Both sides had their points and their important goals. The debate went on for centuries. Or, it goes on. Maybe not over intermarriage, but it goes on. Are there places in our world where you can talk about God's love as long as you really don't mean God loves everyone?

Early in his ministry, Jesus took a clear stand on this issue. In fact, he pushed the boundaries to the very edge. Jesus preached that not only did God care about those who were outsiders, sometimes God especially took care of those who were other, different, "them." There are, according to Jesus, no limits to God's love. The hero of one of Jesus' most famous stories is a Samaritan, the good Samaritan – surprising because no one, outside the Samaritans, would put those two words together in one phrase. Jesus heals the daughter of a Roman soldier. Jesus eats with sinners and traitors – tax collectors. In his parable of the loving father (also known as the parable of the prodigal son), Jesus tells about a younger son who pushed the boundaries of his father's love, wasting all that was given to him in a far country. And when this wasteful son comes home, it is the older brother who is left standing in the dark, perfectly right, and perfectly alone. Until the father, who just won't give up, goes out to the yard and tries to get him

to come into the party too. Every time we come to the boundaries, to the edges of love, Jesus goes right over them and claims God does too. This claim was hard to hear for those who were certain that the divine blessing could not extend beyond their own kind.

In his first public sermon in his hometown, Jesus makes the point. His text is from the prophet Isaiah. It's about the compassionate nature of divine love. Jesus, as God's servant was to take up this mission. He had come to the preach to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. So far, so good. People were nodding their heads and murmuring "Amen's." But then, Jesus' sermon illustration gets him into trouble.

Jesus used stories from the Bible to make his point. The stories were in there, they were sacred scripture, but they were not the crowd favorites. His first illustration was how Elijah the prophet took care of the needs of a woman from the hated land of Sidon at a time when Israelite women were starving. Elijah not only sees to it that she has food for the rest of her life, but also brings her child back from death. Jesus wanted to make the point: God's love does not observe national or ethnic borders. Wherever the edges may be, you will never find them on a map.

Jesus' second illustration is also not a crowd pleaser not much better. Now he tells how the prophet Elisha healed a man called Naaman, a commander of the Syrian army, Israel's arch-enemy.

"That does it!" the people cry. "Now he's gone too far!" say the nice religious people, and they escort Jesus to the edge of a cliff to push him off.

God's love for everyone was not what people had come to hear. The phrase itself is pretty benign, but what about when those people get named? What about when those people have faces? What about when "everyone" means people we cannot possibly imagine?

This story was not saved and recorded and retold by the early church to warn us of the narrow-mindedness of folks who lived 2000 years ago at Nazareth. The story is not told so we can say, thank goodness "we" are not like "them." The story made it into the New Testament because we need to hear it.

Can it be that God loves and cares for and showers grace upon even people who have hurt us, personally, specifically? Where is the edge for us? Where is your boundary? Who do you need to entrust to God's care and love because God is already loving those people, that person?

Jesus is clear. God's love is always more pervasive, complete, and powerful than our anger, misunderstanding, or even our ideas of grace. By the very nature of our humanity, we tend to put limits on love. God does not. Jesus goes to the edge, lives on the edge, so that all may come within the reach of his saving embrace.

And this is grace. Maybe the best evidence of this grace is not that God loves our enemies, but that God loves us. We who would be strangers to God because of our sinfulness or narrow-mindedness or small ideas of God, we are also loved by God. We are actually the Sidonites and Syrians and Samaritans and Romans of God's kingdom, and God loves us, and Jesus dies for us.

How far is God willing to go? So that even we might know the boundlessness of God's love, Jesus would go not just to the edge of a cliff, but to the cross.

Amen.