

Hometown Hero?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
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Luke 4:14-30

Did what Mike just read make YOU mad? Me neither. I wonder, what was it about that particular sermon that made them want to throw him off a cliff?

It's not surprising that Jesus went to his hometown synagogue. Preachers who are just starting out will tell you that it's less scary to go before those who know you best.

And I'm sure they heard challenging things from him before. Jesus had been living underneath their feet since he was a small child. They knew all about that time he made his parents near crazy with worry staying behind at the Temple in Jerusalem. They'd heard some talk about him hanging out with wild John at the Jordan and a strange kind of spiritual encounter.

He'd gone off the radar for a while, some say there'd been some trouble out in the wilderness - but now here he was, back again, making a name for himself as some kind of itinerant teacher and preacher.

They weren't sure what to make of it all, but the home crowd wasn't going to miss the chance to hear what their boy Jesus had to say. And it went well at first, really well! Until suddenly, it didn't. And they wanted him gone.

But why?

I think the conflict arose because of the two Hebrew scripture references he used. Jesus, of course, assumed they already knew the stories. The first was the story of Elijah and the widow¹, and the second involved Elisha and Naaman². I won't read them today, because there is only so much time we can devote to the sermon. Maybe that's something you want to do in your prayer and study time.

For today, the point of the stories that Jesus uses as sermon illustrations... is that both the widow and Naaman underwent a healing they received from a Hebrew prophet. And yet... they were NOT Jews. They were not part of the "chosen people". They were outsiders.

¹ 1 Kings 17

² 11 Kings 5:1-14

And by using these particular stories, Jesus was reminding them that God chooses to touch and bless those on the outside. What he was trying to impart upon his hometown audience was that the task of those who are called to serve God is to go to those outside the boundaries... outside the fold.

Part of what is happening here, I think, is that Jesus had been next door in Capernaum doing marvelous things. The people of Nazareth are eager to hear him for themselves, and to claim him as their hometown hero, maybe even to take credit for him.

But there are rumblings about who he'd been associated with, because you know Capernaum was a city full of "*those kind of people*", those who didn't even contribute to the upkeep of the temple. It was a town known for its high population of romans and other gentiles.

Was it so wrong for the people of Nazareth to think that they should be on the receiving end of his miracles too, you know?

After all, they were the ones who had invested in this kid as he grew up, they were the ones who helped keep that synagogue open so that he could learn and grow into the man he'd become.

So why shouldn't they get something, some return for their investment?

Is it possible they felt that by going to the outsiders, by spending his time with those people not even members, that Jesus was betraying them in some way?

Now, I don't want to be too harsh with those people or read too much into it. What they were feeling was natural in some ways. Jesus addresses it pretty straight on. If you think, (he seems to say) if you think that ministry is about taking care of those who are like us, those who are on the inside, members, if you think that's all I came to do, think again.

Their expectation was that THEY should be the ones who receive the good stuff from his ministry, but he pretty much says "Get over that". The stories he tells make that clear. And he makes his point (and this is the killer) he makes his point from their own sacred text.

So maybe that's why they want to throw him off a cliff.

Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth imbedded in their own traditions.

They should have known better. They DID, in their deepest hearts and that's why they were angry. They aren't angry with him, really. They are angry with themselves.

Jesus escapes, (it doesn't tell us how). He doesn't leave and go elsewhere because he was rejected, so much as he was rejected because he went elsewhere.

They should have known. The Scriptures are FULL of the truth that God's love is for everyone. That God reaches out to people outside the fold. If a choice is to be made, the shepherd always leaves the sheep to go after the one that's left behind.

So what – if anything - does this say to a church and a people that have been navigating through a global pandemic, not to mention civil and racial unrest?

I'm just asking. It's been more than two thousand years since that day in Nazareth when Jesus tried to invite his own people to join him in a ministry that would take them all to the edge.

And I wonder what it would sound like today in our ears.

I imagine Jesus standing here, his jeans too loose from 6 weeks of walking around Wolfe Park without even as much as a box of Girl Scout cookies, needing a shave and a shower, saying that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to bring good news...

And I imagine me shifting around in my seat when I realize this kid Jesus might not know how we really do things around here. And I catch my myself wondering what the heck he thinks my role is in all of this brokenness.

And then I imagine him looking at me with the most loving "*get over yourself*" look before telling me he has also come to bring recovery of sight to the blind;

To forever change the way we see those whose abilities differ from our own,

To point out the ways that human sin tears at the fabric of all humanity, and at what cost war and violence have on our souls,

To allow us to see who we really are, so that we might again glimpse the image of God in ourselves and our neighbors,

To give us a sneak peek of heaven in the here and now,

To show us that the Kingdom of God really is at hand and what it's like to love what God loves,

To allow us to see ourselves as God sees us, so that understand there really is no longer a "them" there is only an "us"

The Spirit of the Lord has sent him to bring freedom to the oppressed, the over-worked, the under-appreciated, the last chosen for the team, the unlovely and bullied, the despised and unseen, the overly-proud, and all the parts of ourselves that are so, so small.

And then he sits down. And no one moves. Or even breathes. And then he says, *"Hey, stop looking at me – you have what you need. It's all here. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

That's the thing... Jesus fought with the devil in the desert for 40 days, he saw all the easy answers and false promises for what they were.

And even though the first thing he says is that quotation from Isaiah, the first of his own words was the word "TODAY".

Today. This moment. And so, I imagine our minds and hearts and eyes opening. I imagine our brows becoming un-furrowed, our resentments let go. Today.

So come, Lord Jesus. Open us to your authentic life and love.

Change our hearts.

Change our minds.

Change our world.

Even though, if we're quite honest about it, maybe we'd rather you didn't.

Still... may your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth here as it is in heaven. Amen.