

THE HOMECOMING



Luke 4:21 "Jesus began to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' 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?' (Jesus) 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.'"

A long time ago, when I was a young seminarian, I attended a weekend spiritual retreat. The opening exercise was to tell a story about someone who had been Christ for us in our lives. Accordingly, there was one person who spoke about a friend who stayed with her through a long and difficult illness, long after

everyone else had deserted her. Another told about a neighbor who took the place of a father for her boys, when her husband painfully self-destructed. Another told about how a perfect stranger had once remained with her wayward son until authorities could safely arrive. One after another told stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue. Soon we had all settled into the warmth of each other's company with our stories, until an old priest stood up and said, "Well, the first thing I thought about, when I tried to think about who had been Christ to me, was, 'Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"

Jesus, you see, is not only the one who comforts and rescues us. But he is also the one who should challenge and upset us, telling us the truth so clearly sometimes, that we would do appalling things to make him stop and shut up. A colleague used to tell me to always pay attention to who or to what passionately upsets you. It is a clue to your own growing edges. And so it is that we arrive at today's Gospel. It is a familiar story, and as such it is found in some form in each of the first three Gospels.

Jesus has come from Capernaum, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where his ministry first began, and now has returned to the Galilean hills and his own hometown of Nazareth, to the place where he grew up, a village estimated to have had only 120

to 150 people in it at the time of Jesus. There, Jesus taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath as was his custom, a synagogue the ruins of which are still standing, for I have wandered about them myself. And there in his own synagogue, among his own people, among his family and the friends and the neighbors with whom he grew up, Jesus read the Scriptures and taught them. All spoke well of him at first, and all were amazed at the gracious words of his first sermon in Nazareth, right up until Jesus threatened them, threatened their unique claims of specialness, and then Jesus' words almost got him killed.

His hometown folks apparently wanted Jesus to do for them what he did in Capernaum. They wanted miracles and healings. If he had changed water into wine at Cana, think what he would do for them. For they were his own kin after all, not a bunch of strangers like those people along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was one of them. They had a special relationship which they expected him to honor by doing even more for them. The people of his hometown wanted to see great signs and wonders from him just as he had done elsewhere. If he healed strangers in other towns, then certainly he would heal and save his own people. But according to Mark's and Matthew's accounts of this story, Jesus could do no deed of great power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. The other

Gospels don't tell us exactly why his hometown friends turned against him, but Luke does.

Luke's version of the story tells us what Jesus said to the crowd in Nazareth, what he taught them, namely, that God's sense of community is much bigger and different than theirs. Jesus offended his hometown folk by repeating to them, not one but two different biblical stories about how God had passed over his own chosen people and their kind, in order to minister to strangers and outsiders; those who are traditionally considered 'invisible' among us, stories where foreigners found God's favor and the children of Israel did not (Lk. 4.25-28). First Jesus reminded them of the time when there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah the prophet and how there was a great famine in the land for three and a half long years. Yet the great Hebrew prophet Elijah was sent by God with relief to none of the Israelites, but instead only to a widow of Zarephath, a Phoenician woman, who was a stranger in the land of Sidon, a foreigner, where Elijah saves the widow and her family, even reviving her son when he died. Secondly, Jesus reminded the hometown crowd of the story when there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and how Elisha cleansed none of them, but only Naaman the Syrian, an officer in the army of Israel's enemy. Jesus was not telling them anything new with these stories. He was telling them things that were

right there in their own Scriptures, only that was not apparently how they read them. Evidently, they used Scripture to close ranks on outsiders and to honor themselves, as we often also do. Evidently, Jesus' hometown friends and family had not opened themselves up to receive the strangers and the refugees into their midst, the untouchables in their society. It must have been something like 'Nazareth First', or at least 'Israel First', the way we might talk about 'America First', or how we speak of 'American Exceptionalism', how we are a shining city upon a hill, a beacon to the rest of the world. We are special and entitled. So, after these stories the crowd at Nazareth quickly rejected Jesus. The minute Jesus denied them their exceptional status, and broke down the barriers between them and foreigners, Jesus went from being a favorite son to degenerate outsider, who offended them so badly that they decided to kill him.

For when they heard his preaching, according to Luke, the crowd was so upset that all in the synagogue were filled with rage (4:29-30). "All" of them? Was Jesus' family there in the synagogue? Surely, they were. But the crowd, we are told, rose up and drove Jesus out of the city, and the mob led him to the brow of the hill on which the city stood, so that they might throw him down the cliff headfirst, a local version of lynching. But passing through the midst of them Jesus escaped and returned

to Capernaum, where his ministry began, and where they too were astonished at his teaching, but they perceived that he spoke with authority, not like the scribes and the Pharisees. And according to the Gospels, Jesus never went home to Nazareth again.

Some of us, I believe, think and act in the same way as those citizens of Nazareth. We believe that we have some kind of special relationship with God, some manifest destiny, or divine providence, because of who we are, our citizenry, our social class, our education, our economic status. We believe that we desire special favors from God, that we are more worthy than others. God bless America, we say. Not God bless everyone, but God bless America, us, our kind. So, in very similar ways, we often identify our groups of like-minded Americans as bearing the truth in ways others don't, whether we be traditionalists or progressives, liberals or conservatives, rich or poor, Republicans or Democrats, we all do it, we all often imagine that our own group, our tribe, our race, our political party, our denomination, our nation, has some unique claim on God. That we have got it right somehow, in a way that others don't!

We would seem to be declaring here that the prophet is honored *only* in his own country, and *only* among his own kind, among people like us, people who look like us, who think like we do. And we will sometimes get just as angry and defiant as those

citizens of Nazareth at the suggestion that God shows no partiality among the nations of the world, or that God's love and grace is not limited to the likes of us, that God loves the immigrant or refugee or outcast or our enemies as much as God loves us, maybe even more. We Christians sometimes think of ourselves as the 'new' Chosen People of God. And so sometimes we expect to be treated differently by God, because we are blessed --- and we are often disappointed and angry if we are not considered so deserving by others.

But the truth is always more than any one of us, or any group of us, can grasp all by ourselves. We need each other in order to be whole. As I said last week, we are not complete without all the others. It takes a world full of strangers and friends and enemies even to tell us those parts of the truth that we cannot see, or that we will not see, and sometimes we want to kill them for it. Jesus' own people tried to kill him more than once. But this time, he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Notice that he didn't try to convince them. He just spoke the biblical truth, and where the truth was received, healings and miracles occurred. And that is how it still works.

If we will not listen to God, Jesus won't try to change our minds. He will simply pass right through our midst and go away. So that we had better study the Scriptures carefully and see the

things there that we don't want to see, and hear the things there we don't really want to hear, and to do the things that we don't really want to do sometimes, like feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, comfort the suffering, strive for justice and peace among all peoples, welcome the stranger, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and respecting the dignity of every human being. It's not about us, it's about them. That's what we must do, if we truly want to be followers of Jesus. AMEN