
Jesus Loves Through His Hometown

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C

Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (Luke 4:24-30)

I was really impressed last Sunday. One of you, one of this Cathedral's faithful parishioners, came up to me after the service with a question. I cannot always answer complicated questions after church services, and I was not able to give enough time to this question either.

But I was impressed. This parishioner had not only been listening to the gospel reading, but he had been studying it, and studying it in context. Now, you may recall that last week's gospel reading was the famous return of Jesus to his hometown synagogue where he unrolls the scroll, reads from the Book of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!" and then declares that "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." His hometown neighbors are amazed, and scripture says that "all spoke well of him."

But this worshipper, one of you, had read ahead last week! And he asked me something, that went like this, "Why does the lectionary gospel not complete the story, where it says that the people in Jesus' hometown speak well of him, but then, just a few verses later, they want to throw Jesus off a cliff? Why is that part missing?"

Last Sunday, after church, I had time enough only to give this answer: "You are reading ahead! That is next week's gospel! I am actually speaking about that part next week!"

So, it is now next week. Here is the more comprehensive answer:

Today's gospel story is about Jesus passing through his hometown. Hometowns are fun to have, but they also represent ambiguity for many of us. Having a hometown, even one we claim later in life, steadies us, centers us – but it can also embarrass us. Hometown is where people are proud of us, but hometown is also where we can be awkward.

Like many of you, I usually remember, most particularly, only one line in this story: "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." We have all heard that, and maybe we have experienced it. But, listen closely to the specific words of Jesus, and why it was that he said those famous words.

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. (Luke 4:24-28).

Jesus is remembering the famous prophets, Elijah and Elisha; and in particular he is remembering who they ministered to, a widow in Sidon and a leper in Syria. Maybe those two place names kind of pass right over us. But the places are important. The two things that Sidon and Syria have in common is that they are not Jewish; they are foreign places. The widow in Sidon and the leper in Syria were foreigners.

Jesus is saying to his hometown that his mission will be to the foreigner, not to those from his hometown. And listen to how he quotes his own hometown scripture! Example One: There was a great famine in the days of Elijah; there were plenty of widows in Israel. In *Israel*! But Elijah was sent to a widow in *Sidon*! Sidon is outside Israel! Example Two: When there were plenty of lepers in *Israel*, Elisha was instead sent to somebody from *Syria*! Syria is not part of the chosen people!

Yes, what happened was that Jesus was declaring his mission to the outsider. He was saying quite plainly that his mission would go beyond the comfortable confines of Nazareth, and beyond even the comfortable confines of the Hebrew tradition. Jesus was hinting that he did not belong to Nazareth, did not belong to his parents, did not belong even to the synagogue! God's mercy extends to the non-Jew, to people outside the family.

In an instant, then, the mood of Jesus's synagogue turned from amazement to resentment.

The reason is both simple and difficult. On one level, it is as simple as your first-born child deciding one day that she must leave the house, find work for herself, and go out confidently on her own. On another level, it is difficult, because the people of Nazareth see something they thought they possessed slipping through their fingers.

The problem with the people of Nazareth in today's Gospel is not doubt. It was not because of their unbelief that Jesus did no mighty work there. Doubt or unbelief are not even mentioned here. The problem is that Nazareth assumed certain privileges for itself, and no one else. The people in the synagogue wanted to keep Jesus all for themselves; *they* were the ones who deserved the favor of God. The problem here is that the possessiveness of Nazareth resented Jesus taking God's favor elsewhere. They did not comprehend a mission to outsiders.

In fact, God cares for outsiders throughout the stories of the Bible, as Jesus was so willing to point out to them. But such stories provoked rage in the local folks of Nazareth. Like many of us today, they were in a kind of cultural bondage, imprisoned by their own provincialism. They wanted this favor of God; they didn't want to hear Jesus saying that he's going to take the favor of God elsewhere. And if they can't have God's favor, then no one can have it. They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

Somebody once put it this way: "Jesus did not go elsewhere because he was rejected. Rather, Jesus was rejected because he went elsewhere." Jesus did not go elsewhere because he was rejected. He was rejected because he went elsewhere.

There is a condition, a disease, common to all humanity, which is present in almost every institution we are part of: family, church, race, and nation. It is the fear that God really might favor – not just us, but someone besides us, too. It is a disease that says stay here, do not go elsewhere. It is a disease called exclusivity and greed. It is a disease that says to its people: do not take what we have here some place else; it is ours, we deserve it. It is a disease that is afraid of outsiders, and insensitive to them.

Why is it that we read First Corinthians, chapter 13, that famous chapter about love (and our epistle lesson today) only to insiders? We are accustomed to hearing those beautiful words among family and friends, insiders, at weddings! What if we released First Corinthians 13 into the world? What if we read it at political debates and when nations were considering war?

Is that great chapter about love meant only for married couples, and for small families, and for our local neighborhood? Let's read it to outsiders! But we are usually afraid of the outsider. That's our common dis-ease and discomfort.

Jesus, indeed, has a mighty mission, if he expects to heal this kind of dis-ease and discomfort. It can be violent and vengeful. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus almost dies doing it. Later, he will.

But listen, again, to how Luke describes what then happened:

They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that

they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (Luke 4:29-30)

He passed *through* the midst of them. Luke does not explain how this happened. It seems somehow miraculous that Jesus simply walked through an angry and riotous crowd who wanted to kill him.

I think it was a miracle. And I believe that the same thing can happen through us. Perhaps Jesus can walk *through* us, we who can be just as angry and greedy and possessive as the people of Nazareth. Perhaps, in spite of our possessiveness, Jesus can go about his mission *through* us.

That is a great miracle. Jesus is always with us, yes; but he is also, always, going somewhere else, too. Jesus seems always to be saying that, doesn't he? "Hey folks, I've gotta go; I'm going somewhere else. I'm going to pray. I'm going to see this person beside the road, that person in a tree. In fact, I'm going to the outsider."

But the point is, Jesus wants to take his hometown with him. He walks through them, so that they might turn and walk with him. Jesus walks through us, so that we can let him love through us, too.

Jesus looks for people who will accept him and his mission, and then who will let him go. He will proclaim the Lord's favor somewhere else, too. Let go and let the favor of God be proclaimed. Let those around us and outside us be healed too. Release the mission of God.

Jesus passed through the midst of them. He had a mission to fulfill, and he still does. Jesus walks through us, so that he can love through us, too.

AMEN.

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