

“Home Town Boy Makes Good”
Luke 4:16-30; Jeremiah 1:4-10

I was working on this sermon over the Martin Luther King holiday. And as a child of the 1960’s, I thought about the world in which I grew up, and how people saw Martin Luther King and African Americans in general.

Eastern Kentucky, by virtue of its terrain, was not a place for plantations or slavery. But we still had a significant black population. So, by the time I was school age, the schools in my hometown had been integrated. I don’t remember black and white bathrooms or drinking fountains.

But I vividly recall the general white view of African Americans. It was not unusual to hear the N-word. Jokes about someone’s laziness, lack of intelligence, or hyper sexuality most commonly referred to an African American. Most people assumed a young black man wasn’t smart enough to play quarterback. Yes, he might run with the ball, or block, but leadership and thinking positions required white intelligence. I was the bat boy when my next door neighbor committed the cardinal sin of selecting the first young black boy to play on a Little League team. I also remember the outcry when that same young man was the first African American to suit up on the high school basketball team.

I don’t remember anyone criticizing the use of poll taxes or grandfather clauses to prevent African American voting in other states.

And I can recall that most of the people I knew believed Martin Luther King was the problem, not the cure.

“It wasn’t the right time for such radical change,” they said. “He’s going too fast.”

“He’s causing these riots.”

“He’s harming his own people.”

“He forced the police to use fire hoses and dogs.”

“He says he’s a man of peace, but look what happens everywhere he goes.”

“Our people are happy the way we take care of them. Yankees just don’t understand our culture.”

Today, most of us, I hope all of us, look back and think, “How could I have ever believed those things?” Morally, constitutionally, biblically, those views were wrong, incorrect, reprehensible.

Now, most of us would reply that this was the culture in which we grew up. We thought it was normal. Most of us had to struggle, re-educate ourselves morally and biblically to discern what was right — that in Constitution and the Bible all people are created equal.

Now, why do I bring this up? Because in our scripture, we discover the exact same scenario. Most often when we read scripture and we see the Pharisees and Sadducees, or common folk, react against Jesus’ words, we say, “What was wrong with these people? The Son of God is standing right in front of you, and you aren’t willing to hear what He has to say? To recognize who He is? How

could you miss something so obvious?" But they could reply, "Just like you did with race relations in the 1960's."

Our passage begins with Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. He is a rock star. Wherever he goes, he draws crowds. People are discussing his preaching, wondering if he is the next great prophet. His entrance into Nazareth causes tongues to start wagging, local boy makes good. At the synagogue he is accorded the status of a visiting rabbi, asked to read scripture and comment on it. Reciting a passage from the prophet Isaiah that by this time was interpreted as scripture pointing to the Messiah, Jesus declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your presence." Otherwise, "I am the Messiah."

Well, everyone is beaming, proud as they can be that little Jesus has grown up into such a wonderful, spiritual man. "Is not this Joseph's son?" they ask.

But then Jesus goes on, "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.' Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

Well, all of a sudden the faces around him begin to darken. People nervously shift their feet. But, Jesus does not quit. He reminds them of the story in scripture when the country was struggling amidst a severe famine, and God sent the prophet Elijah to find food not from a fellow Israelite, but from a non Jewish widow. Or, Jesus says, remember when God helped the prophet Elisha heal the pagan Naaman of leprosy, even though many Israelites also suffered from the same disease.

Well, with these words, the people's anger can no longer be controlled. They drive Jesus out of town, to the edge of a cliff, intending to push him over. But then, miraculously, he passes through the midst of them and walks away.

A businessman boarded a plane and found himself sitting next to an elegant woman wearing the longest, most stunning diamond ring he had ever seen. He asked her about it. "This is the Klopman diamond," she replied. "It is beautiful, but there is a terrible curse that goes with it."

"What's the curse?" the man asked.

She replied, "Mr. Klopman."

The Nazarenes liked that Jesus was the Messiah. But they saw his teaching of how they should live as a curse.

Have you ever been in a conversation or meeting when everything was going fine, and then all of a sudden it deteriorated, and you couldn't seem to stop it? And looking back you weren't really sure what was the turning point.

Well, that's the case with our scripture. Scholars are not certain when the people went from loving Jesus to desiring to throw Him off the cliff. If you read the passage closely, the men in the synagogue service do not act perturbed that Jesus claims to be the Messiah. Often, through the centuries, scholars believed

Jesus' messianic claim provoked the assembly and the question, "Is this not Joseph's son?" was asked mockingly to say, "Who does Jesus think He is?"

Now, we can't be certain, but as it is written, the disturbance actually begins when Jesus quotes the proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And then he recites another well known phrase about a prophet not being accepted in his hometown.

This is seemingly when the trouble begins. "Doctor, cure yourself!" was a saying everyone there knew. It meant "Do your work at home." Or, we would say, "Charity begins at home." "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" means the local people are unwilling to accept who that little boy who grew up there has become. He can't perform in Nazareth the miracles he has elsewhere because the Nazarenes just cannot accept that little Jesus is God's Chosen One.

They were unwilling to look beyond their own prejudices, biblical interpretations, and upbringing and see what God was doing in their midst. So, their reaction was to get mad, drive this interloper into their patterns of living and thinking, away from them. When given the choice of looking at things in a different way or using anger to drive Jesus away so no one had to deal with him, they chose anger. Just as so many of us did in the 1960's.

The fulfillment of scripture is always either liberating or frightening. It is frightening to those intimidated by the changes Jesus demands in our lives. But it is liberating to those who see Jesus as one who can break down barriers within themselves and between others.

Phillip Yancey, who was here as our Heritage Lecturer a couple of months ago, in his best-selling book, What's So Amazing About Grace?, tells the story of a conference on comparative religions held in Britain several decades ago. A group of theologians and other religious intellectuals were discussing whether any single belief was totally unique to Christianity. Different possibilities were put forth. Perhaps the Incarnation? No, other religions, including the Greek and Roman mythologies, had stories of gods becoming human in form. Resurrection? No, other religions also had stories of people returning from the dead.

The debate continued for some time, when writer C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked. They told him they were discussing what Christianity's unique contribution might be among world religions. Very forthrightly, Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace," God's love and forgiveness.

Only Christianity dares to declare that God's love is freely, unconditionally given. A love that comes free of charge, and we are to give it to others in the exact same manner. That kind of love can be either liberating or frightening.

"There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah...yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow in Sidon... There were many lepers in

Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Likely these two scriptural references were what got the crowd mad enough to kill Jesus. Maybe some tweaking of the words would help us put into perspective what Jesus said to his people.

“There were many prominent white politicians, civic leaders, and ministers during the time of segregation, but God chose the black man, Martin Luther King, Jr., to do his will.”

Or, “there were many hungry people on the Palestinian West Bank, and God chose to work through Muslim organizations to feed them.”

What made the Nazarenes half crazy was when Jesus told them God was not their personal possession. They were furious they were not going to share in the spoils of Jesus’ messiahship. He was one of them. And he should share his advantages with them. And one of those advantages was believing God favored them above others.

Jesus shattered their exclusivism. By noting how God had chosen to work through non Jews, Jesus illustrated from the scriptures that no one has exclusive possession of God. God is God and will work in the way and manner God desires.

Otherwise, we don’t get to decide who receives God’s grace. Only God does that. The gospel is always more inclusive than we want it to be. Those we are certain are unworthy are often chosen to be the very instruments of God’s will. The Nazarenes wanted to keep God’s blessings for themselves. They wanted to believe they were God’s people, and no one else.

Through the centuries, human beings, people of faith, Christians, have always wanted to keep someone out, label them unfit for God’s blessings. But as the Nazarenes discovered, when we exclude others, we actually exclude ourselves.

Tony Campolo, the well known Christian author wrote in his Red-Letter Christians blog for February 12, 2011:

I recently had the privilege of meeting with more than twenty-five survivors of Auschwitz. We had breakfast together. I asked them, “After what you went through at the hands of the Nazis, how do you react when you hear someone with a German accent?”

One of the men answered, “I was just a boy when they put me, along with my family, into a cattle car in a city in France and started us on the long journey to Auschwitz. We had no water and we had no food, but each night the train would stop and sit still for hours. Time and time again, after hours had passed, there would be German people who would sneak out of the forest, come up to the sides of the cattle cars and push in between the slats of the car small containers of water and bits of food. Their generosity kept me alive. So — whenever I hear someone with a German accent, I say to myself, ‘Could that be the child or the grandchild of one of those

who dared to help me in my time of need?’ Then I smile at them inevitably.”

Every time I recall this story I become increasingly more convicted. Of all experiences from which hatred could develop in an understandable way, Auschwitz has to be at the top of the list. Yet you could see that this man did not hate his German brothers and sisters. He chose to see the potential valor in each German citizen rather than the potential hatred.

Do you and I attempt to see the face of God in every person we meet regardless of their race, gender, nationality, immigration status, sexual orientation, politics, or religion?

“Home Town Boy Makes Good?”

The Nazarenes could accept Jesus claiming to be God’s Messiah. But when He told them they would not control or own the messianic spoils, that in fact God sometimes chose people totally unlike them to accomplish God’s will, they become fighting mad.

Today, most of us are glad to call Jesus the Messiah. But are we frightened, put off by Jesus’ call to aid the poor, the dispossessed, those unlike us? The good news of the gospel is often jarring, uncomfortable, infuriating.

This morning, in this season of Lent, a time of contemplation and self-examination, can we hear the good news? Do we want to hear it? And, are you and I not only willing to hear it, but to live it?

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