

“It Wasn’t What They Wanted to Hear”

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Luke 4:14-30

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2nd Sunday after Epiphany

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The best-selling author and former Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes a time years ago when she was at a retreat in which the leader asked each participant to think about someone who represented Christ to them.

Someone who has been like Jesus to them.

Simple enough, right?

If I asked you right now to think of someone who represented Jesus in your own life, at some time in your life, where does your mind go?

Wherever it goes, I bet it doesn’t go where this story is about to go.

You see, the most memorable answer, according to Barbara Brown Taylor, came from a woman who stood up in front of the group and said:

“I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, ‘Who is it that told me the truth...so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’”¹

I imagine that the group’s reaction was pretty similar to yours. But the person who said it was standing on good biblical ground. Did you catch that part of today’s story from Luke?

You heard the story.

¹ [Reflection by Barbara Brown Taylor – Peculiar Prophet.](#)

Jesus went back to his hometown.
He's at worship.
He reads from the prophet Isaiah, the first text we heard this morning.

Everything started out just fine.

Luke writes:

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth...

But then, something happened.
Something changed.
Something Jesus said—it OFFENDED them.
And they became an angry mob.

“When they heard this, all...were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of...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.”

I mean, truly a disturbing story.

Disturbing because the people who want to kill Jesus—it's not Pontius Pilate, it's not Herod, or Caiaphas, or the Pharisees...it's those who are familiar with Jesus, the people who watched Jesus grow up.

The people who thought they knew him best.

One of the things we're doing in this sermon series is looking at details that appear in Luke's Gospel, but that don't appear in the other Gospels.

That's what we've got on our hands today.

All three synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—tell about the rejection of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth, but only Luke ends the story with the threat of violence.

Why do you think Luke ends the story this way?

Let's do a little Bible history.

When did Luke write his Gospel?

Most likely in the 70s or 80s, forty to fifty years after Jesus died and was raised.

And who was Luke writing to?

Tradition has it that Luke was a Gentile writing to other Gentile Christians, but I'm not convinced.

Luke knew his Hebrew Scriptures well. It sounds to me like he was writing to a congregation or a group of churches composed of a mix of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, a church that was wrestling with THE defining struggle in the early church.

Do you remember what that struggle was about?

It was about Gentiles.

Do Gentiles belong in God's church?

How do we accept people, worship with people, live in community with people who see the world so differently than we do?

That was THE question back in Luke's day.

And it elicited STRONG FEELINGS from everyone involved.

Do you think that perhaps, just perhaps, that question is still an important one for you and for me today?

Not the Gentile question.

But the question of how we're going to get along with people, live in community with people. How can each of us be faithful citizens with other citizens who so very often see the world differently than we do?

I remember how one of my colleagues once remarked that while it's important for Christians to take stands on particular issues in our society today, there's something more important in our faith.

What's more important than taking stands...is who you stand with.

That's what Jesus spoke about when he went back home.
Who he was going to stand with.

When he returned to hometown, according to Luke, Jesus told a couple of stories that came from their own scripture, and everyone would have known: one was about the prophet Elijah being sent to a widow in Sidon, and the other was about the prophet Elisha being sent to Naaman the Syrian.

Just to be clear, these were **not** places in Israel.

Jesus was telling stories of Israel's prophets going to outsiders, and he was making a direct reference to his own ministry.

He was saying that he was going to reach out to people who were not like them, that he was going to stand with people who did not see the world the way that his friends and neighbors saw the world.

That's what got his hometown so riled up.
He wasn't just taking a stand.
He was telling them...he was going to reach across dividing lines.
He was telling them who he was going to stand with.

Do you know how important it is, to stand with someone else, no matter how they see the world?

It happened to me in my life.
I was 12 years old when our family got the phone call.

My grandmother, who had been extremely sick for a few weeks, was in her final hours.

I flew out with my mom to California after my mom got the call.
My dad couldn't go right away.
Someone had to take care of my one-year-old brother, so I went.
My grandmother died when we were on the plane.

And I put on a BRAVE face.

I greeted my aunt and uncle at the airport,
and everyone was crying, but I didn't cry.

And my mom had to tend to family business the next day,
so I watched my one-year-old brother, but I didn't cry.

And my mom would check in with me,
ask how I was doing—I'm fine, I'd say, I'm doing fine.

Then, maybe it was that same day or the next,
it was just me and my uncle in my grandparents' house,
and he asked me how 7th grade was going.

You still playing baseball?

Yeah, I said, and I started talking about my baseball team, and after maybe 10 or 15 seconds, I couldn't talk about my baseball team.

It just hit me.

I started sobbing, overwhelmed by the loss of my grandmother.

And I'll never forget what my uncle did. He just took me in his arms, and he gave me a hug, and he held on to me until I stopped crying.

My family continued making trips to California over the years to see my grandfather, and I continued to see my uncle. And as I got older, I learned that my uncle and I did not always see the world the same way.

How did I learn this?

Because he wasn't shy about sharing his opinions at the family dinner table.

But every time he said something I disagreed with, a memory popped into my mind. The memory of the moment when I needed someone in the midst of my sadness, and one of the people who stood with me when I was in 7th grade...

was my uncle.

Do you see what we're talking about this morning?

I said in the bulletin that the topic in this week's sermon series is the rejection of Jesus in his hometown.

And that's true.

This text is about the rejection of Jesus.

But even more than that, this text is about the freedom of Jesus.

The freedom of Jesus to go wherever he decides he needs to go,
to work through whomever he wants to work through,
to stand with whomever he needs to stand with...

Because now I can see, it wasn't just my uncle who showed up for me when I was in 7th grade.

It was Jesus who showed up.
The risen Christ, working in and through my uncle, to get to me.

Sometimes, the freedom of Jesus will be very comforting to us.
And sometimes, it will absolutely astonish us....

When George Floyd was murdered back in the spring of 2020, a part of Floyd's story that was NOT widely reported was that Floyd was born about four hours from here...in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

So it's no surprise that in the days after Floyd was killed, a number of protests in tribute to Floyd took place in Fayetteville. Most were peaceful, but not all of them. Some of the protesters damaged buildings, fires were set, stores were looted—the violence was not the norm, but it was enough to ratchet up the political and racial tensions in Fayetteville.

On Monday, June 1, things came to a head when more than 200 protesters gathered in Bronco Square near Fayetteville State University and marched toward downtown.

Waiting for them were more than 60 Fayetteville police officers in riot gear, blocking their path forward.

When the crowd drew near, the police ordered the protestors to stop and step back, which made many of those marchers angry. So there

they were, these two opposing “sides” of the same community, staring at one another.

What would happen next?

Hardly anyone was prepared for what happened next.

At that moment, all 60 plus police officers laid their weapons down. And they knelt in the street, in solidarity with the marchers.

At the time, astonished marchers could hardly believe their eyes.

One by one, they also knelt.

Some started crying.

Some came forward to the police officers to shake their hands.

How did all this happen?

Well, one of the police officers played basketball each week with one of the protestors, and they got to talking about what might be helpful if there were a confrontation...²

You see, today’s text isn’t just about the DANGER of boxing in other people, which all of us do in some way every day.

It’s also about the danger of boxing in Jesus.

Of getting too comfortable with Jesus.

It makes me wonder if at that weekly basketball game, they had 11 players on the court that day...I wasn’t there, I can’t say for sure. But it makes me wonder if Jesus was there.

² Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Standing beside them while the police officer and the protestor had that conversation BEFORE the confrontation...

It was the theologian Robert Jenson who once remarked that you can always tell a false god from the true God because a false god will never surprise you...³

According to our text for today, Jesus surprised his hometown.
The very people who were familiar with him.
Who thought they knew him best.
He rattled their cage!
And they didn't like it.

Now there's a part of me that understands.

After all, you know me well enough by now to know that I'm not a big fan of surprises.

But here's the thing.
I don't think Jesus cares.
I don't think Jesus cares one whit whether I enjoy being surprised by him or not...

I've told some of you what happened to me in the first church I served. It was my first year of ministry, I was teaching a class, and I made copies of a chapter of a book in preparation for the class.

We had a terrific discussion that evening.
The day after the class, one of the participants knocked on my office door.

³ [The Collected Sermons of William H. Willimon - Center for Excellence in Preaching](#)

Ah, good, I thought.

He wants to continue the discussion from the class.

He entered my office and said, “Those copies you made from that book—how could you do that?”

“Excuse me?”

“That was ILLEGAL!” he barked at me. “You didn’t have permission from the publisher to do that!”

“I’ve published a couple of textbooks,” he went on to tell me. “And when people buy my book—that’s how I make money from all the work that I’ve put into my book. But when you make copies from a book, and distribute them freely, you’re robbing people like me of the earnings we’re supposed to receive!”

Well—I had never been called a THIEF in church before!

And I thought—I’m done with him.

I don’t have to be his pastor.

I’ll avoid him.

I’ll let my colleague, my boss—I’ll let him be his pastor.

Of course, I didn’t bother to focus on the fact that he was correct.

What I had done was NOT what I should have done, and what he said about the need to actually purchase books was true.

Well, a number of months later, the same guy approached me in the church parking lot.

“Oh great,” I thought. “This guy again...”

He said, “Ben, I’ve been chewing on this for months, and I owe you an apology. I never should have said what I said to you in your office that day. Will you forgive me?”

And I felt...about THIS big.

After all, I had written him off.
Didn’t want anything to do with him.

And he reached out to me.
He tried to repair the relationship with me.

Of course, it wasn’t just him.
I can see it now.
It was JESUS, acting with him and through him.

The copyright guy, of all people, someone whom I had put in a box...

Can you think of anyone like that in your life right now?

You’re fed up with them,
you’ve put them in a box,
you don’t ever plan to open that box again.

What do you think Jesus, in his love and in his freedom, will do with that box?

Just out of curiosity, how many of you have a recycling bin at home?

Good.

That means Jesus will have a place to put that box when he gets rid of it.

I'll bet...when he's tearing it apart, Jesus would even welcome some help from you.

Amen.