
Jesus and His Hometown

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

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)

The radio personality, Garrison Keillor, has become famous for the stories he tells about his hometown. Lake WoBeGone. Surely you have heard some of those stories in the last thirty years. Lake Wobegone, his hometown, might be like everyone's hometown. It is a place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average," and yet Keillor tells awkward stories about it. Elsewhere on National Public Radio, Tom and Ray, the Tappet Brothers, whenever Cambridge is mentioned, reverently intone, "our fair city;" but they are also quick to say, "Don't drive like my brother."

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, and hometown is also where we are awkward.

Today's gospel story is about the hometown of Jesus. I must admit, that, for years, this entire passage, about Jesus returning to his hometown, has puzzled me; because it seems so awkward. Like many of you, I remember one particular line: "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." We've all heard that, and we've probably all experienced that.

But, this morning, I want to explore just why it was that Jesus was rejected in his own hometown. The writer, Luke, says quite clearly, in chapter four, verse 22, that "all spoke well of Jesus, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." They were rather proud of him! "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

Yes, I imagine that they were rather proud of old Joseph's boy. That's only natural. It's wonderful to go back to your hometown and have everyone speaking so well about you!

But, something very strange happened. As soon as Jesus opened his mouth, as soon as he spoke, within four verses of verse 22, Luke says that "all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town, , so that they might hurl

him off the cliff."

What in the world did he say, to cause his own hometown to react like that? Let's examine it:

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).

Well, what happened is that Jesus declared his mission to be to the outsider. He said quite plainly that his mission would go far beyond the comfortable confines of Nazareth, and far 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 his insightful way, Jesus justifies this message to his own Hebrew people by quoting their own Hebrew scripture to them! 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!

In an instant, then, the mood of Jesus's synagogue turned from pleasure 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. That's 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. The problem is that 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, only at weddings? (And it was our first lesson today.)

Is that great chapter about love meant only for married couples, and for small families, and for our local neighborhood? When we restrict the boundaries of this love is when children become afraid to venture out into the world, and when parents are afraid to let them. When we restrict love is when churches see their mission more for them-selves than to the

world, when races see no need for understanding other cultures, when we are afraid to explore and accept other traditions, when nations spend more money defending themselves than aiding the common plight of all humanity. We are afraid of the outsider. That's our common disease and discomfort.

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

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 with 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. 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 woman. 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 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. "Let me go," he says, "and better yet, come with me."

AMEN.

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