

Hometown Trouble

By

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Luke 4:16-30

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “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 this not Joseph’s son?” He 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.” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his 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 with a skin disease 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.

One day during my last year of seminary, the pastor of my home church called to let me know the congregation was seeking an associate pastor. More particularly, he wanted to see if I was interested in being considered. I was flattered and told him I would give it prayerful consideration. For a brief time, I thought about how nice it would be to know most parishioners on the first day and not need a map to get around town—GPS did not exist then. I thought about how fun it would be to reconnect with long-time friends and eat again at favorite restaurants. Yet then I pondered what it would be like to serve as a minister in the church where I had grown up.

I tried to picture offering pastoral leadership to persons who had been my youth advisors or Sunday School teachers—including the man who had once demanded that I leave his class for 8th graders because I was being too disruptive. I tried to imagine being part of a Session where many of the elders had held that position during my childhood or delivering a sermon to people who had known me since I was eight years old. Eventually, I decided not to apply, choosing to start fresh somewhere else, where no one but the Pastor Nominating Committee knew me, because I became convinced that perceptions in place would have made it challenging for them and me.

That personal decision has always made the events of our gospel reading so amazing and, quite frankly, a confirmation that I made the right decision years ago. For in that first-century narrative, Jesus goes back to the community of faith that had nurtured him since childhood and preaches bold words to people who had known him all his life. It did not go well.

It came on a Sabbath early in his ministry when he stood up in the body of faith where he had been nurtured as a boy to read from Scripture. It wasn't a lay reader kind of moment, but more of a guest preacher, and we can

well imagine the excitement his appearance must have generated. We will have that same feel next Sunday as our youth lead us in worship here.

As Jesus stood on that Friday evening, he didn't begin in the way that we might have expected—voicing the great honor he felt in being back home, of the joy in seeing all of those familiar faces, or expressing gratitude for the lessons of faith they had taught him. Instead, he stands and is given a scroll containing the book of Isaiah. He opens to the 61st chapter, our first lesson this morning, and begins to read aloud “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Jesus continues, mostly matching what we read, though inserting a line from Isaiah 58 about letting “the oppressed go free,” before he comes back to chapter 61 and ends “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus then gives the scroll back to an attendant and sits down, the position of one who is about to teach. “The eyes of the synagogue were fixed on him,” Luke says, and Jesus begins to speak. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he says, a statement that certainly could be heard to mean that he was the long-awaited Messiah. “All spoke well of him,” our text translates the Greek “and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph's son?’” Jesus continues, speaking of how a prophet is not accepted in his own hometown and cites two examples from Israel's past when servants of God had to go to Gentiles because the Jews did not accept their work. “When they heard this,” Luke says, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” They force him out of town and press toward a hill overlooking Nazareth, where they plan to throw him over the edge. Somehow, Jesus passes through the mob unharmed and leaves. As far as Scripture tells, he never returned.

The way those events seemingly turn from pride to anger in a matter of minutes is puzzling, and I've read a number of commentaries over the years that tried to explain that dramatic change. “Anger and violence are

the last defense of those who are forced to face the truth,” one wrote (Craddock, Fred. *Interpretation: Luke*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 63). Another said, “The assembly reacts to Jesus’ implication...that they were like the persecutors of the prophets of old.” (Soards, Marion L, “The Gospel According to Luke,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 1477). Either may be correct. We really don’t know, but I was struck by a suggestion from Ken Bailey that the crowd’s tone didn’t change at all, but rather was angry from the moment Jesus finished reading.

Bailey was a Presbyterian minister who spent many years teaching in the Middle East. I have long valued the insights he brings to Biblical texts as he adds cultural aspects from the region that are still true and that aren’t so apparent to Western readers. In the case of this scene, Bailey notes that the community of Nazareth in Jesus’ time was entirely Jewish and, living under foreign rule, had a particularly nationalistic fervor to it; not only wanting to expel Roman authority, but expand its reach into the surrounding Gentile communities. He further contends that the passage Jesus read in the synagogue that day was so familiar that the crowd could have completed by rote the Biblical verse Jesus began in reading “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...”

To give you an idea of what he meant, I’d like for you to participate in an exercise with me. I will start a familiar phrase and then have you finish it either audibly or in your mind. Are you ready? Here’s the first: “One nation, under God, indivisible ...” The second one: “Fly, Eagles, Fly...” And the last one: “The Lord is my shepherd...”

Bailey contends the sentence, which concluded Jesus’ reading, had that kind of cultural familiarity for worshipers in Nazareth, and thus they were startled when Jesus stopped with the words “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” and then began to interpret the passage in a way the crowd did not want to hear. If Bailey is correct, then the congregation that day

expected him to say “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God.” That’s what we heard in the earlier reading, and if you continued through that chapter after our citation, you would hear of a day when all Gentiles would become the servants of God’s people and the wealth of foreigners would be theirs. Jesus omitted all that, too.

Furthermore, the line in Luke’s account we heard as “all spoke well of him” can also be interpreted as “all bore witness against him,” which then has a very different feel when it goes on to say, “were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” Thus, to say “Is not this Joseph’s son?” has a tone not of pride in the local boy, but dismay.

Bailey concludes, “They were offended at how he took a text of judgment and turned it into an affirmation of mercy. Their hostility was evident immediately. They must have been thinking something along the lines of ‘What is the matter with this boy? He has quoted one of our favorite texts but has omitted some of its most important verses. In the process, he has turned a text of judgment into a text of mercy. This is outrageous! The messianic age is a golden age *for us* and a day of God’s vengeance upon *them*. How could this boy grow up here and not know this? Doesn’t he remember why this village was founded?’” (Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008, p. 162) If that was the sentiment of the crowd, then the anger that boiled over after the sermon makes perfect sense.

Certainly, we don’t know if that is how Jesus was heard or not by people who had known him all his life, but if it is, then we can easily imagine how unsettling the words that followed would have been. Let’s go back to our congregational exercise to get a feel for that reality, too.

What if, during this sermon, I had delivered a message that implied those familiar phrases we know should be understood in these ways: “One

nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for everyone, but you.” Or “Fly, Eagles, Fly on the road to sure defeat.” Or “The Lord is *my* shepherd, so you’re on your own”? None of those concluding phrases reflect my beliefs, but they are vastly different conclusions to what we have been conditioned to expect, and thus could explain some of the discontent in that Nazareth congregation as Jesus proceeded.

With an unsettled spirit then, let’s hear again what Jesus said. For he told that room of believers he had been sent to bring good news to the poor, not to the middle class or those who didn’t have to worry about where they would sleep that night. He said he had been sent to proclaim release to the captives without a word about whether justice had been served or their sentence complete. He said he had come to bring recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free without any hint as to whether such a ministry would include any of them.

Thus, Jesus told people who had known him since childhood that God’s ways were not always the same as their ways; that some of their biases or conclusions, neatly categorized views of who was in and who was out, were about to be overturned. It’s no surprise that the crowd became incensed and tried to do away with him. Thankfully, they were unsuccessful, at least on that day, and thus the challenging tone from his first sermon lives on for you and me.

As it just might be that the word Jesus wants us to hear this day is the one that makes us uncomfortable, too; the one that questions some of our own perspectives, or even a word that makes us angry. And instead of dismissing such possibilities to consider it might just be the word we need most of all, and then start the process of discerning what Jesus would have us do next.