

Hometown Boy

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
February 3, 2019 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany
Text: Luke 4:16-30

This story about Jesus returning to his hometown is, to my thinking, one of the ones where he seems most human. Here he is a hometown boy who's been out traveling, making a name for himself, and now he's come back home. Sounds like the beginning of any number of novels or movies or even a television show or two. But it's not any of those things. Instead it's a story of what happened when Jesus the Christ went back home and the reception he received from the people who had literally known him all his life was decidedly mixed, to put it kindly.

Luke's version of this story is decidedly different from the other two versions of it which appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. For one thing, Luke places this story in a very different context within the overall timeline of Jesus' ministry. Luke puts this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, shortly after his return from the wilderness where he had spent 40 days and nights after his baptism by John. In one way, Luke's timeline of this story makes sense. Why wouldn't Jesus want to stop by home after such a long time in the wilderness? It seems like a perfectly logical thing for Jesus to do. But, in another way, it's sort of confusing to place it here because the story presumes the

hometown crowd has already heard all about Jesus, his preaching and teaching in front of huge crowds, and his miraculous healings in neighboring towns. But, if Luke's timeline is correct, none of that had happened yet. In Matthew and Mark, the story is set about midway through Jesus' ministry so the reason the townspeople of Nazareth get angry with him – presumably because he doesn't perform any miracles for them like he has elsewhere – makes more sense. Matthew and Mark also are pretty blunt about stating that's exactly why the townspeople try to throw him off a cliff. That, and they thought he was acting too "high and mighty" when everybody knew he was the son of Joseph the carpenter and that his brothers and sisters still lived in town. Who the heck did he think he was to come in to their synagogue acting like he was the messiah or something?

Luke's version of this story is different, though. It has a lot more meat on the bones, so to speak. For one thing, Luke is very specific about what scroll Jesus read from in the synagogue – Isaiah, the great prophet – and what he said after reading a specific passage. The text Jesus read was one of the more famous prophetic passages from Isaiah. Curious about this is we don't know if the attendant of the scrolls, who was the only one allowed to touch them, just picked Isaiah for him to read at random or if, perhaps, Jesus had spoken with him ahead of time to ask for that specific scroll. We just don't know. But, the choice was a

powerful one as Isaiah in this passage writes about a great leader being anointed by the Spirit of God to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. After reading this, Jesus identifies himself as the one so anointed when he says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Thinking back to the reactions of the people in Matthew and Mark’s version of the story, this could be where the whole encounter went off the rails. But, no! In Luke’s story the townspeople reacted well to this. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth,” the text says. Way to go, Jesus! they’re thinking. You came to bring US good news. You came to proclaim release from Rome to US. You came to heal the blind right here in OUR town. You came to help all of US to be free. In other words, they were excited by what he said, because they immediately assumed it was all about them.

But Jesus knew it wasn’t all about them. He knew they were expecting him to do for them what he had promised he could do, what he had said God wanted him to do. But, instead of doing what they expected – offering good news, freedom and healing just to them, just for them – Jesus tells them instead, “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” What? Why is he saying that, the people start grumbling. Weren’t we just saying how thrilled we were with what he was saying??

Jesus emphasizes his point by telling two stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. The first one was about the prophet Elijah who went and helped a widow in Zarephath during a famine. The second one was about the time the prophet Elisha healed Naaman from leprosy. Jesus reminded them of these two stories for a very specific reason. They immediately got his point and that's why they got so angry at him that they tried to throw him off a cliff! The reason they got so angry is because in both these stories, God's favor, God's healing grace, God's assistance was given to Gentiles. Jesus wasn't going to do all these things just for them. He intended to include everyone, welcome everyone, into what God had called him to do. They went from happy to outraged when they realized Jesus intended to minister to the Gentiles in the same way he ministered to them and they were having none of it. Even though there were many instances in the Hebrew Scriptures in which this happened – God helping Gentiles, not just God's chosen people – these people Jesus had known all his life were furious at him for saying he would help people they did not believe were worthy of the special gifts and talents Jesus so obviously possessed.

I've always been fascinated by the way this story ends since it describes a chaotic scene in which the towns people drive him out of the synagogue, out of town and acted as though they were going

to throw him off a nearby cliff. But they didn't. Instead, the text says, "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." This is such a poignant scene. These people who had known Jesus for his whole life had rejected him totally and completely. And to leave, to get away and move on with the rest of his life, he has to walk right back through the middle of them as they said who knows what to him, as they glared at him, as they dared him to push past them. Rejection always hurts, and I have no doubt Jesus was hurting as he made his way through an angry crowd of people he once called friends. This is yet another powerful reminder of the price Jesus paid over and over again to be the person God called him to be, needed him to be, created him to be. And so must we, dear friends.

In Luke's story of Jesus' rejection by the people of his own hometown, Jesus is reminding each one of us that there is no such thing as a "comfortable Christian." When we do as God asks, some people get upset. When we proclaim good news to the poor, some claim the poor don't deserve the good news of housing help or heating assistance or food pantry possibilities because it's their own fault they're poor. When we proclaim release to those who are held captive by substance use disorder or mental illness or a disjointed justice system, there are some who will cry foul because they think these folks don't deserve compassion or assistance either. These things happen to them because they are weak so

they should just learn to be strong, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps or dig deeper for more resolve and strength to solve their own issues. As if they wouldn't have already done that if they could. When we offer recovery of good health to those who are ill but can't afford medicines or medical care, some will cry foul that their own needs aren't being met as they feel they deserve so why should others get such good medical care provided for them. When we work to let the oppressed go free, like the DACA recipients who know no other home but here, like the children separated from their parents at the border and kept in cages like animals, some will scream that they need to go "back where they came from" and come to this country "the right way" not realizing that there is no right way to return from certain death in a distant land.

So, as you head back out into the week ahead for you, I urge you to imagine yourself in this story with Jesus. I urge you to do this because, dear friends, we are all in this story every day of our lives. We all face decisions each day that ask us to decide how it is that we follow Jesus and do as he asks of us. Most of all, I'd like you to think about what it might be like, as Jesus walks past you away from the cliff and toward the work that lies ahead, to stop and shout out – "Hey, Jesus! Wait up! I'm coming with you!" Who knows what might happen then? Amen.