

Epiphany 4C 2019 Sermon
Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "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 not this 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 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.

Jesus has just begun his ministry, teaching in the synagogues of Galilee, where he is “praised by everyone.” (Luke 4:15) In today’s Gospel story, Jesus comes to Nazareth, where he grew up; and at first, he is received as a hometown hero. Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” They say to one another, “Why, isn’t that Joseph’s boy? And look at him now – preaching in such a powerful way in our synagogue! And I hear he has performed miracles in Capernaum!” The townspeople are basking in the reflected glory of one of their own made good: Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth!

So, *why*, in the very next moment, do the townspeople try to throw him off a cliff? What went wrong? How did this affectionate homecoming suddenly turn murderous?

Luke gives us few hints in *this* passage; but I think we can find clues in the *previous* chapter of Luke’s Gospel, in a passage which we *never* hear on Sunday mornings, for it is not in our Lectionary. And why *should* it be? For it is simply Luke’s record of Jesus’ genealogy,¹ and reading that genealogy is about as exciting as watching a leaky faucet drip. Luke begins the genealogy: “Jesus... was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi...” and Luke goes on and on for 56 generations until he comes to “...son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham.” And this is where *Matthew*, in **his** genealogy,² stops, since Matthew, a Jew writing to Jews, wants to prove that Jesus was a descendent of Abraham, the Father of the Jews. But Luke, a Gentile

writing to Gentiles, has a far more universal scope, both in his Gospel and in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles. Luke doesn't stop Jesus' genealogy with Abraham, but continues on, listing Jesus' ancestors for another 20 generations before Abraham, finally finishing with "son of Adam, son of God."

It's a subtle clue; but once we see it, I think it can help us understand today's Gospel. Luke writes: "Jesus... was the son (*as was thought*) of Joseph..." (NRSV), or as a more recent translation reads: "People *supposed* that he was the son of Joseph..." (CEB) But Luke, in his genealogy of Jesus, corrects that supposition. People *supposed* that Jesus was the son of Joseph of Nazareth; but his deeper identity is, "the son of **Adam**," who was the father of *all* humanity. Jesus was the Son of Man (which is what the word "adam" means), AND, at the same time, he was the Son of God.

But the hometown folk in Nazareth don't know this. They see Jesus as a "local boy," and their town pride swells. Yet this very **pride** of the townsfolk is the first sign that they and Jesus are not on the same page. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' mother, Mary, sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord... for... he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts."³ Jesus knows the proud thoughts of the townspeople's hearts, knows that they are claiming him as their own hometown hero, which makes **them**, the people of Nazareth, *special*. But Jesus quickly reminds them that there is a strong theme running throughout their own Jewish Scriptures that says that God chose the Jewish people **not** so that God might make the Jews a closed society and give them special status; rather, God had told Abraham, "... through your descendants *all the nations of the earth* will be blessed..."⁴ Indeed, in today's Old Testament reading, God says to Jeremiah, "I appointed you a prophet to the *nations*"⁵ – not *just* to the people of Israel. To be loved and chosen by God does not mean that one receives exclusive status or exceptional blessings; rather, as Fr. John Shea says, "To be loved means to be sent to others."⁶

To be loved means to be sent to others. This is exactly Jesus' point in today's Gospel when he cites two examples from Jewish Scripture. He tells the hometown crowd, "there were many widows in Israel in the time of [the prophet] Elijah... yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon." Now, Sidon was a region *outside* of Israel, in foreign, gentile territory, where they worshipped pagan gods; and the Sidonians were ancient enemies of Israel.⁷ "[And] there were also many *lepers* in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha," Jesus continues, "and none of *them* was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Not only was Naaman a foreigner from the enemy, pagan nation of Syria – he was a commander of the Syrian army!⁸ What Jesus is saying to the people of his home town is that God, in these instances from their own Scriptures, chose to send prophets to help pagan *foreigners* rather than Israelites.

The implication is that perhaps God is sending Jesus **not** primarily to his *own* people of Nazareth, but to those in **other** places – not only to the people of Capernaum and the rest of Israel, but also to foreign, gentile peoples.

And *this* is what **enrages** the folk in Nazareth. **They** are Jesus' hometown people, descendants of Abraham, and therefore should have pride of place and status in Jesus' ministry! But this is NOT the way prophets work. Prophets, as we see throughout the Old Testament, pull no punches, and speak the truth of God without regard to *whose* toes they are stepping on – and they are often the toes of their own people. The hometown folk claimed Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth, as their own; but at a deeper level of reality, he was son of Adam, son of all humanity, and he was not *theirs* to claim. “God so loved the **world** that he sent his only Son...” Jesus was sent, not just to Nazareth, not just to the Jews, but to the **world**.

This was a hard pill for the Nazarenes to swallow; indeed, it is a hard pill for any of **us** to swallow, also! For we tend to think that God favors *some* (namely, *us*) and not *others* (namely, *them*). We tend to think today that God favors Christians, and **not** his children of other faiths; that God favors *America*, and **not other** nations. It's just the way we humans think, a result of our human evolution. For, while our human brain has evolved to the point where we have a neocortex, the center of higher thought and reason, we nonetheless still maintain those more primitive parts of our brain – our “reptilian” brain and our limbic brain – which are hard-wired for ensuring our own individual *survival* and the survival of our own group. Our reptilian and limbic brains are more unconscious, reactive, emotional, self-centered – and very powerful, indeed. **So** powerful, in fact, that we can come to believe that the self-preserving, “me and mine” messages coming from these primitive parts of our brain are messages from God. I think this is what leads some Christians to think that such sayings as “Charity begins at home” come from the Bible; whereas in reality they contradict Jesus' teachings and his example of pouring himself out for others on the cross.

I just returned from Baton Rouge, where my nephew's wife teaches 2-year-olds in a pre-school. She said that her lesson plan for the whole year is simply this: *sharing*. It's a tough lesson to learn, for it goes against the self-centeredness of our survival-obsessed primitive brains. And even though we mature adults, we Christians, have learned a thing or two about sharing, **we** still have a ways to go. For we, too, can easily fall prey to the powerful urges and messages coming from our primitive brains, which tell us, “Look to yourself and your own group first.” Like the people of Nazareth, we don't like hearing Jesus' Scripture citations saying that God sent his prophets to pagan, foreign widows and lepers, and not to widows and lepers of our own religion and nationality. We press our **own** will over and against that of “the other,” forgetting St. Paul's statement in our Epistle that “Love... does not insist on its own way.”⁹ In fact, we're not so sure that Paul – and Jesus! – aren't being naïve when they insist that love is the basis of a truly Christian life. We still struggle with Jesus' clear commands to love our enemies,

do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who mistreat us, turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile.¹⁰ Many Christians, especially over the past 500 years, have thought that as long as one “believes in Jesus,” one is “saved,” and that’s all that counts; forgetting entirely Jesus’ own teaching and the example of his life and death. In one of his meditations recently, Richard Rohr pointed out that in the Nicene Creed, we read that Jesus “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man,” and then we immediately say, “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate...”¹¹ We go directly from Jesus’ birth to his crucifixion – leaving out the whole of his earthly life during which he healed and taught us hard lessons, like loving our enemies, and forgiving 70 times 7.¹² We’d rather just hear that Jesus was born **for us**, died **for us**, and was raised from the dead **for us**, and ignore all those difficult-to-follow instructions he gave for how we should live, loving God with all our heart, loving our neighbor as ourself, and realizing that that neighbor – like Elijah’s widow, Elisha’s leper, and Jesus’ Good Samaritan¹³ – may not be “one of us.”

AMEN

1 Luke 3:23-28

2 Matthew 1:1-17

3 Luke 1:46-55

4 Genesis 22:18, 18:18

5 Jeremiah 1:5

6 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 34

7 “The names ‘Sidon’ and ‘Sidonian’ came to stand for Phoenicia generally.” - *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6, p. 17

8 2 Kings 5

9 1 Corinthians 13:5

10 Luke 6:27-36

11 “The Creeds,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Email Meditation for Wednesday, January 23, 2019 <https://cac.org/the-creeds-2019-01-23/>

12 Matthew 18:21-22

13 Luke 10:25-37