

Luke 4:14-30

This is a story that really reads in different ways, depending on which aspect of our identity we're living in. It reminds me of really early in my career, when the gospel lesson was Jesus' teaching about divorce being an accommodation for our hardness of heart, and I really didn't want to preach on it but I felt like that's what the lectionary is for, and I did my best, and still a member of my congregation who had been divorced felt hurt and accused. So, was I preaching to people who deserved to hear a thoughtful, scholarly reading of a difficult text, or was I preaching to people who were wounded and vulnerable? Obviously both, because each individual is complicated. But who are we when we hear this story?

Luke places the story of Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown immediately after the temptation in the wilderness, so it's his first public appearance. He stands up to read in the synagogue, and there's a dramatic pause while he unrolls the scroll and finds the passage, and then he reads from Isaiah, a proclamation of Jubilee. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The year of the Lord's favor, or Jubilee, is the year indicated in Leviticus 25, when all debts are forgiven. This is totally good news, and everybody is excited and happy to hear it, and they seem to be quite enthusiastic about Jesus. But then he goes on to tell them, that he doesn't plan to release any captives or bring any other good news right there, and that they shouldn't assume that he would just because he's from there. He reminds them of the time when all of Israel was suffering under a drought, and God sent the prophet Elijah to an outsider,

not an Israelite, the widow of Zaphath, and Elijah sustained her and her son through the end of the drought. There were plenty of widows in Israel for whom Elijah did *not* do that. Jesus also reminds them of the time Elijah's successor, Elisha, healed the Syrian general Naaman, even though there were lots of lepers in Israel. It sort of sounds like he's saying to his hometown, "You have captives and blind people here? Well, don't assume I'm going to do anything about it just because this is my hometown." And understandably the townspeople are filled with rage and they drive him to the edge of a cliff so they can throw him off, but he gets away.

I mean. Do we blame them? How do we make sense of this? Essentially Jesus just said, "I bring good news, but it's not for you." On the one hand, he's defining his mission, which is also, in our time, the mission of the church: whatever is good news for the poor is what he's about, what we should be about. On the other hand, *not you*. Well, what if I'm poor? What if I have some debt? Why *not* here, Jesus?

Barbara Brown Taylor offers one interpretation in her book *Holy Envy*.

"[The people there] were not furious because Jesus had made special claims of himself. They were furious because he had taken a swing at their sense of divine privilege - and he had used their own scriptures to do it.... Once, in a minor attempt to preach it straight, I suggested that Christians who wanted to take Jesus' sermon to heart might start by donating some of their outreach funds to a local Muslim community that was trying to buy land for a cemetery... Luckily, I was preaching in a town with no cliffs."

She's suggesting that the people in Nazareth weren't that bad off, but they wanted all the benefits that Isaiah says God is bringing to those who *are* bad off. They're like the people who resist offering aid outside of their own communities, says, "We should take care of our own first." Or they're like the white people who get defensive about Black Lives Matter, saying, "All

lives matter!” as if BLM were claiming a special privilege instead of highlighting the pattern of discounting and devaluing black lives. Their pain is real—but they’re failing to take seriously other people’s pain and their role in it.

I don’t know, though. I agree that we can be petty and short-sighted, but you can’t really pro-rate pain, like the cancer of someone young and well-off is less awful than the cancer of someone old and poor. Suffering is suffering. And while I condemn the bigotry and self-righteousness of Christian nationalism, individuals who are bigots and xenophobes have fears and anxieties and griefs that blight their lives, just as much as enlightened and generous people do. Nazareth was not an affluent town. That whole congregation at the synagogue surely yearned for jubilee as much as anybody.

Luke is unique in placing this story immediately after the temptation in the wilderness, so that it’s Jesus’ first public act. I wonder if, in this telling, Jesus realizes that he has to break his ties with his hometown in order to be free to carry out his mission. Maya Angelou said, “You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.” It’s as if he had to divorce his own hometown and become homeless so that he could go anywhere and belong every place and no place to do his work. It must have been tempting for him to stop at the point where everybody was amazed at his gracious words, and not go on with the part about the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. But he didn’t stop.

There’s an implicit admission in this story that the world is not set up to be fair to all the people all the time. The sphere of the prophet’s activity is larger than can be seen from his hometown, and our frame, whatever it may be, is never adequate. The story really presses us

to admit that you *can't* compare one person's suffering or victimhood with another; it's pointless and it doesn't help. Instead, perhaps, you recognize the reality of the other person's situation *as well as* your own and maybe even find a connection with them. Why did God send Elijah to Zarephath? Maybe in part because Israelites needed to see that God's scope encompasses more than just them. When you see that, you can either resent the Zarephathites as competition, or you can recognize them as long-lost kin with whom you share a great deal.

We can understand why the people of Nazareth were taken aback and then angered by Jesus' refusal to privilege them. But I hope that after they'd had some time to think about it, they could see that there was an invitation in what he said. "God has begun something wonderful for *everyone*, and if you're not included on the basis of proximity, you're certainly included on the basis of common humanity." Good news for the poor: release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, liberty for the oppressed, and a clean slate for everybody burdened by their past. Those are consistently God's intentions for humanity, and instead of trying to keep score of who's most deserving, the people of Nazareth might have said to themselves, "Awesome, we should follow Jesus and be part of what God is doing through him." They might have said, "Zarephath, well, I don't know anybody from there, I should read some of their literature." Or "Naaman the Syrian, I wonder what his descendants are like nowadays, and how they think about his story."

God moves in mysterious ways, and it is a sure bet that when God extends release to the captive who isn't us, it's not only *not* a rejection of us but also an invitation to see with a more panoramic lens. Jesus may have had his own reasons for cutting ties with Nazareth, but the Nazarenes could have accepted the tie-cutting without taking it personally, without

resenting that someone else was getting something they wanted, and simply followed him to be part of what he was doing. This story reminds us not to demand that God be fair, not to keep score, but to be curious and committed to participating in the projects of Jubilee.

God of the nations,

Show us how to love all the people of the earth, of all colors and kinds: those with technology and without; those who make do with very little and who use many resources; those with formal education and without; those who call upon your name and who do not; so that all your children may know shalom, in the name of Jesus Christ our salvation. Amen.