

## Neighbors at Home

### Luke 4:16-30

Jesus' Extended Family

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A couple of months ago Jesus shocked his neighbors by selling his carpenter shop to one of his apprentices. Then he packed his bags and left town, apparently for good. But now he's back, bringing with him a reputation as something more than a carpenter. He has been traveling and teaching all over the country, collecting huge crowds and, according to the press reports, healing people. So his neighbors welcome him as the hometown boy made good. When they gather for worship on Friday evening they ask him to comment on the scriptures as if he were a guest rabbi, a teacher of the law, an interpreter of God's Word. And in the Jewish world of that day, there was no higher honor. In response, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, and if we had been in the synagogue that evening, we would have heard him emphasize the pronouns in that text: "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 let the oppressed go free. God has sent ME to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He then followed the reading with this bold claim, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Make no mistake about it: the carpenter whom the neighbors were willing to honor as a visiting rabbi, was now claiming to be Israel's long-awaited Messiah.

This is an enormous claim. Yet in spite of his audacity, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Their only hesitation was this: "Is not this Joseph's son?" In other words, "How could a hometown boy possibly be the Messiah?"

I'm sure you've heard it said that an expert is someone from a hundred miles away. A large bank in Tyson's Corner has been having some problems in their personnel department. I suspect someone in the building could have solved them, but they called in our daughter all the way from Los Angeles. I'm equally sure there are worthy candidates nearby who might have served as Interim Pastor of The National Presbyterian Church, but you called someone from twenty-five hundred miles away (And I'm glad you did!).

This may explain Nazareth's question, "Is not this Joseph's son?" In other words, Jesus was not from a hundred miles away; he grew up on Acacia Street right there in Nazareth. He studied in their school, shopped in their market, made tools for their farms and furniture for their homes. For all those years they had chatted with him over his work bench, worshiped with him in their synagogue, perhaps even tried to convince him to marry one of their daughters. Not once in all that time had Jesus put himself forward as anyone special. Not once had he done anything slightly miraculous. Not once had they noticed anything remotely messianic about him. To his neighbors at home, Jesus was simply a hard-working carpenter, conscientious about worship in the synagogue, a man who paid his bills on time and got along well in the neighborhood. So while he may be a good public speaker, isn't he Joseph's son, just Joseph's son?

Now, had Jesus been a member of Toastmasters he would have known how to deal with their objection. For one thing, a guest preacher doesn't choose controversial topics; you're not there to pick fights with the locals. On the positive side, you should always start the sermon by thanking your hosts. You tell them what a privilege it is to be there. You compliment the congregation for their good works. And if you're smart, you will keep the focus on the congregation, on who they are and on what they are doing. What you don't want to do is talk about yourself!

Jesus violated every one of those guidelines. He came into the synagogue that day, not as a complimentary guest but as a confrontational prophet. He talked not about them but about himself, not about their achievements but about his claims. Then he threw the fat in the fire by suggesting that God welcomes people who were never welcome in the Nazareth synagogue, people who would have been shown the door had they tried to attend, people who were hated for no other reason than that they were not of the same

race.

And he might have gotten away with it had he not done something that was sure to raise their anger to the boiling point. He quoted their own scriptures against them. They believed Gentiles were beyond the pale. Jesus quoted their Bible to prove that God's care for the poor and the captives and the blind and the oppressed did not stop at the borders of Israel, but extended to a Gentile widow in Zarephath and a Gentile general in Syria, and therefore to all people everywhere. And when Jesus quoted the Bible against them, those who a few minutes earlier had spoken well of him were filled with rage, with murderous rage. It's dangerous to quote the scriptures to people who are firmly entrenched in their prejudice. Because if they can no longer argue against the message, they must either change their behavior or get rid of the messenger. And the neighbors at home, unwilling to repent, tried to throw Jesus off the cliff at the edge of town.

We in Washington, like people in Nazareth, are highly adept at raising walls and defending turf. We are all members of some kind of alliance or association: political parties, the majority or minority in congress, opposing political action groups, management or labor, this nation or another, this religion or denomination. And unless we are careful we may claim to have a corner on the truth while others are awash in ignorance. But when we are in and others are out, conflict is just around the corner, and conflict in the name of party or nation or doctrine quickly escalates into the kind of rage that throws people off the cliff, at least metaphorically.

We are Presbyterians and proud to be so, but we refuse to wear that label like a chip on our shoulder. Even the title "Christian" is suspect in many parts of the world because so many who claim to be Christian have acted arrogantly, even maliciously, toward persons of other faiths or of no faith. Just this week I heard the Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary say that in his travels around the globe he is speaking of himself, no longer as a Christian, but as a follower of Jesus and he is finding that people of all faiths respond warmly and positively to the man from Nazareth.

Dr. Rachel Remen has been counseling persons with chronic and terminal illness for more than twenty years. In her book "My Grandfather's Blessings" she tells of visiting a friend in tiny Bluff, Utah. On Easter morning they attended an Episcopal church service led by a Native American Bishop. Most of the congregation were Navajos, so the sermon was in Navajo and it was delivered with deep emotion. Then the Bishop looked at Dr. Remen and her friend and realized they had not understood a word he had said. "With deep courtesy," she writes, "he began to repeat the sermon for us in English. His English was perfect, but the passion of the first reading was simply not there. He struggled on, trying to make the English words transparent to the profound meaning of the story. Finally he looked up and, abandoning his Bible, spoke to us from the depths of his heart. 'This man Jesus,' he said and paused. 'This man Jesus, He is good medicine.'" Dr. Remen was profoundly moved by the message and even more by the messenger. She herself is Jewish, her friend is Protestant. The sermon was in Navajo, they spoke only English. And in the midst of all the barriers that in most settings would frustrate communication and perhaps generate hostility, a gracious Bishop, speaking about "this man Jesus," drew them together at a deep and profound level.

When you confront barriers in your office or school, please don't behave like the neighbors in Nazareth. Instead, take with you this man Jesus. His medicine promotes purges anger and prejudice. Jesus substitutes the oil of peace for the rhetoric of war. While others criticize and condemn, he anoints our eyes with the salve of civility, so we will begin to see even our enemies of persons whom God loves and for whom Christ died.

Wherever you go this week, whomever you meet this week, whatever tensions you encounter this week, take with you Jesus, for this man Jesus, he is good medicine!