

WHAT? NO HOME COURT ADVANTAGE?

Luke 4:16-30

Sermon presented by The Rev. Dr. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church,
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Jesus “came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.” From this opening line of the passage before us today, we anticipate that something disappointing is likely to happen. Nearly always, when a person returns to a place where he/she has been brought up, or went to school, or vacationed as a child, or played, there’s a sense of change that’s unwelcome. Even if things are better there in many ways, they’re still not the same. Perhaps you’ve heard the line: “Nostalgia is like a grammar lesson. You find the present tense and the past perfect.” As soon as we read that Jesus was returning to “where he had been brought up,” we may think: “Oh, oh, this is not going to work out.” And, of course, it didn’t work out. He was thrown out of town.

Next, it is written: “He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up and read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.” This action invites a note of explanation. In the worship of that time and place, the host rabbi preached the major sermon, based on a text from the Torah, that is, from what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. But if there happened to be a visiting or guest rabbi in worship, he would be invited to say a few words about another text (or, at least the congregation probably hoped it would be only a few words). This seems to be the context in which Jesus spoke in the synagogue that day, and why he was given “the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.” Jesus by this time was becoming well-known. The verses in Luke 4 immediately preceding this story state that reports about Jesus were already spreading “throughout all the surrounding country,” that he preached in many synagogues, and that he “was praised by everyone.” It was fitting, and very much the custom, that Jesus would be invited to preach that day.

His sermon was an announcement of God’s identification with the poor, the outcast and the oppressed, drawn from the writings of Isaiah. The Bible’s message of God’s preferential regard for the “have-nots” is typically resisted by the “haves,” and interpreted in a spiritual rather than a practical way. We admire those who devote their lives to the poor. For example: Abbe Pierre died last week, on Monday, at age 94. Abbe Pierre was a French priest who, appalled by the number of homeless in Paris after World War 2, acted to mobilize emergency assistance, and then devoted the rest of his life to the cause of those subsisting on the edges and margins of society. In a poll taken in France in 2005, the French voted Abbe Pierre the third greatest French person of all time, after Charles DeGaulle and Louis Pasteur. So, we regard with respect and admiration those who practice servanthood. But admiring such people from afar doesn’t mean sharing their passion or joining their cause. So, when Jesus preached on this theme – “to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives . . . to let the oppressed go free” – we might expect a less than enthusiastic response.

But that's not what the text says. Rather, it is written: "All were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." The content of Jesus' sermon seemed not to anger or offend. They were impressed by Jesus, recognized in his message the active grace of God, and responded positively to it. "All spoke well of him," we read.

So, what was the problem, then? The mood in the synagogue began to turn against Jesus when someone shouted-out: "Is not this Joseph's son?" This wasn't a genuine or serious question, as though Jesus' identity was in doubt. Everyone knew who he was. Rather, it was cheeky and cynical, asked with a smirk. Jesus is a Nazareth boy, so his first loyalty ought to be to Nazareth. All this preaching and teaching in other places; what's that about? Are you showing off, Jesus, strutting your stuff? Think you're too important for us? Too holy? Too busy? And Jesus knew the attitude of his audience, the way a person just knows the hometown folk. He knew how parochial and narrow-minded they could be. Anticipating their criticism, he gave voice to what he knew they were thinking: "Doubtless you will say, 'Do here in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum,'" he said. But "truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown."

I sat at a Knicks game recently next to Angelo from Staten Island. He was intensely involved, irate much of time, standing and snarling angry questions at the officials, always preceded with a rhetorical, "what?" "What? Are you blind?" "What? Are you on the take or just stupid?" "What? Were you out drinking before the game?" "What? No home court advantage?" This last outburst was provoked by a three-step violation call against the Knicks, a penalty that's hardly ever called in the NBA, especially not against the home team. The so-called "home court advantage" is real in basketball. Experts say it averages about four points a game, which may not sound like much, but in a sport where games are often decided by a basket or two, is significant. The home team wins over 60% of the time in pro basketball. So, Angelo, in his own elegant fashion, was wondering why the Knicks, not a very good team to begin with, can't even catch a break on their home court.

Jesus might well have wondered this same thing "What? No home court advantage?" No, "glad to see you"? No, "we're proud of you"? No, "how can we participate in this great calling, or at least cheer you on"? Rather, "who do you think you are?"

Jesus responded by reminding them of Elijah and Elisha, important Old Testament figures, each of whom also encountered opposition at home, and so turned their ministries to outsiders. The purpose of these references is clear: the call of God in Jesus Christ is to all, not merely a favored few. The people in Nazareth assumed that Jesus, being "one of us," would limit his work to "us," or at least give preference to "us." But theirs' was an inhibiting vision of who Jesus was, and what he was to accomplish.

Some of you may be wondering: what has this to do with me? I believe that God has placed this story here, to draw attention to our own tendency to be self-assured, or at least lackadaisical, about faith. Because we are good people, who go to church, who support worthy causes (both in the church and community), who accept enduring values like honesty and decency, and who try to lend a helping hand to those in need . . . for such reasons like these, we

may feel pretty comfortable in our relationship with God. We know we're not perfect, but who is? The purpose of this story is not to replace your sunny (and perhaps hard-earned) self-worth with brooding guilt and misery. This passage does challenge us, though, to face and overcome any complacency or spiritual indifference we may feel because we're friends of Jesus, like those in the synagogue that day, as though there's a religious homecourt advantage. No one has an advantage, or special claim to status or favor with God. It doesn't matter what family a person comes from, or church, or community, country, or culture. Race doesn't matter, nor language, nor education or job. These social structures are important in other ways, of course, and for other purposes. But the call of God in Jesus Christ offer no advantages to one category of person or another. Each person has to make a decision for him/herself, either to follow Jesus Christ or to follow some other Lord.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

Jesus' call breaks the ties with the naturally given surroundings in which a person lives. Christ unties the person's immediate connections with the world and binds the person immediately to himself.

Perhaps the most common form of spiritual self-assurance is the idea that God doesn't really care what we do, that in Scripture God sets out broad ethical principles, but day-by-day we operate below the Divine radar screen.

I enjoy the story of the church, like this one, where Worship and Church School took place at the same time. But typically the worship service ran over an hour's length, so by time the worshipers got down to the Fellowship Hall the kids had gotten there first and taken all the good food. The grown-ups didn't know what to do about this; no one wants to scold children in church. Finally, the head of the Hospitality Committee placed a sign at the head of the table, by a large pile of apples: TAKE ONLY ONE. GOD IS WATCHING. When the service ended, and people arrived for coffee hour, they found another sign, made by one of the kids, posted at the end of the table, where a large plate of chocolate chip cookies had been. It said: TAKE ALL YOU WANT. GOD IS WATCHING THE APPLES.

The imaginary story hints at an all-too-real aspect of many of our faith-assumptions: that God is too busy elsewhere, or (more seriously) not the sort of God, to pay attention to, nor to care about, our actions. We may plead an advantage. "I'm a Christian. Isn't that enough?"

Hear the word of God. "I have called you in righteousness," declares the Lord, in the Book of Isaiah (42:6a). The call of God is a call to righteous living. It's not like an invitation to join a club; where as long as you pay your dues, and you remain in good standing. It's a call "in righteousness," that is, a call to right living, to holiness, to discipleship and service.

Jesus' friends and neighbors in the synagogue could not hear that call, because they were, well, because they were friends and neighbors. They thought that ought to be enough, just like we may think that being "religious" in some broadly spiritual or stylized way ought to be enough, to give us an advantage, at least, over those who aren't. But the life of faith turns, not on our

general acceptance to a set of religious ideas, but on our readiness to respond moment-by-moment to God's gracious call.

There are no advantages that grant us a pass from the work of faithfulness, no short-cuts or tricks. If your mind is not in perfect agreement with the mind of Christ, re-focus it. If other people are not beginning to see the image of Christ more-and-more in your life each day, and the beauty of his character in your character, re-commit it. If you're persisting in some practice not in-keeping with the standard of God, end it. If your actions do not reflect obedience to Christ, start to trust him alone and pay no attention to any other thing

It is written: "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 may hurl him off the cliff."

Here we see a foreshadowing of what lies ahead for Jesus. At the end, during Holy Week, he again will be betrayed and attacked. He again will be led to death. The execution he barely escapes this day in Nazareth will be carried-out in Jerusalem on Good Friday. But, thanks be to God, on the third day he will slip again from the grip of death.

And so shall we, as we pursue "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord," Scripture teaches (Hebrews 12:24). So shall we slip from the grip of death, and attain to the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ.