

Sermon Epiphany 4C
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Luke 4:21-30

Then [Jesus] began to say to [all in the synagogue in Nazareth,] “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.

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For youth baseball players in Sumter, SC, a celebrity appearance on the field is no big surprise. No, Sumter isn’t some major recruitment hub, But New York Yankees second-baseman and World Series MVP Bobby Richardson can regularly be found cheering on and supporting Sumter’s Little Leaguers as he seeks to encourage young people in the love of the game back in his hometown. Richardson retired from Major League baseball in 1966, after having played in 30 consecutive World Series games (!), and returned to South Carolina to coach college ball and spend more time with his family. Richardson still resides in his hometown of Sumter where he has spent decades encouraging youth not only in baseball, but in faith as a long-time supporter and leader in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Richardson’s and other stories like his are so heartwarming. Hometown star hits the bigtime only to return and invest in his community, giving back to the town that gave them so much. Well, those looking for a heartwarming story of a hometown hero will be sorely disappointed with this story from the Gospel of Luke today. Jesus, after leaving home and being revealed by the Spirit as the Messiah, the Son of God by the banks of the river Jordan, returns to Nazareth, only to give a jarring speech recalling a terrible drought in Israel’s history, and then nearly get run off a cliff by his own townsfolk.

Everything had been going well. Last week we heard that Jesus was welcomed into the Nazareth synagogue to read from God’s Word and assume the position of a rabbi, where he read from the prophet Isaiah about good news for the poor and release of the captives. And he began to deliver a message of hope, declaring that this mission of redemption had begun in him. We even read today that “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But Jesus does not let the good feelings linger too long. He instead starts putting words in their mouths, like “Doctore, cure yourself,” citing the ugly reality that his powers would be useless in this town like the time when great prophets of the past were only sent to perform miracles for the widows in foreign lands, despite great need at home in Israel.

It wasn't the Nazorean reaction to his sermon that nearly got him thrown off a cliff. It was Jesus' own provocative comments that so quickly turned the tide of public opinion against him. But why? Wouldn't this story have been so much better if Jesus returned to Nazareth to select from among them his first disciples or establish a ministry for widows or a home for orphans, or *something*? It's not like Nazareth was overflowing with benefactors. This wasn't Jerusalem. Surely his humble hometown could have benefited from a miracle or two, just for the sake of the least among them? But no. Jesus made a point to go back to Nazareth. He made a point to read the Isaiah verse about redemption to those gathered in the synagogue. And he made a point to tick them off.

He made it quite clear that his ministry was NOT for insiders, that when it comes to the kingdom, there's no preferential treatment for those who "knew him when." Jesus needs to make it clear from the outset that the ONLY way to enter the kingdom of God brought to earth is FAITH. Not connections, not "who you know," not even family ties. Faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. And unfortunately it may even be the most difficult for those who knew Jesus as a boy to accept that he was sent to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

We hear inklings of that on the lips of those in the synagogue. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" Well yeah, kinda. But more importantly, you need to realize, he is the Son of God. The quicker you can understand that the easier it will be for his homeboys to get that the Jesus they thought they know is more than just a carpenter. He's playing in the big leagues now. This ain't backyard ball anymore boys. Jesus wastes no time in conveying to the Nazarenes that a new day has dawned. And he wastes no tears on the inevitable change of sentiment that occurs in the blink of an eye there in the synagogue. Luke says "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

As I hear about Jesus' Nazorean reception, I can't help but see parallels our own faith journeys. It may or may not be when we go "back home," but there will definitely be times in the life of every Christian when our own growth in faith will rub others the wrong way. Maybe for you it might be an old friend, or a family member, or maybe the crowd you "used to" run with before God changed your life for the better. But sometimes who we are now, the selves that we have allowed to blossom and grow, nourished by the waters of baptism, fed by the body and blood of Christ, just no longer sits well with people who "knew us when." Perhaps they don't understand why you make different choices than you did in the past. Or maybe they fear that since your life has changed, that you'll be judgmental of theirs. Or maybe they don't the idea that you've become more mature, more spiritual, or more involved.

But the truth is that sometimes you can't hide that the presence of Christ has grown in you. And sometimes you can't waste tears on the fact that that presence can be threatening to others. Sometimes, like Jesus, you just have to pass through their midst and be on your way. But why is that? Why would the presence of Christ come across as a threat? What's behind that knee-jerk reaction of the world against the presence and love of God?

I think we might find some clues in today's reading from 1 Corinthians 13. Listen again to these well-known verses as we hear St. Paul paint a picture of a godly life in terms of agape love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Look around you - in the news, on social media, amidst this pandemic - is this what you see lived out around you? Patience? Humility? Forbearance? Respect for the truth? Faith? hope ? love? Not so much. At least not as a rule. In fact, as I look at what's going on in this country right now, I'd argue that it could be described

in almost exact the opposite terms. Judgment, hatred, polarization, bigotry, persistent falsehoods, prejudices and not a whole lot that resembles hope.

So it's no wonder that if you experience an inner change wherein your life begins to reflect the Biblical definition of godly love, that the world may not handle it too well. It's no wonder that new life can be met with resistance in a world that has conditioned us so well to perpetuate the same old ways. This is the season of Epiphany, the revelation of Christ. Christ is revealed as Messiah. He's revealed at the Jordan. He reveals his mission to Nazareth. And we discover that through our faith Christ is revealed in us. And unfortunately, not everyone's reaction to the epiphany of Christ will be positive.

Why? What's so threatening about love? Why did his townsfolk try to run Jesus off a cliff? Why did Jesus' message so frighten Herod, the pharisees, high priests? Why did Jesus' words of love and acts of healing ultimately and inescapably send him to the cross? Christ's message of radical love is a threat to the status quo. It's a threat to the walls that guard our hearts from real love. It's a threat to the impulse to put ourselves first. It's a threat to the idea that we may not be superior to others after all. It's heart-wrenching reality that our worth has nothing to do with anything we've accomplished, or anyone else around us, and relies instead solely on the love our Creator and Redeemer has us.

The threat of love is that it dismantles the old ways, stubborn habits, perverted systems, social hierarchies and downright lies we've been conditioned by the world to trust in and rely on to determine our place and our rank. Without them, our footing on this earth can seem unsure until we learn, over time, with practice, prayer and support, to rest into the divine reality that our true place is found only in the arms of God. That reality is difficult to accept. And it can be difficult for others to accept in us. But it is everything. It's worth laying everything on the line for. Because the epiphany of Jesus, Christ's presence in and around us, made ours by grace through faith alone, is what life in the kingdom, our true home base, is all about.