

“Whose Side Is Jesus On?”

Luke 4:16-30

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I’m sure most of you have seen them on one occasion or another. What I am talking about are those large billboard signs that appear at the limits of a city or town that pay homage to a favourite son or daughter. These days they tend to be a pro-athlete, entertainer or some other kind of entertainer. Near where I grew up for example, there is a sign posted as you enter the neighbouring suburb of Cole Harbour that says “Welcome To Cole Harbour Home of Sydney Crosby.” We’ve all seen signs like that.

Well after reading this text from the Gospel of Luke one gets the feeling that you wouldn’t see a sign posted at the Nazareth town limits with something like, “Welcome to Nazareth: Home of Jesus, son of Joseph.” No, once we get to the end of the text what we see is a Jesus who is rejected by his hometown...they are ready to push him off a cliff.

Things didn’t start out that way. When Jesus first comes back to Nazareth, people are excited to see him. Word had gotten around that Jesus had been travelling around Galilee doing and saying some great things. So when people learned that Jesus had come home there is a crowd filled with anticipation.

Now there have been some scholars who have attempted to dispute this passage in Luke. There have been some who have questioned the veracity of such accounts because up until about ten years ago no one had ever found a synagogue that dated any earlier than the second century. However, over the past ten years, archeologists have uncovered at least a dozen examples of synagogues from the time of Jesus and lend more credence to such descriptions as the one here in Luke.

So here is Jesus, who has just arrived home. He’s full of the Holy Spirit and brimming with confidence. The residents of Nazareth have all gathered, anxious to see Jesus again. One might imagine some hometown pride and a collective, drawing in of breath by everyone present as Jesus grabbed the Isaiah scroll and stood up in the synagogue and said, “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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And this scripture was fulfilled in their hearing, because Jesus had just spoken it to them. Jesus was basically saying that in him great things are done in the name of God.

The people watching are saying things like, "Wow, hey, isn't that Joseph's son up there!" "I know him." "This is just great. Jesus is going to do amazing things for us and for this town of ours!"

Jesus replies, "'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.'" The reality is that the people in Jesus' town EXPECT Jesus to do good things for THEM. If Jesus is one of them, then Jesus should stick around and do good things for them. He shouldn't be off in places like Capernaum. Can you hear them, saying things like "Come on Jesus, why don't you just stay here in Nazareth and take care of your own?"

But Jesus knows that true prophets don't work that way. -Prophets aren't necessarily accepted by their own.- Prophets work without prejudice. -Prophets just do the work that God calls them to do. And Jesus wants to make this clear to the people of Nazareth and does so by reminding them of the stories of past prophets of God –prophets like Elijah and Elisha.

Jesus points out two specific examples of the work that was done by these prophets from the scriptures. The first was the story of Elijah, who aided the widow of Zarephath in Sidon after a three and a half year long famine. So imagine after that drought and famine, there were a lot of people starving and hurting at that time...and who does the prophet Elijah of God help? A foreigner...in a foreign land...a lowly widow...not one of the locals. Whose side was God on?

And the next example Jesus reminds them of is when prophet Elisha healed the Syrian General Naaman of a skin disease. Now there were in Elisha's time all sorts of people suffering from skin diseases. But the prophet of God saved the foreign Syrian military general named Naaman. A man of great power, who showed up at Elijah's house in today's equivalent of a motorcade with an armoured car filled with riches to pay for a cure. The prophet never accepted payment either. God healed Naaman freely and gracefully...a foreigner...a man of power...a man of wealth. Whose side was God on?

And as the people of Nazareth listened to Jesus, they heard him loud and clear. Jesus was basically saying, "look, just because I'm one of you doesn't mean that I have come to help you and you alone. There are others who I am called to help -others beyond the boundaries and borders of your own lives, your own welfare and your own expectations!" As far as the people of Nazareth were concerned, Jesus might as well do nothing if we wasn't going to help them. They wanted to remove him...get rid of him.

It's like the story about this fellow who one day, got fired from his construction job. His son, curious as to why his father was home early that day asked his Dad what happened.

"You know what a foreman is?" the father asked his son.

"The one who stands around and watches the other men work?" the son replied. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, the foreman got jealous of me," the father explained to his son. "Everyone thought I was the foreman so the real foreman got rid of me!"

Well Jesus wasn't known for standing around and doing nothing. But that's the way many in Nazareth viewed the situation. It is always the case that some people will feel as if you are doing nothing if you're not doing anything for them or if you're NOT doing what they think you should be doing.

Can you hear the people of Nazareth shouting and saying, "Whose side are you on Jesus? Whose side?" And they go to push him off a nearby cliff (and believe me there are some big cliffs near Nazareth). And just when they think can dump the one they thought was their favourite son, Jesus eludes them. God still has work for him to do in spite of the people of Nazareth. And this is how the people of Nazareth will be forever remembered in the gospel of Luke. They are the ones who tried to kill Jesus. Ones who rejected him because he declared a willingness to help others when they expected Jesus to do something for them to do what they wanted.

When we look at how the people of Nazareth treated Jesus. This is their greatest indictment. Here they had a person among them who could do great things and bring knowledge of God to the world. But because Jesus didn't say outright that he was going to do

for them what he was doing for others. They turned on him, as far as they were concerned, he wasn't on their side!

You see if there is something the retelling of this text reminds us of today, it's that one of the challenges of the gospel of Christ is to celebrate the good manifested in others for others. Sometimes the good God does in this world is not a good that will be readily available in our own lives. It may not be the good we imagine for ourselves. We have to look at others and in other places if we are to see and know it. The hope we anticipate -if we truly desire a world where good news to the poor in spirit and release of the captives is proclaimed- means that we rejoice in good news in all of its manifestations...wherever and whenever. If we are unable to do this we reject the presence of Christ as did his own people in Nazareth. Jesus is not one of us! Not on our side!

Yet this is what God has always worked for and lived for and died for in this world. Not that God might come to show preference to one side or another, but show that in God everyone has hope because in Jesus God's hope is for everyone -even people who are on the other side. Even those who are not one of us.

But we humans like it when we can rejoice in one of our own tribe. Remember how happy so many educators were when Dalton McGuinty became premier? The hope was finally "a one of our own" hope -a schoolteacher. (And I'm not saying anything particular regarding educators or the premier when I use this as an example.) It is just a human example to say that we're usually happy when one of our own is doing something good for us, for our constituency.

When this is no longer the case when they fail to do for us. We will reject them. I saw it happen to a friend of mine who was a father who worked tirelessly coaching boys soccer and his own sons resented their father for it and felt as if he was ignoring them...not because he didn't spend time with them or love them...but because they saw his associations with the soccer team as competition that deprived them of their needs. There Dad wasn't always on their side!

What we are talking about here is the jealousy that leads to resentment. It destroys relationships with God and with each other. As some have put it and put it so well..."Resentment is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die." Our resentment harms us more than others. It's the resentment we feel when others are the

beneficiaries of good fortune or the kindness to which we thought we were entitled. That resentment it can blind us and keep us from celebrating the goodness of the world.

You know sometimes I think the question many people in our society ask these days isn't "why do bad things happen to good people?" I believe the question many ask is "why do good things happen to bad people?" It's not that these people are actually all bad but we give in to envy and resentment. "Why do good things happen to other people instead of me?" It's a pity because we are unable to rejoice in and for others others what we envy for ourselves.

And as one author says about envy, "Envy is the religion of the mediocre. It comforts them, it soothes their worries, and finally it rots their souls, allowing them to justify their meanness and their greed until they believe these to be virtues. Such people are convinced that the doors of heaven will be opened only to poor wretches like themselves who go through life without leaving any trace but their threadbare attempts to belittle others and to exclude - and destroy if possible - those who, by the simple fact of their existence, show up their own poorness of spirit, mind, and guts. Blessed be the one at whom the fools bark, because his soul will never belong to them."

I love that last line, "blessed be the one at whom the fools bark, because his soul will never belong to them." It speaks of freedom. And that's what this text in Luke is about. Release to the captives...letting the oppressed go free. This freedom of the soul is the way of Christ and the way of God. Jesus' soul never belonged to the crowd and what they wanted. The soul of Jesus never belonged to the crowd in Nazareth or anywhere else. It belonged to God. Yes, we can seek a god and a saviour who will be on our side...who we can own...but in Jesus we encounter a savior that calls us to another side, to God's side, that we might lean on him freely and without reservation.

Henri Nouwen once said, "Joy does not simply happen, we must choose joy and choose it each day." When we choose to move to God's side rather than seeking a God who will be on our side, suddenly we find ourselves open to a greater goodness in this world. We see a goodness that is present in the lives of others and in different places. Our experience of goodness changes.

In Christ we encounter the spiritual freedom to do good wherever and whenever God may require it of us. And we have the freedom of spirit to celebrate that goodness wherever and whenever it may occur. We are freed from jealousy and envy and free to proclaim good news. It really is an echo of the words of Ps.147:7 that reads, "They shall eagerly utter the memory of your abundant goodness And will shout joyfully of Your righteousness."

You see, the memory of God's goodness is not something that is limited to our own life and our own experience and our side. It is something that transcends our lives and our cultures and our constituencies and our congregations...it is something that brings us to God's side. There is a greater, a larger experience of goodness to be encountered in this life. This is the gospel.

Today as many of you know is Superbowl Sunday, and as many of you also know, right now, the Harbaughs are football's first family. The San Francisco 49ers coached by Jim Harbaugh play the Baltimore Ravens coached by Jim's older brother John in the first brother vs. brother head coaching matchup in Super Bowl history. Many are calling it the Har-bowl.

Well parents Jack and Jackie, both in their 70s, live in the Milwaukee area. They won't be wearing 49ers red or Ravens purple. The parents of John and Jim had this to say about their two sons facing each other in today's game, "On Sunday night we're going to experience both of those great emotions the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" says father Jack. And their mom Jackie added, "We're going to hug both of them."

You know I believe that is God's attitude that we see in Christ. In Christ God risks coming into a world and to peoples that so often wants a favourite son or daughter, someone who will be on their side and their side alone and to good things for them and them alone. But in Christ we have a Saviour who experiences the thrills and the agonies of this life in order that we might be freed to behold a greater good and be participants in a greater good. It is in the larger embrace of that goodness -the divine hug of the Holy Spirit- that we discover the everlasting arms of God that are always reaching, always pulling and always hoping that we will one day find ourselves on the side of Christ. Thanks be to God.