

“We Thought We Knew Him”
Luke 4:21-30 – January 31, 2016

INTRO: The setting for today’s reading and the one last week is the same--Jesus in his hometown Nazareth synagogue. He described his ministry with a verse from Isaiah, which I’d like us to read together. It is found on the front of your worship bulletin (Luke 4:18). These words sounded great because the people of Nazareth assumed that when he talked about bringing good news to the poor, afflicted, oppressed, that Jesus was talking about them. Then Jesus got more specific, challenging the people to think again. He used two stories from their faith heritage, and told them they didn’t have a corner on God’s love, and maybe they didn’t know him as well as they thought they did.

A few weeks ago, we determined that our church snowblowers needed some work. We had to find somebody who would see if they could be fixed, or not and at what cost. About that time, I was eating a meal with a couple from our church and I asked them if they had a name I could give Chick, for a good repair person. Yes—they knew of someone who was reliable, would pick up the snowblowers, and do good work. They said to call Matt and tell him they had recommended him. We did, and we now have functioning machines, ready for what may be more snow coming in.

We ask others for referrals when it comes to household jobs, doctors, dentists, lawyers, baby sitters, auto mechanics, realtors. And there’s something very reassuring, when we’re given a name, and the friend who gives us that name says, “be sure to tell them I sent you.” We not only feel like we can trust the referral, but we may experience some aspect of privilege—expecting a little better attention or service, because we are connected to somebody they already know.

You can be sure I’m keeping a file of names of all kinds of people who can someday maybe help me fix something in a house I’ll hopefully move to this summer, and I’ll make sure I mention who gave me the name!

People who know us have expectations of us just because they know us. The people in that synagogue in Nazareth may have thought Jesus, a native son, belonged to them. They had a special claim on him which they expected him to honor by doing what’s in THEIR best interest. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son, the one we’ve known since he was a youngster?” They thought he was one of theirs, and they could count on him to take care of them—they were kin. The hometown crowd thought the perks would be for them--the miracles and the healings. But they soon found out this wasn’t necessarily the case. Maybe they didn’t know him as well as they thought. For “Jesus had taken God’s favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially Capernaum, which was a heavily non-Jewish population.” (Fred Craddock)

Jesus’ popularity and admiration quickly fizzled among the hometown crowd, when they started to squirm as he reminded them of the stories in their tradition which say that God’s love isn’t limited by nationality or racial boundaries. He lifts up two events in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, where foreigners, outsiders to the people of Israel, are recipients of God’s love. “Jesus’ allusion to Israel’s past suggests his ministry will be marked by blessings for outsiders and judgement for insiders. After all, neither Elijah nor Elisha were known for hometown healing. The widow Elijah healed was not Jewish. Elisha healed the leader of an enemy army.” (Dr. Jason Edwards)

Jesus breaks the news to his hometown that they don’t have the corner on God’s love—God’s grace and favor aren’t just for a privileged few, but for all. “God bypassed many needy people of their religion and nation, Jesus says, to help those foreigners, those Gentiles, those outsiders. We can almost hear the snap as people are jolted by this unexpected turn.” (Brian McLaren)

God is free to work in ways no one expects and many people don’t even like. It is Jesus’ announcement of the universality of God’s love that turns the crowd against him. They throw him out of town, trying to throw him over a cliff, but he gave them the slip and was out of there.

Wheaton College is trying to throw out Professor Larycia Hawkins, to fire her. She is the first tenured African American woman at Wheaton College and the only full-time African American woman on the faculty. She’s been there for nine years. During this time of anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence in our country, Professor Hawkins posted a photo of herself wearing a hijab, writing on Facebook, “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”

The college placed her on administrative leave after that post. The administration claimed she appears to have violated the school’s statement of faith by saying Muslims and Christians worship

the same God. In two weeks, there will be a hearing to decide if Professor Hawkins will be fired or not. It's interesting to note that Wheaton was formed by leaders of the movement to abolish slavery. And now Professor Hawkins, a black Christian woman, stands in solidarity with Muslim brothers and sisters who are experiencing violence and misunderstanding and she may pay the price--the loss of her job.

Prof. Hawkins is a respected scholar in the field of political science. Her fellow professors, and the college administrators were probably confident in her abilities as a professor, until she stood up for what she believed and she found the college she worked for, turning against her. Some students feel Hawkins' potential dismissal raises questions about the ways that Wheaton, where approximately 20% of students are people of color, deals with race and ethnicity. As for Hawkins, she says that "to be the black woman who talks about race, it's risky, right? I get tagged as whatever people think — as a rabble rouser, as too edgy. Maybe people think, 'She's too controversial.'" But she says she'll be fine with whatever the outcome is. She wouldn't change what she did—she believes in what she said. "If this ends up being the end of my journey (here) what a wonderful bookend, to be committed to human solidarity, religious solidarity, my faith, and the world of ideas," she says. "I think those are compatible." (*USA TODAY College*)

Joan Chittister is someone whose hometown crowd, her Roman Catholic denomination has often turned against her. She is a Benedictine sister, a Bible-based feminist. I've enjoyed her books over the years and I start my day with daily readings written by her. She speaks out whenever she can, on the need for the church to be inclusive of both women and men. She pleads for Roman Catholics to get involved in facing the pressing social and economic issues of the day. She confronts the evils of a patriarchal system. One time when she was scheduled to speak at a National Catholic Educational Association convocation, the leaders of the Pittsburgh diocese barred staff and educators from attending the event. Officials of the church described her as "objectionable." And of course, the minute the church said people weren't to attend the event, for every missing Pittsburgh educator, there would be another two or three educators, curious to see what she's going to say. So instead of decreasing the crowd to hear Sr. Joan, they successfully increased the crowd.

Some years back, Chittister had a meeting with a top official in the Roman Catholic church. He told her that "her likes were a threat to the church and that American women religious were infecting Catholicism." "You are right," Chittister replied. "And it's too late to stop that infection now because the disease is the Holy Spirit." If the church ever thought they could control this home-grown nun, they were deceiving themselves.

One of the ways Christ breaks into our world is to have people tell us the truths we don't want to hear—to upset our equilibrium. "One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea." (Walter Bagehot)

And it seems that Jesus was regularly proposing new ideas. "Things were fine in Nazareth until Jesus opened his mouth and all hell broke loose." (William Willimon)

It's not easy to take unpopular stances, whether we're in our hometown, or within a church system we've long been a part of, or in our families where people have known us a long time. When people assume they know us, and know exactly what we think, what stands would we be willing to take for others--the poor, the prisoner, the burdened and the battered? Maybe taking a stand for prison reform, for more accessible quality health care for all, for a system to ensure guns won't continue to make their way into the hands of criminals, or for seeing that the world is a more welcome place regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation or skin color.

"Between life and death it is for all of us to do one blazing act of good—however small it may seem at the time. Life is the opportunity to speak one great truth in the face of one great lie. It may seem that no one hears it. It may seem that nothing changes. But not to speak---that is the real sin. Then, smallness is the lot even of the great. Only the doing of justice is a good enough excuse to be born." (Joan Chittister)

So what is it for you, that you would be willing to speak out about or stand up for? What is it that's important enough, for which you would be willing to metaphorically be "thrown over a cliff?" Keep in mind that Jesus wasn't immobilized by his hometown folks. He said what he needed to say, left behind those people who thought they knew him so well and headed off into new territory. He just went on about his work. May we show some of that same fortitude and courage, empowered by a God whose love knows no bounds.

--Sue Burwell