

Text: Luke 4:22-30

Title: Hometown Heretic

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I went to most of high school and college in Orange City – a small Dutch-American outpost on the windswept hills of northwest Iowa. I moved with no intentions of returning, only to be asked back to speak at the college and preach in my home church. That church had raised-up a small army of preachers; they wanted to see if I cut the mustard.

I always felt suspect when I lived in Orange City and that was magnified at church. So, I labored long over the sermon. I wrote, rewrote, and wrestled with every phrase. I wanted people to speak well of me and be amazed at the gracious words that came from my lips. I wanted to be a hometown hero.

On Sunday morning I reported to the elders (all men) who asked about my mom. They didn't know her, but they knew I was Ron Nelson's son – the college professor who was murdered. It seemed fitting to ask about her. As we filed into the sanctuary, still with the same lime green carpet, I breathed a sigh of relief that I passed the awkward-small-talk without any glaring gaffs.

As I offered the prayer for illumination the pianist began to play. She laid a musical bed under the prayer. Never having prayed over music, there was an odd lilt to my voice. I wondered if that soundtrack would be part of the sermon.

When I finally got to preachin' I fell flat on my face.

Whenever I looked up from my carefully curated manuscript, I'd see some vaguely recognizable face and I'd get distracted. My ADD was in full bloom; my internal monologue was skipping all over. But my sermon was sputtering, stalling, and slowly sinking into the sands of blah, blah, blah, blah....

When the service mercifully came to a close, and I just wanted out, the high school principal approached me in the narthex to say that the speech I gave while running for student council president was the best speech he'd ever heard, but my term as president was a failure. (He must have forgotten the black Earth Wind and Fire cover band that I got to Orange City to play for a dance.) Not a word about the sermon.

Now. My guess is that Jesus' neighbors and teachers showed up at the synagogue with high hopes. Preaching is part scholarship, part theater, part spiritual speech, and part art and they wondered if this hometown kid would tickle their minds and tug at their hearts. They hoped for a comforting word or an encouraging image. They wanted a chewable chunk of theological meat, salted with story, and peppered with memorable lines.

So, when Jesus read from Isaiah and proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him – anointing him to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, and that the time had come. His kinfolk and fellow Nazarenes were duly impressed. "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

There's no indication if that comment was offered in derision or delight. There's no indication if they were stunned, or offended, or tickled pink. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" can mean a variety of things – based on inflection.

But then with his neighbors bewildered or bemused, while they weighed his words and his lineage, before they have time to let it sink in, Jesus pokes them in the eye with a stick.

Jesus recounts two episodes, recorded in First and Second Kings, in which Elijah and Elisha were instrumental in bringing God's deliverance from death and sickness to the Gentiles. They were obscure stories where God's grace seemed to skip over the Jews and slosh all over the Gentiles.

They were also stories that had an undercurrent of judgment or indictment. And, with that, the coming out party of Jesus takes a nasty turn. There was no chit-chat in the narthex.

There's a blunt quality to this first sermon of Jesus. This is not the gentle savior who invites the children to come first or the master teacher who weaves a story with a surprising twist. There's no subtle light of dawning revelation and neither does Jesus sink into the sands of sermon boredom. Rather Jesus throws down the gospel gauntlet....

He doesn't let their ethnocentric world view slowly surface.

He hits them with their own story.

He beans them with the book.

He cuts to the chase.

In his first recorded scripture reading and sermon, Jesus tells an unsettling truth: The distinctions that we create of class, ethnicity, nationality, creed and confession, are superseded by God's grace. There's a wideness to God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. Elijah went to a poor widow in Zarephath and brought her son back from the dead. Elisha offered healing to a Syrian army officer. And with that Jesus punctuated his announcement of the Kingdom.

The "good news to the poor" extends to the widow and the soldier.

The "freedom for the prisoners" extends to the unclean and the outsider.

The "recovery of sight for the blind" extends beyond the boundaries.

The "release of the oppressed" extends to the lowest rungs of the ladder.

The "year of the Lord's favor" extends even to you and me.

With this hometown sermon Jesus turns his friends and neighbors into a threatening mob and casts a shadow of rejection that extends from Nazareth to Golgotha. There's a kind of foreshadowing of the cross here...

I don't remember there being cliffs, but our text reads that they drove Jesus to the hill on which Nazareth was built that they might throw this heretic over the edge. His own people deny him and would put him to death, but somehow Jesus gives them the slip and walks right through them. Death can't hold him.

I've been at this Hope preaching gig for almost 20 years. I've learned that preaching is part scholarship, part pep talk, part science, part theater, part spiritual speech, and part art. I trust the text more than anything I've got to say, therefore I do the best I can to get out of the way and let the text speak.

I've also learned that more often than not in scripture  
the movement of the Spirit,  
the *missio Dei*, the mission of God,  
the movement of the will of God  
is outward,  
is toward others,  
is expansive and inclusive.

The will or way of people is set boundaries, to build a safe space, to define who's in and who's out, and God keeps pushing the circle wider.

That's not to say that there aren't boundaries in scripture. Circumcision, baptism, repentance, patterns of obedience, and professions of faith all have some boundary setting function. But, over and over again, it seems like the heart of God, the movement of scripture, is to keep pushing outward to include others.

I've been preaching long enough that I don't get much feedback. Familiarity, expectation, satisfaction, boredom all probably play some role in that. Eventually you're just the hometown preacher – neither hero nor heretic.

But, along the way the most substantive feedback/pushback I received was to tamp down or be cautious with my universalistic tendencies. To make sure that the boundaries are clear. One ongoing critique is that I'm fuzzy about Hell.

My standard response is: I'll leave that sort of sorting out thing to God. The call of preaching is to the good news – to a grace that keeps crossing boundaries and spilling over to the other. I'm not about to erect barricades. That was more than they wanted to hear from Jesus in his hometown. And that's hard to hear here and now....

I'm not vain or deluded enough to liken my preaching to the preaching of Jesus. But it does seem to me (after 20 years) that the grace of God in Christ, the come and coming *shalom* of God, includes Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, gay and straight, scientist and anti-vaxxer, fundamentalist and iconoclast, insider and outsider, Ninevite and Nazarene, hero and heretic....

Thanks be to God.

Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation" gets plenty of traction in sermons about human stubbornness and the reach of God's grace.

The story opens with Ruby Turpin sitting in a doctor's office judging herself to be of better stock than most of the other patients. Across the room sits Mary Grace, a pudgy teenager with acne

and a sour scowl. She's reading a book and is annoyed by the chatty intrusion of Ruby. Until without warning Mary Grace whips her book across the room and beans Ruby on the head. Ruby falls to the floor as Mary Grace flies across the room behind the book and hovers over her hissing,

*Go back to Hell where you came from, you old wart hog!*

That violent act is the beginning of Ruby's redemption. Being hit by the book changes her internal conversation that eventually leads to an unforgettable vision of the Kingdom.

Ruby is back on the farm feeding the hogs when she sees a light in the night sky. The passage reads like this:

*....She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of colored folks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see on their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was immobile.*

*At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.*

Hallelujah.  
Amen.