

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany-2019-He Passed Through the Midst of Them and Went on His Way
February 3rd, 2019
Thomas L. Truby
Luke 4:21-30

He Passed Through the Midst of Them and Went on His Way

When this passage begins the people of the Synagogue haven't realized the full import of his words. They still think he thinks as they do. They congratulate themselves that he is one of them. They don't see the world-altering implications of his refusal to read the part about the vengeance of the Lord. They didn't realize his words were subverting their world so familiar to them that they can't see it, calling attention to the cultural water they swim in like fish in a small pond.

His subversion offered a new freedom but they couldn't see that they were in bondage. Oh yes, they knew the Romans had them in their grip but I am talking about a deeper bondage, the kind that comes from the quest to keep up with or get ahead of their neighbors, the daily dog-eat-dog world they dwelled in.

What can Jesus do to get them to see the deeper truth he came to reveal? He has to get them to see his "otherness." Right now he is too close. They can't see him. They only see their image of him filtered through their bitterness, erroneous understanding of their history, religious habits and distorted values.

"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 in Capernaum." Suddenly their native son introduces a common proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself." They see him as part of them and therefore to cure himself he also cures them. But he knows he comes from another place, in fact, he is in the power of the Spirit. He comes with a message from God; a message they will only get if they don't see him as one of them.

He anticipates they will soon make a request of him. "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." The mention of Capernaum is not accidental, it's deliberate and loaded. He's has his finger on the pulse of his home town. He knows about their resentment, envy and jealousy toward Capernaum. They are very aware of what's going on in Capernaum and Jesus had better do the same thing in his home town as he did there. He knows they are thinking this because he knows how they think. He has been one of them.

Capernaum is right next to the Sea of Galilee where the land is rich and productive. They have lots of fish to supplement their diet. They are on a major trade route connecting the East with

Jerusalem and Egypt. They take advantage of this by charging a toll on all who go through their region, giving them a dependable and lucrative source of tax revenue drawn from strangers. Adding this all up, Capernaum is a prosperous, growing, beautiful town on the edge of a large fresh water lake, dare I say it, the Lake Oswego of the area.

Nazareth, on the other hand, is high in the hills, poor because the soil is poor, miles from the trade routes and with little growth potential. The people who live in Nazareth work the land and walk to nearby developing Greek cities where they provide the labor. As a carpenter, Jesus was probably one of them and that's how he came to know Greek and Roman culture.

The people of Capernaum, of course, use all of their advantages to support their belief that they are better than those raggedy, poorly educated and malnourished, lazy folk living in dusty Nazareth. There was a proverb at the time that asked, "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" Meanwhile the residents of Capernaum dwell in their supposed superiority and cease being grateful for their many blessings, much less generous.

You may ask how I know this. I grew up in Nebraska in a small old house (our first farm house) and resented Iowan's to the east that could count on rain and lived in bigger, newer houses with indoor plumbing and beautiful flower gardens. (We later got indoor plumbing in our second farm house.) And I know this because I resented my California cousins who had TV before we did. When I was five or six I acted this out by having contests between a farm boy, like myself, and my "soft" city cousins. I would kick two rocks down the big, rocky hill that was our pasture and see whether the farm-boy rock or the city-boy rock got to the bottom first.

Having pointed toward their resentment, that burning jealousy that never goes away, located so deep in their souls they don't know they have it, Jesus prefaces his foray into their history by noting that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town." With this Jesus launches into the truth outside the boundary of permissible thought. He does this out of love for his hometown. He must break through their insular world to where they see difference as beautiful and enriching and not as a threat.

With this new book [Cory & the Seventh Story](#) we have been talking about how we live out of our story. For the people of Jesus' hometown, bitterness and revenge provided the center to their story; the belief they held in common, the belief that kept them somewhat united. They had attached this core belief to their understanding of God. For them, God is the avenger and they will be blessed by his violence against those outside their circle, particularly those who were prosperous and looked down on them.

Now that we understand the story they told themselves, we are ready to hear the truth they didn't want to hear. Jesus tells them, "The truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for 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.” This widow was an outsider not of their village or people.

Jesus tells a second story, “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” The one cleansed was from Syria, a famous general in the Syrian army, their enemy.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He is subverting their core belief that God loves them in preference to others. It’s a story that is getting in their way, making them unhappy and holding them back. Jesus knew that a new story, built on love and forgiveness for all, would yield all the blessings the first part of that passage from Isaiah promised. It would be good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the freeing of the oppressed. It would be the proclamation of the Lord’s favor.

Jesus was offering them a new story that would take them out of their rivalry with Capernaum and every other place on earth they felt threatened by. This new story, should Capernaum accept it, would also put an end to Capernaum’s pompous sense of superiority and allow them to live in gratitude and generosity.

“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.” Does this remind you of anything still to come in Jesus’ life? Does it demonstrate that the violence separating those “in” from those “out” constitutes the underlying story that unites them? Even though their old story was oppressing them in multiple ways, they wanted to sacrifice Jesus right then and there for offering it. He had threatened their story and offered them a new one.

But it was too soon. The time for his death had not yet come. “He passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” Amen.