

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth
Luke 4:21-30
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Good morning, friends, and welcome. We return this week to Luke 4 to finish the story of Jesus preaching his inaugural address in his hometown synagogue. Recall that by the time he had arrived at Nazareth, he had already been touring around Galilee and was well-received by those who heard him. According to Luke, he was “praised by everyone” (4:15).

By claiming the words of the prophet Isaiah, found in Luke 4:18-19, he was disclosing his identity to the people who knew him best. Recognizing that he was one of their own, they were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (4:22-23). They “all spoke well of him” (4:22). And yet, who was this Jesus, who they knew to be the son of Joseph, a local carpenter? They did correctly identify Jesus’ human father, but they seem to be unaware that Jesus was also the son of God.

Jesus must have sensed their concern, so he quoted a well-known proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself” (4:23). We have to wonder what Jesus’ intention was here, since he is putting words into the mouths of his listeners. Before the people do or say anything in opposition to Jesus, he quoted another familiar proverb, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (4:24).

Then he went on to give examples from the prophetic ministries of Elijah and his protégé Elisha. During a famine, Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon, a wealthy Phoenician city, located on the Mediterranean Coast in what is now Lebanon. This story is found In 1 Kings 17:8-16. There we read that Elijah told the woman to provide food for him, even though she only had a few morsels of food left for one meal for her son and herself. She did as Elijah asked, and “the jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah” (17:16).

Similarly, we read in 2 Kings 5 how Elisha healed the commander of the king of Aram’s (Syria’s) army by telling him to wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman is incensed that Elisha didn’t even come out to meet him, or do something himself to cure his leprosy. But the upshot of this story is that the commander was healed and declared, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel” (5:15).

After hearing Jesus’ references to these two miraculous stories, his

Nazarene neighbors became enraged (Luke 4:28). They were so angry that they wanted to throw him off a cliff, apparently hoping to kill him. But that doesn't happen. Instead, "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way" (4:30).

So we have to ask, how did Jesus' first appearance in his hometown synagogue, which seemed to start so well with everyone praising him, suddenly turn to death-dealing anger? Let's look again at what Jesus did...or didn't do. Looking back to the beginning of this story in verse 14, he returned to Galilee filled with the Holy Spirit after his temptation in the wilderness. He traveled around, teaching, although we are given no specifics about his message. Even without the details, we know he was highly regarded by everyone who heard him. So far so good.

And then he gets to Nazareth, where he goes on the Sabbath to the synagogue as he had done all of his life. There, he was given the opportunity to read from the prophet Isaiah. He found the place where the prophet's words described what Jesus believed he had been called to do: share good news with the poor, release the captives, enable the blind to see, set the oppressed free, and proclaim the Jubilee year. He concluded by telling his audience that on this very day the Scripture has been fulfilled. Again, people spoke well of him, though they were amazed by what he claimed. Still, it seems as if all is well.

Then, things get a bit tense. This is, after all, Jesus the carpenter Joseph's son, a young man who many of them had known since boyhood. He seems to go on the offense here with two proverbs and a reminder that, through two early prophets, God ministered to people who were outside of Israel's bounds. These stories were recorded in their Scriptures. Jesus didn't just make them up. Nor did he make up the idea that God had concerns for all people. We only need to look to the Book of Jonah where God spares the Ninevites to see that concern.

Even in Capernaum (whose story is told in 4:31-44) Jesus heals and teaches in an area where many Gentiles live. So why had he not done anything in Nazareth? The people's anger is ignited when Jesus points out that the prophets could have gone to Israelite widows in need, or to Israelites with skin diseases, but Elijah and Elisha were both sent to Gentile outsiders. Dr. Fred Craddock summarizes the crux of the situation by writing:

The problem, however, lies far deeper than blind familiarity. If the people of Nazareth assumed privileges for themselves, that error is joined to a more serious one: resentment that Jesus has taken God's favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially

Capernaum, said to have had a heavy non-Jewish population. Jesus defends his ministry to outsiders by offering two Old Testament stories. Both Elijah...and Elisha...took God's favor to non-Jews.

...For Luke, the tension that erupts here and will erupt again and again elsewhere is not between Jesus and Judaism or between synagogue and church; it is between Judaism and its own Scriptures. Luke's point throughout Luke-Acts is that Israel should have understood and embraced Jesus' message. Israel knew of God's grace toward all peoples as early as the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 22:18; Acts 3:25).

(Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, page 63).

Dr. Craddock goes on to point out that all of us, Jew and Christian alike, have the capacity "to be offended by God's grace to all those of whom we do not approve" (page 63). Those words really sting, don't they? And yet, if we're honest, I think we have to agree that we prefer to keep our privileges, especially those concerning our religious faith, for our own use and purposes. We really don't want to share what God has given to us with others.

Luke Timothy Johnson makes similar points when he writes:

It is this veiled intimation that prophet would be for all and not just for them—and in the reader's understanding, that God's visitation and salvation were to be for the poor and oppressed of all nations and not just for Jews—that arouses the neighbors' wrath, impelling them to fulfill Jesus' statement: he is not acceptable in his own country because his mission extends beyond his own country...[T]his ominous opening already suggests a reason why many Jews later on in Acts reject the Gospel, precisely because it is meant for all (for example, Acts 13:44-52) (*The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina*, page 82).

If these analyses by Drs. Craddock and Johnson of the reasons for Jesus' rejection are correct, then it's easy to see why those who thought they were "insiders" in Nazareth would be so infuriated by God's extension of divine grace to others, to those who they thought were outside the bounds of God's grace.

I wonder how we would have responded, as individuals and as a congregation, had we been present when Jesus confronted his listeners with this message. Let's try to put ourselves in their sandals. The synagogue attendees were among the chosen people of God. They had

been waiting and waiting for a Messiah, God's anointed one. And then, along comes Jesus telling them that he is the one who has been anointed to fulfill this role. This Scripture is no longer awaiting fulfillment. It is fulfilled this very day. And oh, by the way, his acts of ministry are for all who are created in the image of God, not just his own Jewish people.

I think if we're honest, this attitude of wanting to keep privileges—including the grace of God—for ourselves is fairly common among people of all stripes. People generally want to be with people who are like them. A common word for that these days is "siloed," which Merriam-Webster defines as "in isolation in a way that hinders communication and cooperation." Think of the kinds of situations in which you want to be primarily among people with whom you feel comfortable. For example, two people sharing living space need to be compatible, unless they're content to live as the odd couple or as the Bickersons, who engaged in verbal combat. Faith-based communities, such as our churches, tend to attract people with similar theological understandings, as well as similar views on how they are to live out their faith. Even in places such as fitness centers, we can find like-minded people. Of course, anyone who joins a gym is likely interested in physical fitness and perhaps sports. But some folks want to belong to powerhouse gyms where muscle-building is the primary focus, whereas others of us are happy to belong to the Y where we can exercise to stay fit without training for a weight-lifting competition. We experience this gathering together of like-minded people on online forums geared to special interests. People also watch television news stations that mesh well with their political preferences. And, those of us of a certain age tend to choose continuing care or over-55 communities that attract people near our age who may share our interests and hobbies.

So why do people want to interact with people who are like them? Over the past several years, we've seen friends and family who have experienced tense get-togethers and perhaps ruptures in relationships because people had different political opinions. Gathering with like-minded people can reduce conflict that arises when world views are very different. Also, people like to have other people support their lifestyle and world view. Perhaps the most important reason for being in the midst of like-minded people is that we have a sense of belonging. These are "our" people.

I imagine that people in the small town of Nazareth were closely bonded and made a conscious effort to continue to fit in with everyone else. Jesus started his visit on the same wavelength, as it were, with these people who he had known for many years. But he was now different. His announcement of his mission, along with his openness to all of God's

people, put him on a collision course with his neighbors. The outcome wasn't hard to predict: Jesus was rejected by those we would expect to be most supportive of him.

I imagine we have all felt the sting of rejection at some time or another. Perhaps it was minor: we didn't get selected for a school team. Or perhaps it was more consequential: the promotion we were expecting never came through. Rejection can seem like the end of whatever we are trying to accomplish. And it certainly can diminish our self-esteem.

Yet, this was not the case with Jesus. God had sent him on a mission to seek and save the lost, and despite barriers thrown in his way, Jesus continued on the path God had marked out for him. In interpreting this story, we need to recognize "that Jesus does not go elsewhere because he is rejected; he is rejected because he goes elsewhere" (Craddock, page 64). He was not willing to live and minister in the confined, fenced space that his neighbors had erected. Instead, he insisted upon open borders where he could reach out and touch all persons with the love and grace of God.

So, what about us? Are we listening to Jesus, ready to receive his prophetic words of grace and share them with others? Are we ready to open our hearts and minds to those with whom we may disagree or who, in whatever way, may not be like us?

Our challenge this week is twofold. First, recall a time that you felt rejected. What happened? How was the situation resolved? What lessons can you learn from how Jesus handled rejection as you think about a time you were rejected?

Your second challenge is to try to broaden your horizons by interacting with someone who you normally wouldn't converse with. Or by reading a newspaper or magazine, or watching a news broadcast on television or online that you think espouses different views from yours. You might even want to watch a televangelist to discern how he understands the Bible and how that may be similar to or different from your own understandings. Perhaps you could talk with a neighbor whose background or culture is very different from your own. Well, you get the idea. Jesus showed us how to care for others, and he also taught us how to get out of our tiny boxes. I'll be curious to hear how you were able to meet these challenges.

Love, Nan