

“Varying Responses to Jesus”
Luke 4:21-30
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Thomas Wolfe wrote a novel entitled *You Can't Go Home Again* that was published posthumously in 1940. It tells the story of an author who writes about his hometown in such a way that makes it difficult to go home. Whether we have read the book or not, the premise makes sense. In fact, the title alone makes sense. It can be difficult to go home to a community, church or family because we aren't the people we were way back then nor is home exactly what it used to be.

But even if we acknowledge this reality, it may not stop us from going home. Thomas Wolfe's nephew, Fletcher, tried to return to Warren County while we lived there. He grew up in Norlina and went on to a music career which began in New York City and ended with five decades of directing the Atlanta Boy Choir. He then tried to retire in Warrenton, to go home to small-town North Carolina, and was, with his wife, a good friend to Dana and me, but within a year he realized it wasn't going to work. Apparently, he had not read his uncle's novel.

Nor has Jesus, though he has an excuse, living 2,000 years before it is published. But as we rejoin the story we began last week, Jesus has gone home to Nazareth. He is there not just to renew old acquaintances, but to make public his identity and calling as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of an anointed one. It's the big reveal and he chooses his hometown as the place to make the announcement. What is he thinking?

Not surprisingly, people respond in varying ways. Some are happy to see him while others are thrilled he is doing well, making a name for himself, but when Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," they say, "Hey, isn't this Mary and Joe's kid?" as in, "We remember him when he was just a pup, he's the carpenter's boy, and weren't there some questions about his birth? He is the anointed one?"

The first responses are somewhat incredulous, though not contentious, but then Jesus goes on to say that no prophet is accepted in

his hometown. So, perhaps he is prepared for this reaction. And then, he rubs a little salt in the wound by noting that Elijah helps a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, an outsider, and Elisha heals Naaman, a Syrian, an enemy, of leprosy, pointing to the scope of his mission, to care not just for fellow Jews, insiders, but for outsiders too, even enemies.

This pushes the naysayers over the edge into a rage. It's like saying he is going to ignore the long-time faithful church member and spend time with the beggar on the street corner. They drive him out of town and plan to push him off a cliff, but somehow he escapes. How quickly the worm turns, how quickly affirmation turns to condemnation.

So, we have to wonder why he chooses to make public his calling here at home, if he knows this will be the response, but the truth is there are varying responses to Jesus wherever he goes. We might assume that everyone will welcome him as Messiah, but this is simply not the case. Part of the challenge is believing that he is the one God has chosen. Some believe and some do not. But part of the challenge is also embracing his message which has an edge to say the least.

Right from the beginning, here in this story, Jesus points to the fact that his mission will include Gentiles, outsiders, enemies. This is unsettling enough for some. And his mother has already sung about his mission, a song we call the Magnificat, in which she says among other things that he will scatter the proud in their thoughts, bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty (Luke 1:46-55).

Clearly such a mission, which is indeed Jesus' mission, will not make everyone happy. His calling echoes that of the prophet Jeremiah to whom God says, "Now I have put my words in your mouth... to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." If this is the nature of Jesus' mission, there will be varying responses.

And, of course, there are to this day. People respond in varying ways to who Jesus is. Some readily embrace the concepts of incarnation, messiah and salvation; others reject these concepts as preposterous; while most, including many in the church, ponder them as deep mysteries to consider. But not everyone responds to Jesus in the same way, even if they have the same information about him.

In like manner, people respond in varying ways to Jesus' message of love and justice, his habit of hanging out with all the wrong people. We have a tendency to remake Jesus in our own image, to pick and choose the teachings we like and then avoid the teachings we don't like, those that hit close to home. But our calling is to follow all of his teachings, to allow all of his wisdom to shine light on our path.

If we even attempt to do this, we understand why there are varying responses to Jesus. For some of his teachings are hard to embrace - forgiving seven times seventy times; selling all that we have and giving to the poor; putting him before everything, even our families and homes; loving our enemies. It should not surprise us that people respond in various ways to Jesus, and not only to him but to all who follow him and give faithful witness to him.

I have shared with some of you the story of a predecessor in another setting who preached a sermon on the brotherhood of all people in the 1960's. Today we would use a more gender-inclusive term, but one mountain is enough to climb in a day. He was addressing racial division and affirming integration, beginning with the basic claim that in the church we are all brothers and sisters, one family in Christ.

After the service, a prominent church member said, "Preacher, you said something today that I don't ever want to hear you say again. You said that n_____ is my brother. I don't ever want to hear you say that again!" The pastor, a sturdy soul, replied, "Well, the way I see it, then, you have two choices. You can convince me I am wrong, which I don't think you can do, or you can quit coming to church here." The man stomped off, but continued coming to church as often as he had before.

Now, this was an abrupt response from a preacher, though no more abrupt than the demand of the church member. And on many issues, we need to make room for some humility, the possibility that we could be wrong and thus another view might be acceptable, but there are times when who Jesus is and what his message is challenges us. So, not only must Jesus anticipate and manage varying responses, so must all who seek to give witness to him.

And here I am not talking just about ordained ministers. I am talking about all followers of Jesus. We are all called to give witness to

Christ and his teachings wherever we are. So, we need to speak up at work or school when people say and do racist things or attempt humor at the cost of some group of people; we need to call out dishonesty wherever we encounter it; we need to stand up against bullying, harassment and assault; we need to feed the hungry and clothe the needy, visit the prisoner and welcome the stranger. We need to do all of these things because they are right and because Jesus tells us to do them.

But when we do, there will be varying responses. People may not threaten to throw us off a cliff, but we will face resistance. This doesn't mean we are wrong. In fact, it probably means we are right. We just need to know that this is a part of what goes with being Jesus people. It is not always easy and convenient. And there is not always a perfect time when we can address a concern without resistance. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, concerns about timing are often excuses for not acting. Justice delayed is often justice denied. It is always the right time to do the right thing.

But lest this begin to feel so heavy that we are afraid to act, we should note how this story ends – not with Jesus being thrown off a cliff of which there are many in Nazareth, but with Jesus passing through the midst of them and moving on to Capernaum. God does not always protect him from harm. He dies on a cross. So, the message is not that as long as we are in God's will, we will not suffer. But Jesus still has work to do, God's work to do, and thus he is protected in this moment.

I don't know how far we can take this reality in our own lives. I have known wonderful saints who died when they had much still to live for and accomplish. But what we can say is that God's work will get done, nothing can ultimately stop it. So, if we are doing God's work here in a hospital room or in the clothing ministry, building a home in Honduras or building bridges with people of other cultures and faiths, we are a part of something that will endure.

As Dr. King once said, building on the insights of 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Or to put it another way, God's will ultimately will be done no matter what. Perhaps knowing this can help us respond to Jesus in the ways that we should.