

**“Why Jesus Can’t Go Home Again and We Can’t Either”**

**Luke 4:21-30**

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Thomas Wolfe wrote a novel entitled *You Can’t Go Home Again*. It tells the story of an author who wrote about his hometown of Libya Hill, a cover name for Wolfe’s hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, and then found it difficult to go home because of what he had written about the community and the people in it.

It’s a concept that makes sense, but apparently Thomas Wolfe’s nephew didn’t read his uncle’s novel. Fletcher Wolfe grew up in Warren County, North Carolina, in Norlina, but spent most of his life in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was Maestro of the Atlanta Boy Choir for sixty years. He even won a Grammy in that time. When we were in Warrenton, almost thirty-five years ago, Fletcher decided to retire in Warrenton, from Atlanta... It was a privilege getting to know him, but it didn’t take long for him to realize he couldn’t stay there, he couldn’t go home again.

A member of a church I served in Danville, Virginia discovered how challenging it is to go home when he returned from college. At a Wednesday night supper, the deacon chair was asked by a church member if he knew who the rough-looking character with long hair and a beard wearing blue jeans was, suggesting they might want to ask him to leave. “As a matter of fact, I do know him,” said the deacon chair, “He is my son.” He had changed his look while in college, like many students, and the church struggled to embrace his changes.

I avoided this sort of experience when some people thought I might return to my home church in Louisville, Kentucky as pastor. It is a wonderful church, but I was baptized there and later served as youth minister. People remember me as a long-haired teenager or a young, wet-behind-the-ears minister. I couldn’t go back as pastor.

We might think Jesus would have a different experience, surely he can go home again, but our reading from Luke makes it clear that he

cannot. Things go okay at first, in fact, quite well. In the part of the story we read last week, he begins teaching in synagogues around Galilee and is praised by everyone. He then returns to Nazareth, his hometown, reads from the scroll a passage in Isaiah about the Spirit's anointing of one who will perform a prophetic ministry among the poor and oppressed, and he says the scripture is fulfilled in him. Luke says the homefolk speak well of him and are amazed by his gracious words.

So far, so good, but as we know, things change rather quickly and soon the people try to kill him. Why does this happen? We assume it is a matter of struggling to believe that the person they knew as a little boy with a runny nose could be a prophetic and perhaps even messianic figure. And in both Matthew 13:57 and Mark 6:3, it is said that the people at home immediately take offense at him. But this is not the case in Luke and the reason for the people's change of heart is not clear. They do say, "Is not this Joseph's son?" but we don't know in what tone of voice. It could be in ridicule, "Joseph's son, really?" or astonishment, as in, "Wow! One of our own has been called by God!"

Things begin to change only when Jesus shifts his tone, referencing a proverb about physicians curing themselves, assuming the people will want him to perform miracles, and noting that no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. It almost seems like he is picking a fight where there doesn't need to be one.

But the real change occurs when Jesus starts talking about the universal nature of God's love, and by implication, his ministry. In a time of famine with many widows in Israel, he says, Elijah was sent only to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon. When there were many lepers in Israel, Elisha cleansed only Naaman the Syrian of leprosy. It is at this point that the people are filled with rage. They get up, drive him out of town, and lead him to the brow of a hill where they plan to hurl him off the cliff until he somehow gets away from them.

Peter Gomes suggests that the people take offense not so much with what Jesus claims about himself, as with the claims he makes about a God who is more than their own tribal deity (*The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good about the Good News?* p. 39). Those who speak of a more inclusive God who is concerned not just about "us" but

also about “them” always encounter resistance. And in this case, it seems like Jesus is not just saying that God helps them too, but rather that God helps only them, and not us, and this will be his pattern too.

It's like a pastor spending time with homeless people and not visiting the longtime church member in the hospital. It's like a minister working day and night with immigrants and refugees fearing for their lives and not taking time to listen to the pillar of the church who just wants to talk. How do churches respond to such uses of clergy time? Not with an excess of affirmation!

This is what Jesus is talking about and so the people's mood changes in a flash! They go from 0 to 120 in the blink of an eye! They force him to the edge of the cliff and would end his ministry right then and there if not for some sort of unseen Divine Intervention. And we thought it was tough for us to try to go home again!

Jesus cannot go home again, at least not while being so direct, but he has to be himself, and this means ministering to all people.

So, what is the message for us? On the surface, it's just a practical word about the challenges of going home and accepting the ways that people change and grow over time. It's not just that we want others to recognize and affirm us for who we are today and not lock us into some period in our past; it's that we need to allow room for others to change and grow. It is a simple concept but a challenging practice yet also a practical way of expressing the kind of love for others the Apostle Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 13, seeing people for who they are now.

But the deeper lesson is about how difficult change and growth can be in the realm of faith. Change is never easy, but the change Jesus brings is on another level. We often assume that if we are following him, people will affirm us, and we'll all hold hands and sing “Kum Ba Yah.” It doesn't work this way for Jesus. Why would it for us?

In our reading from Jeremiah, God calls the prophet to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant (1:10). It's not helpful, much less prophetic, just to tear down. Deconstruction without reconstruction only makes things worse. I try to remember this when working with people who have self-destructive worldviews, such

as too rigid a view of providence. It is not wise to tear down one view unless we can help people construct a view that works better for them.

But deconstruction is often necessary. We can't build a new life until the old one is set aside. We can't embrace a new and more accurate understanding of God and God's realm until we are willing to let go of more limited views. Change and growth involve tearing down *and* building up. This is Jeremiah's calling, it is the way Jesus works, and it is why he meets resistance. Tearing down existent beliefs is hard.

This is especially true of the question of who is included in Divine concern. This is what gets Jesus in trouble in our reading today. His mission isn't just to his people, as they would expect, but to all people. And this is what gets Jesus' followers into trouble to this day. We talk glibly about God's love for *all*, but what many, even in the church, mean is all people who look, think, believe, talk, and act like us.

When we become explicit about God loving people of different races and nationalities, including immigrants and refugees; God hearing the prayers of Jews and Muslims; God embracing people with minority identities; and us being called to extend to love to these people too; the response will be jolting. We will meet resistance, people may try to throw us off a cliff, but the trajectory of growth in understanding has always been to realize that God loves more people than we think, never less, God loves the people we want not to love and calls us to as well.

This kind of change is never easy, and we don't need to seek out trouble, as Jesus seems to do, but we should anticipate tension when change is involved and remember that growth means change. Our understanding of God is ever evolving. It is blasphemous to think we can ever grasp all that God is. In the words of English separatist John Robinson, "The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word." Indeed, God does, and we are called to respond to this truth and light and not get stuck in past ways of thinking.

This means we can't always go home again, not just our literal home where people may not recognize or understand us, but "home" in the sense of long-established beliefs. We can't become who God is calling us to be until we let go of who we have been. That's tough, but it's the way we grow.