

Who Do You Think I Am?

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Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

I have occasionally wondered what it would have been like to grow up with Jesus. What would he be like as a classmate? Would he be competitive on the athletic field? Who would be his friends? Did he get involved in childhood pranks and fight with his siblings? Allow your imagination to take you into the multiple possibilities.

Farfetched? Mark tells us that when Jesus came to his hometown he went to the synagogue and began to teach. Those who had known him as a child and were listening to him said, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him" (Mark 6:1-4).

In our text from Luke we are told that "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'" Between the two passages both mother and father are recognized.

A little over fifteen years ago my Uncle died. I went back to his funeral which was held in the town where I grew up. Many of the people who knew me growing up were in attendance. I had not seen most of them since my childhood.

As word got around that I was a Presbyterian pastor curiosity peaked. Understand, most knew me as a mischievous child. On one occasion, while on a camping trip, my friends and I were playing with our bow and arrow. In the 50's rubber tips were unknown. We had the real thing. These arrows could penetrate an object.

Hanging back in the trees I saw a nice canvas tent in the distance. I suggested that we put our arrows to flight at the unsuspecting target. To flight they went, nicely slipping through the canvas. I reloaded. Within minutes all five of my arrows lay lodged in that tent.

The man who owned that tent was attending my Uncle's funeral. He had not forgotten. He identified me as the boy who ruined his tent. I offered a rather long overdue apology which I am not sure was received. Others came up to me reminding me of childhood antics. One woman expressed disbelief that I had become a pastor and threatened to come visit my church in Tacoma, Washington. After all, did not Jesus say "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (Mark 6:4).

There is often a dissonance between who we are as children and what we become as adults. Fortunately, we do grow up.

Confirmants coming back to visit, long down the road from eighth grade, now in graduate school or holding responsible jobs, hardly resemble their eighth grade selves I knew.

As we saw last week, Jesus is clear about his identity, calling, and mission. Not the young boy they knew, Jesus, following the passion and directive of his mission, offends. He sets the course for the ministry which grows out of the Spirit's anointing and his fidelity to God. But we have to ask, what did he say that so quickly turned those townies against him?

If you are a good Jew in Jesus' village, believing that "God had created the Gentiles to be fuel for the fires of hell", Jesus' words affirming a Gentile woman being the only recipient of God's healing in all of Israel during Elijah's time would create conversation. Not only is she a non-Jew. This person is a woman.

Already the hometown folks, who heard of his miracles among the people in Capernaum, were requesting the same. Jesus, aware of their hearts, anticipated the request; "And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum'".

It is then he pulls two examples out of Israel's history, one of them just mentioned. The other is the Prophet Elisha's encounter with Naaman, the Syrian. He had leprosy. Not only marginalized as a Gentile, his leprosy pushes him even further outside the boundaries of the community of God's people.

The townspeople's initial positive response is premised on the awareness that Jesus is Joseph's son. But Jesus is God's son. That changes the narrative and where the story goes.

This scene sets a pattern of people's reactions to Jesus' ministry. As He expands God's love to be inclusive of Gentiles (proclaiming release to the captives, those without God and captive to sin), He defines the breadth and scope of God's love which involves the restoration of a person's soul and relationships. Human wholeness is restored to those enslaved under diabolical powers. Similarly, there is release from relationships characterized by obligation to one's superiors. The poor, those marginalized and excluded from social and religious relationships due to gender, age, economic destitution, physical malady, or religious impurity, now find themselves being embraced under the umbrella of God's favor.

The widow and the Syrian General, a traditional enemy of Israel, who is a leper, now identified as recipients of God's favor and grace serve as illustrations of what God is up to.

We often close ourselves off to God's voice when we hold tightly to our religious privileges, certain that God works only according to our understanding and tradition. We grow inward, blinded to the wider world God loves, concerned only with ourselves.

Dallas Willard, author of "Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God", writes, "Our failure to hear his voice when we want to is due to the fact that we do not in general want to hear it, that we want it only when we think we need it" (Homiletics, January-February, 2016, p.38).

Jesus' contemporaries become hostile as the magnitude and scope of Jesus' message sinks into their minds. Just as some Republicans are screaming that Trump is no conservative, the Jews were protesting that Jesus is not a true Jew. Well, he wasn't, if you measure his message against the Orthodox Judaism of his day.

What about us, the 'townspeople' of our world? Who are the voices of God speaking to us, seeking to push us out of our provincial mindsets, our entrapment within the status quo? To be honest, one of our entrapments is the lack of awareness that we are entrapped.

Over the past few months our Compassion Peace and Justice Committee is involving members of our congregation to participate in a series of conversations on race relationships with our African American neighbors. Tracy Dace, our chair, is setting them up. We are having a difficult time understanding one others' cultural, social, and corresponding racial perspectives. I am being asked to look at myself and my white privilege from a different vantage point which is creating a measure of discomfort.

Look at our world and its accompanying anxiety today. We are witnessing a seemingly unending onslaught of police killings of unarmed black persons. White supremacists are shooting people as they pray. Churches are being burned as guns are being shot into crowds of multiethnic protesters. Millions of Syrian and African refugees are flowing into Europe. ISIS is threatening a potential world war. And don't forget the climate change debate (Sojourners, February, 2016, p.12).

If our world is grounded in the deep foundations built by worldwide colonization, imperialism, slavery, exploitation, and ecological consumption, are there not social, political, and economic consequences that Jesus is both addressing and thereby causing offense by so doing?

The Spirit anointed ministry of Jesus is about restoration to wholeness, inclusion of those marginalized by the exploitive structures of our world, and access by all peoples and cultures to God's salvation of forgiveness and love. As we embrace and incorporate other people and cultures into our FPC community we are joining with Jesus in proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, a favor resting upon all of us.

Understanding this import of Jesus' ministry, do we hear God's voice through Sojourner's editor Jim Wallis in his new book entitled "America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America", when he points out that a generation of all races today in America is leading the way to a future where our growing diversity is experienced as great benefit, not a threat?

Would this please Jesus?

What might not please Jesus is that, in our society, a 2015 survey conducted by the Public Research Institute, pointed out that a majority of white Christians still believe that the recent spate of police killings of black men and women are isolated incidents. I think of our racial interactive group meetings in light of this statement by Dr. Robert Jones; "While religious leaders have mobilized in the last year to talk about police violence, discrimination, and racial inequality, these efforts have had little measurable impact in the pews. White Christians across denominational lines are far less likely than Black Christians to perceive that there is even a problem" (Sojourners, p.5).

Wallis asks us to consider whether "If White Christians acted more like Christians than white, black parents would have far less to fear for their children". Are we, like the people of Jesus' hometown, blinded by the cultural prejudices of our own class orthodoxies and culture? Are we open to hear Jesus' voice or simply do not want to?

The people who heard Jesus that day expound upon God's generous, inclusive love "were filled with rage". What did they do? "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". Luke then tells us that "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way".

As Harvard philosopher George Santayana writes, "In accomplishing anything definite a person renounces everything else". The calling of Jesus to us, a call to join with him in the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose for humanity, subverts the deadly modern idolatry of choice. "I have chosen you", Jesus tells us. We are not our own; we have been bought with a price.

This calling provides the storyline for our lives. Jesus' call gives us coherence and continuity amidst a fragmented, confusing world.

Are we consigned, as historian Arnold Toynbee says, to "telling one darn thing after another?" Jesus gives meaning to our life stories despite the broken lines of our existence.

Following Jesus' call enables us to be single-minded. We are given a clear sense of where we are going so we can discern what is important. That is what enabled Jesus to walk through that crowd and not be affected by their rejection. He knows who he is and what he is called to do.

When Winston Churchill returned to power in 1951 he invited C.S. Lewis to become a Commander of the British Empire. Though he was an admirer of Churchill, Lewis declined. His calling would be compromised by the honor. Lewis writes, "There are always knaves who say, and fools who believe, that my religious writings are all covert anti-leftist propaganda, and my appearances in the Honors list would of course strengthen their hands. It is therefore better that I should not appear" (Guinness, "The Call", p.178-80). Crowd pressures have unconsciously conditioned our minds to the rhythmic drumbeat of the modern world. Many voices urge us to choose the path of least resistance. We are bid to avoid fighting for an unpopular cause, never being found in a pathetic minority of those following Jesus against the grain of our culture which emphasizes success, recognition, and conformity (Ruth Barton, The Transforming Center, January, 2016)

Following Jesus through the hostile crowds of this life carries a resounding 'Yes' to God, and a fulfilling of God's purposes in this world. It is also a 'no' to the chaos and complicity of so much of the world's demands upon us.

We are no longer the child of our parents and communities. Our identities are now as children of God.