

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (c)
Jeremiah 1:4-10 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
January 30, 2022 [Traditional]

This week's gospel lesson is a continuation of last week's. Early in his public ministry, Jesus visits his hometown, Nazareth. So that's our setting last week and this week...the hometown. Jesus is in a familiar place where everyone has always known him. Last week, everyone in Nazareth was impressed with him. This week, the same people try to throw him off a cliff. What's happening here?

First of all, Jesus has a strike against him in his hometown from the very start: everyone there is familiar with him. Any parent who's tried to teach their own kid to play the piano has experienced this force working against them. Parents who homeschool their children battle this every day. Most psychologists, likewise, understand the difficulties of counseling people who are close to them. Pastors, almost universally, acknowledge that they can not be very good pastors to their own family members.

And that's what Jesus is up against in his hometown. These people have known him all his life. He was one of the kids running around the neighborhood with his friends; they saw him in the woodshop as a teenager, learning his father's trade. They knew all of Jesus' blood connections, his extended family tree of uncles, aunts, and cousins.

So for them, Jesus fit in their pocket. They loved him, but they also thought they had him pegged. It's kind of like they assumed they were automatic stockholders in Jesus, not because they were going to make any *personal* investment in him, but just because of familiarity. I think of Madison Keys, the pro tennis player. She's from my hometown, Rock Island Illinois. Well, since I'm from Rock Island, I of course get to share in her glory. I'm from the town that produced *her*. That's not a bad thing. But isn't that funny, even as I sit on my couch and eat Twinkies, I can still share in that reflected glory somehow. It's like I have automatic ownership rights, somehow. And this is what Jesus is dealing with in his hometown.

No wonder he gets in trouble when he reminds them that they have no rights to him, no automatic influence over him. In a way that can only be described as annoying, Jesus reminds them of two events in the Bible where God does not show partiality to Israel, his chosen people. In those biblical events Jesus refers to in today's gospel, God shows special care NOT FOR THE HOME TEAM, but for the outsiders, the foreigners, the heathen. Jesus' message is clear: God is not the possession of any particular crowd. He freely allows himself to be held by human beings (I think of him when he's a baby in the stable)...he lets us hold him, but we are deluded if we think we can make him fit into our lives, into our plans. He has made us part of his life...that is the only way it works. The people of Jesus' hometown, even though they know him best, will never have any claim on him.

So when Jesus makes this clear to them, it would be like for me to hear that the Chicago Bears have just moved to Boston. Total betrayal. These people who assumed they were automatically Jesus' homeboys are so infuriated that they want to drag him to the edge of a cliff and throw him

off. But in the middle of all that hatred, somehow Jesus gets free and quietly moves through the crowd, away from them. Nothing will keep him from *his* final destination. And here's the truth at the heart of this episode: The people who think they have the most claim on God are the ones who reject him when he's there with them, trying to save them. People who assume that *they* are the home team reject him. It's the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the outcasts from society—those people who would never assume they have any claim on God—these are the ones who welcome Jesus as the Savior. You see it happen over and over again, throughout the four gospels.

This is one of those lessons that Christians—pastors, laypeople, every Christian—really, really needs to think about. Remember the people of Jesus' hometown...their subtle feeling that they owned him. That attitude can always creep in. Praise be to God that we can come to church and be surrounded by so many people we can trust and love. And think of this place we love and cherish. The altar, the candles, the paraments, the colors and the ongoing procession of the church seasons, each with its own eternal themes; the ancient structure and the rhythm of the divine service. All of these beautiful gifts remind us of God's undying promise to us in Jesus Christ; it reminds us of what does not change: God's word of salvation for us in Jesus Christ, his baptismal promise to each of us in this room that we are his own children. All of this lifts me up out of my normal everyday life and connects me with my Lord, who is the source of my future, the source of all new life and variety, but who never changes. The whole world will die away, but God's promises in Christ will never die. Why would any of us walk away from this gift we've been given. The gathering of God's people, and the traditions that help us focus on God...the Church is where faith becomes real, where it becomes embodied, where it is part of our schedule. This is where we remember, and worship Jesus, the rock on which we can build our lives.

Thank God all of this is familiar to us. We're part of it. We're part of this team. The danger of this wonderful familiarity we enjoy is that we can easily forget all those people out there who have no idea what any of this is about. In twenty years, the world has completely changed. There is no reason for people outside the church to know anything about Jesus. No one has taken the trouble to tell them anything. They're not going to look for something they don't even know exists. We want to be those believers who are inviting them, pointing them to the good shepherd, reaching out to strangers.

Here's where the great danger of familiarity comes in—the devil's temptation: we tell ourselves quietly, in our hidden hearts: “we've got Jesus, so we're OK. He's part of our team. Hey, if people want to come, we won't keep them out.” And that is where the opposition finds his opportunity to lead people to all sorts of false gods.

Jesus in Matthew 25 tells us we will find him out there suffering with the lost, the lonely, the confused, the sick. I have the joy and the peace that the world can not give in my heart, because I have Christ...he has freely given himself to me, and I can hold onto him. But I can't keep him here. I can't hold him back. I can only hold on to him for dear life as I go where he wants me to be. When I hear him today, reminding me of what he's interested in—reminding me of his passion for the people out there who are lost—I quickly understand that it's not my job as a Christian to be comfortable in my faith all the time. If Jesus is out there already among people I

don't know, strangers who make me uncomfortable, I get the message: I should be going out there and opening myself up to strangers and being uncomfortable.

We're in a time now where it's rare to see people knocking on church doors. They need believers to come to them. They need someone to come to them and invite them, and love them, and open the door for them. Jesus didn't want a bunch of small teams looking out for themselves. He wants one team throughout the world that's so confident and bold in his promises that it will reach out to everybody.

It's part of our human brokenness and fear: We want to have Jesus meet us at our comfort level, on our terms. But praise God, Jesus will never allow us to keep him in our pocket. He'll always escape us, just like in the gospel today. He'll always slip away from us, whenever we try to claim him on our terms. He goes to Jerusalem, and he says, "follow me here." And that's a good thing, because that's where he meets us fully, and finally, on *his terms*. He has died for us. He gives us his body and blood from the cross. He will fill us up with the life we need, again and again. Those are his terms. He doesn't expect or need us to pay him back—it's ridiculous to think we can. But when your cup is so full, and when it keeps getting filled over and over again to overflowing, there's only one thing you can do: pour it out. Share it. Pour it out.