

This is a fascinating gospel lesson. It starts off with all the people admiring Jesus and it ends up with the same people enraged at him and trying to throw him off a cliff. Please hear again verse 22 in Luke 4:

“They were all well impressed with him (Jesus) and marveled at the eloquent words he spoke.”

That’s a good start. But then, just six verses later we read:

“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of town, and took him to the top of the hill on which their town was built. They meant to throw him over the cliff.”

Wow, the words of the preacher are not always warmly received, even if the preacher is Jesus. His listening audience went from applauding him to trying to kill him. Let’s see what Jesus said, then try to understand the reaction of those listening and finally see if it might have anything to say to us, here and now.

As I explored these verses I thought that the crowd’s reaction to Jesus might have come about because of some jealousy on their part and maybe some prejudice that they harbored.

First, the individual who excels may be a point of inspiration or might bring forth feelings of jealousy. Are the people of Nazareth inspired by the giftedness of Jesus or jealous of him as they deny that the gifts he exhibits could be real? The last phrase of verse 22 seems to hold the key to the question. It reads,

“After hearing Jesus the people of Nazareth said, ‘Isn’t he the son of Joseph?’”

This question can mean a variety of things depending upon its’ tone.

To find out the tone of the question we can look at the same event as it is recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In Matthew 13:55-56 we read the response of the hometown crowd to Jesus as follows,

“Isn’t he the carpenter’s son? Isn’t Mary his mother, and aren’t James, Joseph, Simon and Judas his brothers? Aren’t his sisters living here? Where did he get all this? So they rejected him.”

In the gospel of Mark, chapter 6, verse 3, it says the same thing, they heard him and “they rejected him.” These pieces of information regarding the hometown crowd would indicate that the question in our passage from Luke, “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” has a negative tone to it.

Knowing this information, please ponder the following questions. Did they want to throw him off the cliff because his accomplishments made their lives look insignificant? Were they filled with envy, jealousy and malice? Back in that time period the idea of upward or even lateral mobility was not thought to be possible. If one was son of a potter, one became a potter. If one was a son of a shepherd, one became a shepherd. If one was a son of a farmer, one became a farmer. A son learned a trade from his father and then pursued that trade.

Their question, “Isn’t this the son of Joseph, the carpenter?” could easily be understood to be asking, “Who does he think he is, sitting in the seat of the rabbi and announcing that God has uniquely anointed him?” The crowd thought one of two possibilities could be happening. Either he is a carpenter who is trying to pull off some scam as he acts like a holy man or he has tapped into possibilities the rest of us have not even recognized within ourselves, much less tapped into. We see the people of Nazareth chose to deny their inherent possibilities as they drive this “fraud” out of town and try to throw him off a cliff. If this is the case, then the people of his hometown lost the opportunity of letting their initial amazement serve as a key to opening up their minds to the possible gifts and talents that lay dormant within them.

That’s then, how might this story apply to us now? How might the gifted person or over-achiever in our midst inspire us to discern our untapped potential? We can be jealous or we can be inspired. Let’s choose inspiration.

That is one way to look at this passage. Let me suggest another possibility. I ask you to consider ethnic prejudice as the motivating factor in the crowd’s negative response to Jesus. The question, “Isn’t he the son of Joseph?” can also be understood to be stated with a self-serving tone. The people of Nazareth might have very

well been thinking that if Jesus has special connections with God then maybe he could bring some special blessings their way. “Local boy” makes good could result in the hometown folk getting a piece of the pie!

If Jesus, from Nazareth, is the long awaited Messiah then they might get some special treatment from Almighty God in the process. If this is the case why didn't the hometown folk “wine and dine” Jesus instead of toss him out of town? We get the answer in what Jesus said about the prophets Elijah and Elisha in his talk with the folk in Nazareth. These verses might show why the crowd moved from applause and hopeful anticipation to hostility and rejection.

Jesus' reference to Elijah goes back to an incident that happened in the 9th century BC and it is recorded in the 17th chapter in the book of I Kings. In this particular circumstance the prophet Elijah judges the hometown folk in the midst of a famine and then blesses a foreign widow and her son. Although Elijah was highly regarded as a religious hero this particular story agitates the hometown folk. Jesus wasn't gaining any friends by reminding folk that their ancestors were judged by a great prophet. Is Jesus saying that they themselves must change to conform to the message he is proclaiming about the coming of God's kingdom? Instead of blessings or a special connection with God Jesus is sounding like he might be judging them. Now, there's a reason to put him in his place and throw him off the cliff.

Jesus' reference to the prophet Elisha as it is recorded in II Kings 5 doesn't help him with the crowd either. Elisha, who received the mantle of power from Elijah, chose not to heal Israelites while, at the same time, he does choose to heal a foreign military officer. Once again, what Jesus lifts up is not a pleasant memory in the minds of his hometown folk. If Jesus, the Anointed One, would usher in God's realm in a way that brought Israel back to the center stage status in the world then the people of Nazareth were all for it as noted in their initial reaction. But if Jesus was saying that God was going to bless all people, including those repulsive to them, then he was a heretic that needed to be thrown off a cliff.

Was the love of God, expressed through Jesus, so radically inclusive that it enraged the people who thought of themselves as the “People of God”? Remember, in our gospel lesson today, it is not the “ungodly” that reject Jesus but it is the “worship attendees” that take him out on the hill to cast him over the cliff. I think this understanding of the passage is plausible considering the fact we find it in the gospel of Luke, who is “Mr. Inclusive” among the gospel writers.

-That inclusive character in Luke is seen in the genealogy he records for Jesus. It goes all the way back to Adam. That indicates Jesus is brother/savior for everyone not just the Hebrews. In the gospel of Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus just goes back to Abraham, the Father of Faith for the Hebrews.

-The universal mission of Jesus is emphasized in Luke as Jesus commends folk that are despised by his own people, like the hated Samaritans. Only Luke has the story of the Good Samaritan.

-Luke uniquely indicates that women have a new place of importance among the followers of Jesus. Was God's love, expressed through Jesus, so radically inclusive that it enraged the people who thought of themselves as the children of God?

That's then, how might this story apply to us now? Are there ways that we limit how God's love and power might work through people who are different from us? We know God loves us and works through us. Are there some people we can't imagine God might love and work through?

The tone and intent of the hometown crowd can be viewed in a couple of manners. First, they are jealous as they reject Jesus and in that process they deny the potential that lies dormant within them. Second, it can be concluded that the folk maintain ethnocentric limitations on how God acts among people. These are two possibilities for us of “what not to do” but I am happy to say that passage ends by pointing us to an inspiring quality that has a positive learning application for us.

At the end of our lesson in Luke we read, “They got up, drove him out of 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

What does it mean that “he passed through the midst of them...”? I don’t think it means that he became invisible or had the moves of a running back worthy of being in the Super Bowl. I believe this reference means that the eternal truths of life are irrepressible and will pass through our midst even as we try to dispense with them. Jesus possessed irrepressible truth and passed through their resistance.

In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries the ideal that all people have a right to think for themselves as expressed in the Reformation and the Enlightenment along with the notion that people could govern themselves as expressed in Declaration of Independence moved slowly but surely to wider acceptance. Over the decades of 19th century abolition of slavery moved from being an ideal to a reality. Over the decades of the 20th century the rights of women to vote, have access to sporting endeavors, and professional life slowly but surely moved to wider acceptance. In the latter part of the 20th century the truth that all persons should possess civil rights has moved from being an ideal to law and an ever growing reality.

The eternal truths of life most often are not recognized as being eternal truths when they are initially introduced. In fact, the first persons that press to have a particular eternal truth move from the realm of theory into the reality of day-to-day life are usually dismissed in a harsh manner. Jesus continually expressed eternal truths of life and found himself dismissed in a harsh fashion. But the good news is that eternal truths are irrepressible and will pass through our midst even as we try to dispense with them.

The challenge of each generation is to discern eternal truths that are emerging that were heretofore unrecognized and find ways to facilitate their movement into daily reality and not resist their movement. As disciples of Jesus we must ask, “What eternal truth is budding in our midst at this point in history?”

As Disciples of Christ, eternal truths, large and small, are to be supported by us. The church is to be the head-lights of society and not the tail-lights. “Jesus passed through the midst of them and went his way.” The eternal truths of life are irrepressible and will eventually pass through the night of negativity to the light of day for one and all to acknowledge and embrace.

The folk in Nazareth, so many years ago, remind us that jealousy and prejudice are human traits we need to move beyond. Yet Jesus demonstrates that the eternal truth of God is irrepressible. Let’s continue to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen.