

"Hometown Hero"
Luke 4:14-24
February 3, 2019

Jesus was not respected by the religious leaders of his day. They neither listened to nor learned from him. Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus is our hero today? How did he go from disrespected troublemaker to the venerated and beloved leader of our faith? Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church in Luke 4, verses 14-24:

Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit. News that he was back spread through the countryside. He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God's Spirit is on me;

he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, "Isn't this Joseph's son, the one we've known since he was a youngster?"

He answered, "I suppose you're going to quote the proverb, 'Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.' Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Tell me this morning if you assume the Patriots are going to win today's Superbowl game -- again. I can picture it now—Tom Brady, the hometown hero of Boston, will be riding later this week in the victory parade down Comm. Ave, sporting his six championship rings. He'll have as many rings on his fingers as car-czar Dealin' Doug wears, combined with his MVP wins, one for every finger and both thumbs.

It's a pretty safe assumption, if you ask me. We have our own hometown heroes in Colorado: John Elway surely and Peyton Manning, Todd Helton if you like Rockies Baseball, Patrick Roy in hockey, or Chauncey Billups in basketball. Probably most of us would identify Elway first as our hometown hero, but in New England for football players, Tom Brady is King. The hometown hero. He has played his entire career—all 19 seasons—for one team. He's a shoo-in for the Hall of Fame, of course. That's a safe assumption. He's worth more money than God—that's a fact.

Let me ask you about another hometown hero. See if you can guess who this is:

On a cold January day, a forty-three-year-old man was sworn in as the chief executive of his country. By his side stood his predecessor, a famous general who, fifteen years earlier, had commanded his nation's armed forces in a war that resulted in the defeat of Germany. The young leader was raised in the Roman Catholic faith. He spent the next five hours watching parades in his honor and stayed up celebrating until three o'clock in the morning.

(S. Sinek, *Start with Why*)

You know who I am describing, right? Another famous man of his time, but not the hometown hero of Boston as you might have assumed. It's January 30, 1933, and I'm describing Adolph Hitler, *not* John F. Kennedy.

"The point is, we make assumptions. We make assumptions about the world around us based on sometimes incomplete or false information." In this case, the information I offered was incomplete. Most of you were seeing John F. Kennedy being sworn into office until I added one minor little detail: the date.

Look at the front of your bulletin, if you will.

In the spring of 2018, Johan Van Parys, the director of Liturgy and sacred arts at Minneapolis' Basilica of St. Mary, saw an ambulance pull up on Hennepin Avenue in front of his church. He watched paramedics hop out and surround a thin figure draped in a blanket on a nearby bench. He was not alarmed, nor was he concerned for the person on the bench. The medics, however, assumed this man was in trouble and in need of immediate attention.

The figure is not a person at all, but a statue. The "homeless Jesus" sculpture has been stationed outside the basilica since 2017. It depicts a man lying on a bench with his face totally shrouded, huddling to keep warm. The only way you can tell it's Jesus at all is by the twin piercings in its feet.

People are known to have covered Jesus in a warm blanket or to tuck flowers inside the hood, or just sit and cup his cold feet with their warm hands. It's a symbol for the Twin Cities, experiencing now a housing crisis and some of the most visible reminders of mass homelessness in recent memory. The sculptor, Canadian Timothy Schmalz, wanted to make a visual representation of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, "*Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*"

Homeless Jesus is no hometown hero. In fact, it makes many people uncomfortable, for it is both striking and a little bit shocking.

This is akin to its namesake in Luke's gospel, as the upstart Jesus unfurls the roll of scripture and reads from it. He announces to the religious scholars and leaders that he is the chosen Messiah spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, long, long ago:

God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,

To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

As someone from this congregation reminded me this past week in a discussion about Jesus and the Pharisees, "they really didn't know what to do with him!" Striking and shocking, he could not be ignored. He made people think. He challenged their assumptions. He made them question their values and priorities, and that did not make him at all popular with the religious elite.

Our assumptions often miss the mark, don't they? *Homeless Jesus* pushes us to face the reality of the problem we still face. The sculptor's intent was to "change hearts and minds. If the statue makes you feel a certain way, he says, it could be that you, too, are called to make a difference."

It is a good reminder in these brutally cold and snowy days, that real people will be living outside, as he reminds us, "real people made of flesh, not metal, desperate for warmth, some of whom will "likely die."

Jesus could pick any one of a number of safe texts to read for the scholars that day, safe passages that would cause them all to nod their heads in agreement, lessons from the prophets that would cause them to murmur with low, satisfied sounds. But no.

Jesus picks a lesson *designed* to make them uncomfortable, calculated to challenge their assumptions about God and the prophecies of old. He

proclaims that the Spirit of God has anointed someone to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. Then, as Brian McLaren writes, "he offers this amazing commentary—notable for its brevity and even more for its astonishing claim: 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" (B. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*). They assume he is just another reader; they assume he is talking about God's promise for the people that is to be fulfilled in the future.

They assume wrong. The time is now. The place is here. The anointed one is standing before them.

Hometown hero? Hardly. They don't recognize him as any kind of champion. There will be no theological Superbowl rings given to him to show off in public! They flat-out reject him and reject his teaching, too. They don't know what to do with him, so they set about silencing him so to protect their power.

These are dangerous words he is saying, radical, in-their-face indictments. Respecting the poor, feeding the hungry, healing the untouchables, and freeing the oppressed--all of what he says challenges their power, their norms, and their *assumptions*.

McClaren tells us what happens next: "The Nazareth crowd is impressed that their hometown boy is so articulate and intelligent and bold. But Jesus won't let them simply be impressed or appreciative for long." Jesus says to them that God is for all people, that in history, God

has even bypassed *their* people to help foreigners and outsiders. "You can almost hear the snap as people are jolted by this unexpected turn."

When the religious leaders are called out by Jesus, the people respond with violence. In just a few minutes, they flip "from proud to concerned to disturbed to furious." They chase him to the edge of the cliff, meaning to throw him over the side.

You know, it's universal; folks who want to protect their religious power don't like hearing that their assumptions are mistaken and that their self-proclaimed holiness is actually rather superficial. People are starving out beyond the doors of our safe places, and God expects us to feed those hungry mouths. It's the same now as it was then.

When the *Homeless Jesus* statue was being considered for placement outside the basilica, Van Parys felt the most important opinions on the statue should come from the area's homeless population rather than from the powerful religious leaders to whom he was accountable. This expression of concern by him for the feelings of the unempowered did not go over well with the religious hierarchy.

Nevertheless, he held an open meeting with the street people before the statue was placed out on the sidewalk. "Their reaction was really quite positive," he says. Some were 'really honored' to see Jesus depicted as a person like them—a person on the margins without a place to stay for the night."

No, we don't like it when our assumptions are shown to be wrong. We don't like to hear that we are not doing all we can to feed God's people. We don't like to have our hometown hero question our values and priorities. We don't *really* want to be asked to be Christ's disciples, for that is radical and dangerous work. One does not say *yes* to discipleship lightly. It's a whole lot easier to still that voice by pushing it over the cliff than to be driven by it to radical transformation in which the old assumptions no longer ring true in our hearts and minds.

McClaren sums it up nicely, I think. He says, "To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to hear that challenging good news for *today*, to receive that thrilling invitation to follow him, and to take the first intrepid step on the road as a *disciple*." To be alive in Christ is to let those time-honored assumptions go about what it means to be Christian, so that a new thing may be sculpted in our lives, so that we may truly answer God's call for justice and compassion.

May It Be So.