

## YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

Text: Luke 4:14-21, 22-30  
LHUMC 1/27/13

### I. Introduction

- A. As you may know, in the United Methodist Church, we have an itinerant, appointive process for pastors.
  - 1. What that means is that as a pastor, I make a vow at the time of my ordination that I will go wherever and whenever our bishop asks me to go.
  - 2. What it also means is that theoretically at least, I could be appointed to any church in our conference.
  - 3. However, any pastor will tell you that that one is not entirely true.
    - a) Because every pastor knows, if they grew up within our conference, there is one church that we almost surely will never be appointed.
    - b) And that is our home church—whatever church it is where we were raised.
    - c) So in my case, I can rest assured for the rest of my career that I will never be appointed to the Okemos Community Church.
- B. I sometimes wonder if that unwritten rule came about after the powers-that-be spent some time reading Luke 4.
  - 1. Because as Jesus says and shows, it can be hard to go home again.
  - 2. When he went home, back to where he grew up, to First Church Nazareth, it didn't go well. In UM language, it seems like that appointment was not a good fit.
  - 3. I heard it said once—if you are a prophet or a preacher, it is easy to suffer from “home court disadvantage”, and today's story is a classic example of that.
- C. I understand some of the reasons for all of this—if Jesus' story wasn't enough, there is probably some wisdom in never going back to the church where you grew up.
  - 1. Frederick Niedner, chaplain and teacher at Valparaiso University tells his story: “Choose your words carefully if you preach to the people back home. Those who knew you when remember things that make many messages seem odd. In my case, P. T. Reppert would likely be out there in the congregation. P.T. once got an ugly black eye from a baseball bat I'd flung in anger across a playground. That pretty well knocks out the Sermon on the Mount as a possible text. I spent whole summers with a group of

guys...talking the way teenage boys talk when they're off by themselves. Some of those "boys" would be in the congregation, so imagine the consequences should the day's lessons include Ephesians 5, which says, "let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting." Thankfully, our town has other churches, so Johnny Green's dad would not be at ours. He was Sergeant Green of the Nebraska State Highway Patrol. I had a conversation with him one evening soon after my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. He pulled me over after clocking my speed at 110 m.p.h. He asked if my dad knew I had the car, commented on the foolishness of what I'd done, and began to write a ticket. I glumly estimated the consequences of this transgression—grounded for a month at least, maybe for the whole summer. When Sergeant Green handed me the ticket, I saw that it was a warning. Unbelievable! My parents would never find out. That night I knew for certain that there was a God, a kind and gracious God who watched out for me in multiple ways. But I could hardly go back to that town and preach about how I'd come to such strong convictions. I could never imagine going home to say, "Friends, I stand before you today as the fulfillment of God's ancient promises. Here's my program. (But) Luke says that Jesus did exactly that." (*Christian Century*, January 3, 2001, p. 13.)

2. My stories perhaps aren't that spectacular, although it would be somewhat awkward to speak in front of folks at my home church who still remembered how my buddy Dan Bloomquist and I sat up the balcony during worship for the expressed purpose of messing around, or to those who remembered how I looked so decidedly less-than-enthusiastic as a member of the children's choir that my mother directed.

II. So what do we take from these stories? Even those of us who don't consider ourselves to be particularly "prophetic"? Even those of you who aren't "preachers" (although I would argue that we're all preachers of one kind or another—that's part of the job description of a disciple.) Can you ever go home again? Can you ever speak the truth in love to those who knew you back when? To those who know you now? To those closest to you? Your friends? Your family? To your church? To your community?

A. And one thing to remember from today's story—perhaps the hardest message to give to folks, whether they know you or you know them or not, is the message that Jesus gave that day. A message that even

these folks he knew so well apparently weren't ready to hear—a message about a God who was bigger than what they thought. A God who loved and forgave and healed people who were different than them, even people they considered to be their mortal enemies. You say those things sometimes, and even those who knew you back when might try to silence you, too. But that's not the only message that can be hard to give to those closest to us.

1. It can be hard to tell someone you know and love to change their behavior.
  2. It can be hard to tell someone you know and love that going to church might be good for them.
  3. It can be hard to tell someone you know and love that maybe their view of God and who is welcome in God's Kingdom might be a little narrow.
  4. And I'm sure most of you have your own examples—times when you've tried to be a prophetic preacher to those closest to you and it didn't go well.
- B. So I'm thinking that today's story, as well as all those other times when Jesus had to tell people perhaps what they didn't want to hear, might teach us how to better approach those times—Times when we sense the need to speak out, even in our own “home towns”. What does Jesus teach us?
1. You have to walk the talk.
    - a) I've heard it said that when Jesus got up that day and started by quoting that passage from Isaiah about “bringing good news to the poor” and “releasing the captives” and “recovery of sight to the blind” that he was giving them what was to be his personal mission statement for ministry.
    - b) And as he began to live out that ministry, it's pretty clear that that is exactly what it was.
    - c) If you had to summarize exactly what Jesus was all about, what he tells them there at the beginning of his message sums it up pretty well.
    - d) But it wasn't in just his words, it was in his deeds.
    - e) He didn't just talk about the poor and captives and the blind, he walked with them, ate with them, even healed them.
    - f) As time passed, and more and more people got over their anger with him and his message simply because they saw him walking the talk, he became an example of the reality that when you do that, people are much more likely to listen.

2. You can't condemn your audience.
  - a) Notice that Jesus never says to his home town audience what their shortcomings are.
  - b) Yes, he didn't mince any words, and he did confront them, but he never said that they were a lost cause.
  - c) Instead he gave them a vision of the future by giving them a vision of the past—of times when God acted in the lives of outsiders, with the promise that God was going to continue to act that way.
  - d) And he basically gave them a choice—they could get with the program, with his program, or not.
  - e) But there is no finger wagging, no personal attacks, no condemnation.
  - f) After giving his personal mission statement, and he simply lays out the program.
  - g) Sometimes that is the approach we need when we are dealing with folks who we are trying to help see the light—"Here's the program. And the program is one of love for everyone, including you."
  - h) In my experience, that works way better than telling people how rotten they are!
3. And then the other thing that he did that day was that he used scripture as the foundation for his message to them.
  - a) And it wasn't just one little verse—an approach that can be dangerous in the wrong hands sometimes when you consider that just about any opinion can be backed with a verse of scripture if you look hard enough.
  - b) No, when Jesus turned to the scripture and quoted Isaiah, and then used those various stories from the Old Testament to further make his point, he was going "big picture" on them—that picture being one of a God who reaches out to those on the outside, and who calls us to do the same.
  - c) A message that can be called perhaps the biggest big picture of all in the Bible.
  - d) It reminds me of what one of my preaching teachers used to say to us-- "When all else fails, try the Bible".
  - e) It seems so obvious, but sometimes that when we are trying to get people on board with Jesus' message, we make it all about us vs. them, and forget that the Bible has some things to say about who he was and what he taught.

III. Conclusion—So if that’s what we can learn from Jesus based on today’s story, a couple final thoughts about going home again and speaking a word of the Lord to those closest to us.

A. No one says it’s going to be easy. And it wasn’t for Jesus either—I have to think that he knew the kind of reaction that he was going to get that day before he said anything. It’s never easy to give a message that people may not want to hear, but that they need to hear.

1. I remember a story told about Stanley Hauerwas—one of the prophetic preachers of our own time. I always remember it specifically whenever I read Luke 4. He was leading a pastors’ workshop one time and during the question and answer time, one of the pastors raised his hand and said, “the bishop sent me to a little town in South Carolina. I preached one Sunday on the challenge of racial justice. In two months the people were so angry that the bishop moved me. At the next church, I was determined for things to go better. Didn’t preach about race. But we had an incident in town, and I felt forced to speak. The board met that week and voted unanimously for us to be moved. My wife got insulted at the supermarket. My children were roughed up at the school playground.” And in true prophetic spirit, Stanley Hauerwas replied, “And your point is what? We work for the living God, not a false, dead one. Did somebody tell you it would be easy?” (retold by William Willimon in the article “Book ‘Em” in *Christian Century*, January 27, 2004, p. 20)

2. His response seems harsh, but at the same time, don’t miss his point.

3. By definition, to work and speak and live for a living God means that we will inevitably rub up against the ways of the world, even in those we are around every day, at work, at school, maybe even in our own families.

4. And to speak and act out the truth in love to folks in those places, to be what Jesus calls a prophet in our own home towns, is never easy.

B. My final thought comes from a book those of us on our Vital Church Initiative team has been reading. It’s called *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* and it talks about how to be leader when things are conflicted—not just in church, but in everyday situations in life. Kind of like the way it was in the synagogue in Nazareth that day. The author talks about how to be a non-anxious presence in times like that. And as I was reading the book at the same time I was

pondering today's story, I realized there were some connections. That what is amazing about Jesus in situations like what he found himself in in today's story is how non-anxious he was able to be. And the author of the book lists some ways to stay non-anxious (p. 44-45), and I realized this is how Jesus was. The list includes:

1. Having a clarity in what you believe—specifically having a set of convictions, values, and beliefs and knowing what you would “die for” and what’s really important.
    - a) The author put “die for” in italics, but Jesus had a clarity that allowed him to take out the italics! He literally died for what he believed. To be able to speak and make a difference in our hometowns, it takes clarity and a conviction in what we believe.
  2. Taking stands with courage—specifically standing firm in the face of strong reactions. Jesus turned that into the main characteristic of his ministry.
  3. Staying connected to others, despite it all
    - a) And that’s certainly Jesus, too.
    - b) When Jesus went home again, and spoke to his people a message that they didn’t want to hear but needed to hear, he did it because he loved them.
    - c) And I’m pretty sure even as they dragged him out of the sanctuary and up the cliff, he still loved them!
- C. So maybe in the end, you can go home again. Following the example of Jesus, maybe we can speak a message of truth in love to those around us.
- D. So we give thanks to God for giving us the words to speak, the actions to live out, and the courage and the conviction and the grace to do all of the above even in our own home towns.

