

Humble Beginnings

A sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 8, 2023, based on Luke 4:21-30.

Jesus grew up in a small town -- Nazareth. I've lived in two rural Oregon small towns, and you know, there is a definite charm about life in such places. There's a easy sympathy between locals and a particular humor available you can't find in larger communities.

People in small bergs sometimes overlook the kinds of things that divide people in larger places. I remember when one of our church members lost everything in a fire that burned her house -- everyone in Myrtle Point came to her aid. I mean, everyone. Doors opened to her and her family everywhere and immediately. She didn't have to pay for a thing for months.

In those towns you can't do anything without chatting with the people you do business with, and this can take your whole day. You may not have to walk more than three short blocks to the drug store, but don't plan on getting out of there in under an hour.

There are few secrets in Myrtle Point, or I should say, secrets in Myrtle don't stay secret long. That's why there is little reason to use your turn signals in a small town if you live in one, I mean -- because everyone knows where you're going, anyway.

Listen to the following summing up of one man about rural living.

When people ask what I like about small town life, I tell them about the time my mother took my truck to the grocery store. I had left a fishing pole in the passenger seat and when she had rounded a curve the poll fell over and the hook got snagged in the back of her collar. Unable to get the hook out, and too modest to take off her blouse, my mother went into the store carrying the fishing poll. Elvin, the elderly store owner, couldn't get the hook out either so he simply walked behind my mother carrying the fishing pole while she did her shopping. You just can't get that kind of service in the city. (from Sun Magazine, Feb 2004)

Imagine that happening at Nordstroms?

I have a friend named, Mike, who grew up in Oroville, California. Mike likes making gentle fun of his hometown. He's a talented fellow but very humble, and I think part of that comes from those humble beginnings.

I asked him once about Oroville, and he said "Oro" in Spanish means gold. The town sprang up in the gold rush. Back in the 1850s it was the largest town in California, for about a month. Then it settled down and became a settling-in place for Chinese and then dust-bowlers. There's nothing very golden about it, except for its memory of itself as having been the luckiest place to be on earth for one short month, long ago.

Well, no one knows how the little Galilean town of Nazareth became ashamed of its name. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth" was the saying, and the gospel of John repeats it. Maybe Nazareth was easy to dismiss, not because something bad happened there. Maybe it was because NOTHING ever happened there. Before Jesus, Nazareth had produced no kings, no generals, no scholars, no prophets – nothing.

It suffered badly from a lousy self-image. And Poor Jesus; he had to be the focal point for the struggle they were having inside their own souls over this.

The congregation at Nazareth thought they knew Jesus well. After all, this was Joseph, the carpenter's son; they had known him from childhood.

Thinking we know someone well can blind us to the unexpected, to the mystery God is maybe working out through that person.

Theologian Ronald Rolheiser observes, "Imagine someone coming up to you and telling you: 'You know, I understand you. I've watched you grow up, I know your Myers-Briggs results. I know your Enneagram number, and I am familiar with the dysfunction of your family. Besides that, you are French, and we all know the temperament of the French! And you are so perfectly your mother's daughter! Oh yes, I do understand you perfectly!'

You'd want to slug him. Compare that to someone who comes up to you and says, 'You know, I don't understand you at all! You are one rich mystery! I've known you for twenty years and you constantly surprise me!'" (THE SHATTERED LANTERN, Ronald Rolheiser).

The citizens of Nazareth could not deny that Jesus had all the marks of something good *finally* coming out of Nazareth. He was acknowledged to be a particularly fine preacher. "A report about him spread through all the surrounding country." Luke reports that he "was praised by everyone."

It was no doubt particularly pleasing for the folks in Nazareth to learn that Jesus had caused a stir in the nearby rival village of Capernaum, turning people's heads there.

So, when Jesus comes home, the synagogue in Nazareth is full to overflowing. They hand him the Isaiah scroll, and the congregation beams. He reads the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . ." and the congregation swells with pride. But this good feeling is short-lived.

"Jesus noticed that their woundedness about their crummy hometown was making them hard and clannish, even ugly. He realized that beneath their pride over him there was a misunderstanding of his calling, a desire to see in him only an expression of Nazareth's vision. They wanted him to be theirs alone, to be *all* Nazareth and *no* Capernaum. So he challenged them.

He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Caper'na-um, do here also in your own country.'"

And he said, *Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Eli'jah ... when there came a great famine over all the land; and Eli'jah was sent to none of them but only to Zar'ephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow... And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Eli'sha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Na'aman the Syrian."*

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were mad as hell; and they rose up and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong.

Wil Willimon, put it this way, “It was a hard word for Nazareth to hear. What Jesus was saying was that in order to be *for* Nazareth he was going to have to appear to be *against* Nazareth, against its desire to confine and contain the work of God.

To be what he needs to be for everyone, Jesus needs to turn on those who have little small town images of him.

In order to speak good news to the poor he will need to speak a word of judgment against the rich who are holding all the money and have the ear of those who make the tax laws that give the rich preferential treatment.

In order to be the healer of the sick and blind he will need to leave the safe streets of the healthy. In order to be a friend of sinners, he will need to speak harshly to the righteous. Only by eventually going to Jerusalem to speak truth to power can he ‘save’ humble little Nazareth.”

In his sermon Jesus was just reminding the synagogue congregation that God’s way has always been like this. God is creator of heaven and earth, not just some local deity enshrined in some grotto down the street.

In fact, Jesus says, for God to show God’s love for Israel, God worked wonders in places called Sidon, and Syria. In order to show God’s love for the church, God is busy working outside the church, outside Christianity, outside the city limits of every *Nazareth* we can imagine.

Well, the people of Jesus’ hometown were enraged by this. They weren’t just mad.

Author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about being at a retreat once, where the keynote speaker asked those gathered to think of someone who represented Christ to them in their lives.

When it came time for them to share their answers, one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"

I remember one evening at dinner when I was in seminary we had a discussion, we seminarians, about the nature of God. I have not forgotten one young woman piping up and giving us a definition for God I have never heard improved upon. She said, "God is the great balloon popper with air for new balloons."

Do you get the image? That certainly explains God as we understand God in Jesus. Jesus was seldom shy about popping other people's balloons, other people's most cherished ideas. He lived out in his person the Hebrew Testament adage where, through the prophet, God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts."

"Can anything good ever come out of Nazareth?" Well, something very good was driven out of Nazareth that day. The congregation rode Jesus out of town on a rail and even had thoughts of throwing him over one of the cliffs Nazareth is famous for.

It was a foreshadowing of what the world would eventually do to him on the cross. It's what the world always does to people who speak up like he does on behalf of outsiders.

One interpreter of scripture puts it this way: "It's not God's harshness or aloofness that makes us angry; it's God's mercy." (Will Willimon) It's too big, too wide. It's easier to spend our lives licking our local wounds and making nasty remarks about Tigard or Hillsboro than it is to try to live as generously, as kindly, and as mercifully as Jesus tried to live.

Some years ago there was a lot of talk at a pretty high level in this country about "evil doers." Remember? That talk and the action that followed, got us, as a nation, in some horrible messes in the Middle East that we're still not entirely free of.

Well, the Russian novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, once wrote: “If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Now, just think about who said that – Solzhenitsyn had been in the Soviet Gulag. He knew that Stalin had killed some 35 million of his countrymen. How easy it would have been for Solzhenitsyn to call Stalin and his henchmen “evil doers” and paint himself as a victim; a martyr.

He knew better. He knew his own heart. He knew what hate does to people. And he also knew the mercies of God. Always brimming over.

God’s way, according to Jesus, is not to wall yourself off from your enemies. If there is to be peace in the world, he said, you have to embrace your enemies – enemies like Naaman, the Syrian general who is befriended by Elisha the prophet.

The polarization in this country is so great these days. We all know it has to do with how walled off we are from each other when it comes to our sources of news, and the communities (online and off) where we share information about the things we care about most.

I mean, most of us use the Internet not to seek the best information, but rather to select information that confirms our prejudices. Right?

Our problem is that no matter how we see things, we all of us know we are right. We have our opinion and that’s that. Other people who disagree with us – they must be dupes.

In 1859, the philosopher, John Stuart Mill, said, “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”

Years ago I was asked by the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in rural Utah to debate him on the question: "Is Homosexuality Compatible with Christianity." He was of the opinion that it wasn't compatible.

He had booked a room at the University of Utah and was looking for an opponent; someone who believed that Jesus had no beef with gay people.

After a day or two I said, yes. I did so, not because I thought I was any great debator or thought I could win the day. I did it because 1) I knew I would learn a lot by just having to get ready for such a thing, and 2) I knew I would learn a lot from my opponent, Rev. Wallace, in the course of the debate since we disagreed so completely on subjects like God and the Bible..

I was right -- preparing helped me figure out what exactly I believed and why. I hadn't had to assemble an argument about the topic since the early 1990s.

Hear John Stuart Mill's words one more time: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion."

Steven Colbert said recently that what is wrong with America today is that we are too good at choosing sides. He said, we shouldn't choose sides. We should only choose ideas.

A lot of people, left and right, have chosen a side today, who have no ideas. They just have a hunch about the direction the country is going today. Or maybe all they have is a bias; one that blinds them and kills any compassion or fellow feeling they may naturally have.

Someone has said, "Better to debate a question without settling it than settle a question without debating it" (*Joseph Joubert*).

Well, neither I nor Rev. Wallace settled the debate about the relationship of Christianity and homosexuality, but I'm happy to say that we did, I think, inform the hundred or so people who came that the issue (and the Bible) were not as cut and dried as they maybe believed when they walked in that evening.

I hoped also that they saw that while we were each passionate about our ideas, we were never going to say that people who did not hold our ideas were not Christians.

I guess what I am saying is that we need to hear what the folks in Nazareth (and Yamhill, and The Dalles) are saying these days. Most of us only hear what the folks here in PDX are saying; or maybe we only hear what people in *our own* s part of the metro area are saying. God help us find new ways to open our hearts in 2023.

Amen