

The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, 2010

What to make of today's Gospel story? It just doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. Coupled with last week's Gospel, it goes something like this:

Jesus returns to his hometown, it's the Sabbath, so he goes to Temple and, as a guest, or perhaps as the hometown boy made good, he is invited to read the Scripture and comment on it. And then suddenly, things turn from bad to worse, and the locals are trying to hurl Jesus off a cliff.

This story also appears in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, but in much less detail. In the story in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus is teaching in the Temple on the Sabbath. Many are amazed at his teachings and ask themselves, "Isn't this Mary and Joseph's son? Don't we know his family? Where does he come by this wisdom?" And in each Gospel the next incredible line is: "And they took offense at him." And Jesus leaves without performing any "great deeds," uttering the now well-worn phrase, "a prophet is not without honor, except in his own home."

But in the Gospel of Luke, it seems that it is Jesus who picks the fight. He has just told them that he is the fulfillment of the promises made by God to the people of Israel. And he teaches them, and they are amazed "at the gracious words that came from his mouth." All seems to be going along swimmingly, until the people utter the words that seem to send Jesus over the edge. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they ask.

It seems that in all three Gospels the idea that a local man, a carpenter's son, could possibly have such wisdom, beyond that of his elders, is incomprehensible. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we see this right away. "Is this not the son of Mary and Joseph?" they ask. They are offended, and Jesus leaves.

Here, in the Lucan story, Jesus comes right back at them. "Is this not Joseph's son?" they ask. Almost as if they are saying, "Wait a minute, we know you, you're Joseph's boy. What are you doing here?" And suddenly everything is changed. Jesus challenges them and they get so

angry they are prepared to throw him off a cliff!

In all three Gospels, the end result is the same: Jesus leaves his home town. For good. Scholars say that Luke is setting up the universality of Jesus' message, the mission to the Gentiles, the spread of the Kingdom. And while I think this is true, I remain wondering about this homecoming and leave taking.

In the three versions of this story it is only Luke who places this return to Nazareth at the start of Jesus' ministry. He has been baptized by John, tried in the desert, taught in the synagogues of Galilee, and is now home.

Why did he go back? That's what I wonder. Why did he go back? Was he seeking comfort? Solace? Peace? Was this the place where Jesus could just be for a while? Or did he truly hope to start his ministry there, at home, with people who knew him, and loved him.

Whatever the reason for his going home, it becomes clear to him right away, that the "son of Joseph," will never be the Son of God in their eyes. They think they know him, "the son of Joseph," and that's all they need to know. His place in their minds is fixed. And so Jesus must leave the place he once called home, and begin his long journey to Jerusalem.

I read an article in the New York Times on Friday about the work being done by some in the Dominican Republic for the people of Haiti. Lots of countries are assisting the people of Haiti, but the help of the people of the Dominican Republic is particularly newsworthy.

These two nations share the tiny island of Hispaniola, but they do not trust one another, and it seems they spend a great deal of time complaining about one another, citing decades old grievances. What they know about one another is negative; what they feel about one another ranges from ambivalence, to resentment, to anger.

Yet now, in the rubble of the earthquake, the people of the Dominican Republic are reaching out to the people of Haiti. Oh, it wasn't easy. Each side wondered if it would work. Each side wondered if there would be violence, or abuse. But the Dominicans went, and the Haitians accepted them.

A senior diplomat at the Dominican Embassy said, "Our relations with Haiti will never be the same." And a Haitian community activist is quoted as saying, "I guess they don't hate us as much as we thought."

And perhaps this is the message in Jesus' leave taking. If we are to change the world, if we are to be changed, we must be willing to challenge our own assumptions, and to have them challenged by others. We must leave what is comfortable and strike out for something new. We must leave this place: this place of comfort and solace; this place of ancient prayers, and comfortable words; this place where our Savior comes to us in bread and wine; this place where we are fed. We must leave this place, and go out there, and take our chances.

In here we get to know God. In here we experience the love of Christ in our fellowship with one another. In here we are known.

But out there - out there is someone waiting to know you, waiting to be rescued from the rubble of oppression, of poverty, of hunger; waiting to hear the Good News that you have to give.

Don't keep it to yourself.

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