

Humble Beginnings

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 1, 2017,
based on Luke 4:21-30.*

Jesus grew up in a small town -- Nazareth. I've lived in two rural small towns in my life. And I will say there is a definite charm about life in such places. There's a warmth available there you can't easily find in larger communities, if you are considered a member, that is.

You can't do anything without visiting 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 such places, or I should say, secrets in such places 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 – because everyone knows where you're going anyway. Listen to the following summing up of one man about life in such a place.

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 poet friend named, Mike, who is from 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. It was the largest town in California, once, 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 little 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 easy to dismiss because NOTHING ever happened there. Before Jesus, Nazareth had produced no kings, no generals, no scholars, no prophets – nothing.

Poor Nazareth. It suffered badly from a shattered 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, and your background. 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!'"

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 still 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. The folks from Nazareth may have been made especially proud by the way Jesus turned people's heads there.

So, when Jesus comes back from there, the synagogue in Nazareth is full to over-flowing. 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 would be 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, to be for "us" and *not* for "them." So he challenged them.

And 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. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Eli'jah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, 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 filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, 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. In order to be for Nazareth, Jesus would have to leave Nazareth. In order to be for Nazareth, Jesus would have to hit the road out of town, a road that would carry him eventually to a hill outside of Jerusalem."

It isn't easy to hear. Jesus is for us, but not just us. Jesus is for all the others as well. In fact, sometimes, to be what he needs to be for everyone, he needs to turn on those of us with our 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 savior 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 this way. God is creator of heaven and earth, not just some local deity enshrined in some grotto down the street. God's saving power is bigger than any single town can hold. God's mercy is wider than any one village can imagine.

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. 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 when 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 ever 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 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?" the people said. Well, something very good was driven out of Nazareth that day. The congregation rode Jesus out of town and even had thoughts of throwing him over a precipice. 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.

Wil Willimon put it this way: "It's not God's harshness or aloofness that makes us angry; it's God's mercy." It's too big, too wide. It's easier to spend out lives licking our local wounds and making nasty remarks about Capernaum 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." That talk and the action that followed, got us as a nation in some horrible messes in the Middle East that we still are trying to get 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 saint, maybe.

He knew better. He knew his own heart. He knew what hate does to people. And he also knew the prodigal 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. I think 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.

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."

Over a year ago I was asked by the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Magna to debate him on the question: "Is Homosexuality Compatible with Christianity."

He had booked a room at the university here 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 even 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 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 I believed and why. I hadn't had to assemble an argument about the topic since the early 1990s when I was serving a group of people who mostly disagreed with me on the topic.

Hear 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. And I think he is right.

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 they're parents or professors drilled into them.

Again, when we choose sides, we shut ourselves off from hearing what other people are really saying.

Here's how that works. A liberal will tweet a video of members of an Alt Right group at a meeting following the election standing up with a right arm extended repeating the words "Heil Trump." That goes viral immediately.

And an Alt-Right supporter, in turn, will tweet a picture of a sign at an outdoor demonstration being up by a liberal that says, "Patriotism is Racism." Same result.

Each side picks the most inflammatory thing someone on the other side is saying, and it just makes millions of his fellows angry as hell. This is not helping. But it's the world we currently live in.

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

Neither I nor Rev. Jason Wallace settled the debate about 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 was 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 here in Salt Lake City, need to hear what the folks in Nazareth (and all the other small towns out there) are saying these days. Most of us only hear what the folks in the city are saying; maybe we only hear what people in *this* part of the city are saying. God help us to open our hearts in 2017.

Amen