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Congregational Church of La Jolla
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The Greatest of These

Luke 4: 21-30

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Let us pray:

Gracious God: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight. Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

I have a strong memory attached to the Gospel lesson that we heard Bronwyn read. Specifically the line, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” Now the first time I actually heard this line used was not in church... At least in my experience, its not one of the Gospel stories that stands out or that I remembered from my many years in church. But when I was a freshman in college I took United Church of Christ History and Polity at Harvard Divinity School which was a graduate course that I had to receive special permission to cross enroll in. But the reason I wanted to take this course was because it was taught by the denominational counselor to United Church of Christ students at Harvard who was the person who knew how the ordination process worked and who helped shepherd seminary students through that process. I also was interested in meeting Masters students who were much closer to the finish line than I was and to figure out how they got there. It was a class of 4 of us and during the semester we took a field trip to the conference office of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ and there we had a chance to meet the President of the United Church of Christ of Massachusetts. All of us in the class took turns introducing ourselves and my introduction was a bit unique because I was only 19 and an undergraduate and I was in a class with 3 others who were well beyond their college years and one of them who was coming to ministry as a second career and so I introduced myself as a freshman who was taking this class so that I could get to know the UCC better and figure out how people pursue professional ministry and I followed it up with saying that I was a member of First Congregational UCC of Great Falls, MT where I frequently preached during my high school years and that on school breaks I returned home to fill the pulpit there as well.

After making this introduction the Jim Antal, the President of United Church of Christ’s largest conference — the state where we are the largest faith group outside of the Roman Catholic Church — looked at me and said “well that’s impressive they invite you to preach so much... for no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” Now I had no idea why he said this or what he meant but everyone chuckled and I went along with it. And it wasn’t until later with the help of Google that I was brought to this Gospel Lesson.

Jesus is on his home turf. And upon hearing his words they are surprised, they take note at his graciousness and we hear one onlooker in particular ask, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” Which is one of those sentences where the tone really implies the true meaning. In this case, I believe the emphasis needs to be on “Joseph” so that the question is read something like this, “Is this Joseph’s son?” Who knows whatever they are implying about Jesus’ earthly father but they are clearly surprised that Joseph the carpenter could rear such a well spoken and gracious son. This local boy has made good and they are proud.

The people of Nazareth have heard about Jesus and his amazing work and they want to see some of that here, in their town. They want home town advantage. They want Jesus to heal some of them. He wants him to turn water into wine there. They want to receive some of these benefits they’ve been sharing about. But instead of playing favorites Jesus has a hard message for them.

He reminds them about how – during a famine once, way back in the day – when all of Israel – God’s chosen ones – could have used a little favor, that the prophet Elijah was sent outside the fold, to help some widow in Zarephath of Sidon. And he reminds them about how, during the good ol’ days of the prophet Elisha, there were plenty of Hebrew lepers who could have used a cleansing, but that Elisha was sent to an outsider – some guy named Naaman from, of all places, Syria.

One of the main themes of Luke’s Gospel is communicating the universal nature of Jesus’s saving work. The scandalous idea that Jesus is presenting here is that salvation is available to both Jews and Gentiles and Jesus communicates this idea by reminding his audience that the prophet Elijah was not sent to any of Israel’s starving widows but was rather sent to a Gentile widow in Sidon. Furthermore, Elisha was sent not to comfort any of Israel’s lepers but rather was sent to Naaman the Syrian— another Gentile. The idea here being that Jesus’ ministry, located within this grand tradition—will be ever more inclusive, expansive, and for everyone. It isn’t just for them...the people of Nazareth... it is for everyone. And this inclusive message that God’s grace and favor must be shared with foreigners causes Jesus audience to lose their minds.

It challenged their deepest assumptions and prejudices so profoundly that they responded with such rage and unwillingness to go along with the vision Jesus was casting that they responded by attempting to physically throw him off the side of a cliff and be done with him forever.

Now, if any of you are ever in Nazareth you will really see this story come alive vibrantly because its terrain is extremely steep and hilly and there is a very steep cliff in town called Mount Precipice and its almost right off the road and you look down and suddenly there is about a 1000 foot plunge straight down. This is sort of where it’s thought this took place and in 2009 Pope Benedict held a mass with 40,000 people on Mount

Precipice. But even if not there, Nazareth is a town of many steep cliffs that one could be pushed off of. In many parts of town there will only be houses on one side of the street and on the other side will just be stacks of building materials and quarried stone.

Luke places this story in the beginning of Jesus' ministry not because that might be actually when it took place, but because this story communicates the entire paradigm of who Jesus was and what he was all about. He was initially received favorably in his congregation and in his hometown and people marveled at what had come of this son of Joseph. They marvel at his miracles and gracious teachings.

But Jesus was right a prophet is not accepted in his hometown — especially when that prophet comes bearing not only gracious words but deeply challenging words, words which challenge the people's deepest assumptions and narratives—words that they didn't want to hear. And it's as true today as it was then that if you knew someone when they wore diapers and before they had teeth its hard to take their opinion seriously on anything. Its generally advised even now that one not serve a church they were a child in—even if you are 30 years old they will still see you as belonging in Sunday School. It's for this same reason that its often a professional best practice to not promote someone to a leadership role in the same building or the same location where one worked side-by-side with colleagues they are now supposed to supervise. A good example of this is that in some school districts if I teacher becomes a school principal they will serve as principal of a school where they were not a teacher — because it can be hard to see someone in a new way, in a new role, especially if that's someone we've known a long time.

The people of Nazareth knew Jesus, they knew his family. Not only was his message revolutionary and counter to everything they assumed was true but it was coming out of the lips of someone they knew as a child and this was enough for them to chase him right off the cliff.

Sometimes it can be scary to be messenger of a faith, hope, and love that is for everyone, that is radically inclusive, and that topples all walls and boundaries and erases all distinctions between between people. No insiders or outsiders, no distinctions between locals and foreigners. Sometimes that message can land you in dangerous places, for Jesus it almost led him off the side of a cliff and later on down the road it would lead him to a cross on a hill.

The cover art for today is by a self taught folk artist named Sister Gertrude Morgan. Next week is Christie's annual folk art sale and this is one of the pieces in the catalog and so I thought this was a good cover image for us. Sister Gertrude Morgan was from Alabama but moved to New Orleans where she lived most of her life. Born in 1900 and died in 1980. This is a picture of herself. She had a third grade education but felt a deep call to minister and preach. She taught herself to read and write and she knew Bible stories and could also play the piano but her church in Alabama required formal training to allow

her to preach and this was something that wasn't accessible to her as a poor black woman in the 1920s. She received her final revelation that God was calling her to preach and she was so excited she ran from house to house in the middle of the night to tell people and she decided she had to leave her home to pursue her calling. She became what was called a "jack leg" preacher which were a sort of traveling musical evangelists that would travel the rail lines and sell the songs they wrote

She ended up settling down in New Orleans and she started wearing a white nurse outfit every day.... And she took Christ as her spiritual husband and she considered herself his nurse and she painted and preached and was a fixture of New Orleans until her death and now her work can be found in the Smithsonian and in all the best folk art collections the world over.

As we continue to approach black history month I will continue to share with you the rich tradition of African American folk art on our bulletin covers. But Sister Gertrude Morgan was a good choice for today when we hear of those who have been called to serve and who have had to depart their hometowns, to leave that which is familiar—those who preached a message that was dangerous for their time, a message of faith, hope and love that was so radical that people would rather chase them off a cliff.

May we all be so brave as to go into our hometowns or among the places where we are known the best and have the courage to speak the truth, to say what needs to be said, and to cast an inclusive vision of God's love and justice.

Amen.