

Disappointment and Leadership

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

January 30, 2022

Text

Luke 4: 16-30 (today's reading: Luke 16: 21-30)

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' ²³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Prayer

Sermon

Let me tell you about a moment in one of my favorite movies. Our hero, gone from his hometown, off to seek his fortune, comes back to rescue his beloved. He performs deeds of great daring and skill in his efforts toward his goal, all while wearing a mask that keeps him from being recognized - recognized either as the humble farmboy that he used to be, or as who he has become - an internationally famous pirate.

As he works toward his beloved, he encounters foes that will turn in to allies - they will eventually follow this mysterious figure and join in his quest. But first, one of them has a question.

Inigo Montoya: Who are you?

Westley: No one of consequence.

Inigo Montoya: I must know.

Westley: Get used to disappointment.

The movie is *The Princess Bride*, and spoiler alert - hit mute now - Westley aka The Dread Pirate Roberts is reunited with his beloved.

I have always wanted to quote that movie in a sermon.

Get used to disappointment.

Get used to disappointment sounds like a summary of what Jesus says to the folks of his hometown, to whom he has returned. He left, the humble child of Mary, a young mother of “mean estate” and Joseph, likely a poor day laborer carpenter.¹ He returned as a rabbi, a teacher, an interpreter of scripture, one that folks in the synagogue would sit and listen to and be amazed by. And yet. They would also turn against him and run him out of town. “As the son of a modest artisan, Jesus should not be teaching with such authority, honor, and influence.”²

Perhaps the people of Nazareth were simultaneously excited to see one of their own come home, greatly accomplished, ready to spread his wings in the world - and frustrated that Jesus would not be at their beck and call through his ministry. Perhaps the people of Nazareth were simultaneously impressed that someone was finally talking about the liberation proclaimed in Isaiah, and disappointed that accomplishing it would ask so much of them. Perhaps the people of Nazareth were ticked off when one of their own said they were going to be ticked off... Well, the people of Nazareth were disappointed.

Have you ever been disappointed in a leader?

Your teacher, your state rep, your meteorologist, your pastor, perhaps?

They didn't cover the topic you're interested in, didn't forward the bill you wanted out of committee, didn't get the forecast right, didn't show up when you needed them?

Have you ever been a leader that someone was disappointed in?

A teacher, a public employee, a pastor, perhaps?

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/socialclass.html>

²

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-421-30-5>

You're too compassionate or too strict or or didn't show up on time or too pastoral or too political for someone?

I'm so interested in the way that our scripture reading today ends: "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

Jesus does something interesting here, that he repeats in other places in the gospels. He remains calm in the face of the anxiety and anger of the folks around him. You might remember from Mark 4: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" " Jesus calms the storm. There's another time when people are ready to stone a woman, and Jesus kneels over and draws in the dirt...and then teaches. He stays focused on his mission and purpose. Jesus, my model for most things, is able to weather anxiety, anger and disappointment and stay calm and focused in the midst of it. That is quite the spiritual gift.

I was interested to see one of our national UCC leaders, Elizabeth Dilley, discussing natural cycles of disappointment within congregations. She went on to connect expected cycles of disappointment with this unique CoVid era, which is wearing a lot of people and communities down. Thankfully, she had some wisdom:

"It's important to remember that this happens in healthy and unhealthy systems alike, that the ways through are through investing in relationship-building, listening, and making generous assumptions.... It comes from working through the conflicts, from figuring out the kernel of truth in a mountain of unfair assumptions and accusations and dealing with that rather than the other stuff, and from continuing to invest in your inner prayer life (for individuals) and corporate prayer life (for congregations).

...We're coming up on Year 3 of Coronatide. Stuff that used to work isn't working as well..... What we've been doing hasn't solved/fixed all the big problems of our communities. We're tired and angry and would just like to blame someone or enact all the "If only....." scenarios running through our head. If, instead, we can continue to be "hard on issues and gentle on people," invest in our relationships and the health of our systems without blaming people and systems for not being perfect, then very likely we'll see our ministries deepen to a new level of trust and faithfulness."³

I love that advice enough to say it again: be hard on issues and gentle on people, invest in relationships and the health of our systems without blaming people and systems for not being perfect." That's good news.

Now, let me pause here. It could sound like I'm comparing myself, or other clergy, to Jesus. If it sounds that way, would you forgive me and allow me to clarify? What I really mean to point to is that any of us who lead groups, and any of us who have a sense of mission and purpose that could be a challenge to our community - which I think means a lot of the folks in this

³ Via Facebook, January 24, 2022

congregation - are likely to disappoint someone. And any of us who are part of groups are likely to be disappointed by a leader.

But our ultimate leader is Jesus, and I always look to Jesus to set our example.

In this moment, Jesus does something that systems thinkers feel is good leadership. (Systems thinking is one of the things pastors learn about, and then learn about again, and then learn about again. It's the focus of my main continuing education this year.)

Jesus stays connected to the folks in his group. He's in dialogue with them.

But he also stays focused on his mission.

And as he does this, he is a calm, non-anxious and self-differentiated presence.

He isn't drawn into the whirl and swirl of the storm.

One of the folks in our Bible Study this week picked up this: Jesus forgave them and did not respond in anger to their anger.

He passes through the midst of the storm and goes on his way, to Capernaum, where he will also wind up disappointing people when his mission takes him away from there, too.

In Capernaum,

"42 At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. 43 But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.' 44 So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea."

Jesus, calm, self-differentiated, and non-anxious, continues.

Cheryl Lindsay frames the end of today's passage in a helpful way:

"Here's the good news in this story: rejection of Jesus does not stop the movement of Jesus. He's not destroyed; he keeps going."⁴

I'd be the first to testify: it's a challenge to be as calm as Jesus. I am not always, not instinctively a calm person, so I have much to learn from our Teacher in this. And in fact there are moments when Jesus is not calm in the Gospels: turning the tables or praying in the garden. But in this morning's text, Jesus keeps calm and carries on, and so, perhaps, this is one more thing we can learn from our Teacher. Thanks be to God for the lesson, and the one who keeps teaching. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seed-rejected/>