

Into the World God Loves
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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11:05

Since it's Communion Sunday and we always have a Prayer of Confession, I need to confess something. I drive way too fast. My mom taught me to drive and a friend of mine once compared her driving to being on a rocketship, so I blame her. When I was in high school, I got pulled over for speeding, and when the police officer asked the dreaded question, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" I decided to be honest, "I might have been driving a little fast." He didn't look amused as he said, "The speed limit here is 25 and you were going 55. And, young lady, this is a school zone." I apologized, but he asked for my license and registration and went back to his car.

He came back pretty quickly and said, "Are you Bruce Lorincz's daughter, the Assistant Principal at the Middle School?" I managed to mumble a yes and he left to finish processing my information. I was sweating bullets—my dad was in charge of all disciplinary matters at the Middle School. If this officer had kids and they ever got into trouble, my dad would have been the one to decide their punishment—after school detention, in school suspension, out of school suspension, expulsion—all these punishments were decided by my dad. But now my fate was in this officer's hands.

He came back to the car once again and piled on the guilt, "I sure would hate to have to tell your father that you drove too fast, lost control of your car, and killed yourself one night. Do you understand what I'm saying? I've decided to give you a warning, but you had better show this to your father. And if I find out you didn't, you are going to be in big trouble." I did show my parents that written warning for speeding as soon as I got home. My dad was horrified that I was going 30 miles an hour over the speed limit and in a school zone no less, how embarrassing for our family. My mom, on the other hand, told me I should never speed on that stretch of the road, it's a speed trap, and the cops are there all the time. "Come on, Lauren, I taught you better than that."

I thought of this experience when considering how folks reacted to Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth. When you live in a smaller town and your reputation or your family's reputation precedes you, it can be hard to be your own person. People judge you and either give you the benefit of the doubt, or not based on what they think they know about you.

Last week we heard Jesus say that the Spirit of God anointed him to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim that God's time is now. At first, the people are rather astonished, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?"[1] The crowds seem to be gushing—look at our little Jesus all grown up and so eloquent. We're so happy you're back home, can you work some miracles here in Nazareth like you did in Capernaum?

But the story spirals out of control when Jesus says, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." [2] He speaks of the prophets Elijah and Elisha healing Gentiles after being rejected by their own people. The crowd wants Jesus to work miracles, and he refuses. So they try to throw him off a cliff—which I should note, Nazareth isn't built on a cliff so that seems a little metaphorical. Yet the story ends with Jesus just passing through the angry mob and going back to Capernaum to teach.

What a weird story—Jesus refuses to help people in his hometown at the very beginning of his ministry and points out that when prophets get rejected; they often reach out to Gentiles. The

author of Luke is foreshadowing Jesus' later rejections and the opening of the Jesus Movement to Gentiles. But it's curious that these people clearly want Jesus' help, and he doesn't respond to their requests.

So what do we do with this? In modern translations Jesus says, "Let me tell you, no prophet is welcome on his home turf."^[3] And I think this can be true today. When you are in a community and you start knowing people well. When people let you into their lives and you learn more about who they are, how they think, what they've been through—don't you sometimes get resentful if they say or do things you don't like? Someone offers up advice, and you think, why are you giving me advice? Your life is a mess! Or someone tells you something you don't want to hear and you think, well what do you know, that's not your area of expertise!

This is the idea that familiarity can sometimes breed contempt; it's a dark side of humanity. Now as a prosecuting attorney my sister hates lawyer jokes in general, but there are a few she appreciates. One story reflects the idea that familiarity breeds contempt, and it begins with a trial in a small town in Mississippi and a grandmother taking the stand. The prosecutor begins his line of questioning, "Mrs. Jones, do you know me?" She responds, "Yes, I know you, Mr. Williams, I've known you since you were a boy. And frankly, you've been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. Yes, I know you."

The prosecutor was stunned, and not knowing what else to do, he points at the defense attorney, saying, "Do you know Mr. Bradley?" She again responds, "Yes, I know, Mr. Bradley, I've known him since he was a boy. He's lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. His law practice is the worst in the entire state, not to mention he cheats on his wife too. Yes, I know him." The defense attorney just sits there in silence. The judge then asks both counselors to approach the bench and in a quiet voice says, "If either one of you asks her if she knows me, I will send you to prison."

So what do we glean from this story? It may be hard to give someone the benefit of the doubt when we know them, flaws and all. When we've seen them grow up or make a dumb decision or two. Maybe Jesus knew he could never preach, teach, or heal in his hometown because the folks in Nazareth could never separate him from being Joseph's son, the hometown kid. Even if they wanted him to minister to them, he just couldn't go there, at least not yet.

In reflecting on this passage UCC Minister Kate Huey notes that Jesus is clearly not basking in the admiration of the crowd, and something seems to be bothering him enough to react this way. She asks, "Does he know more about their expectations than we can read from the text? Does he feel that they've missed the point? Does he have a sense that they won't like where he's going with this line of thought, about jubilee ("the year of the Lord's favor") and the liberation of the oppressed? Or does he suspect that that kind of talk is fine as long as it applies to them, but not to those who somehow stand outside the favor of God?"^[4]

We just don't know, but this story shows that we need to branch out of the familiar, go into new places, and there may be times when we need to start over. In his classic work on transitions, William Bridges says, "Every transition begins with an ending. We have to let go of the old thing before we can pick up the new one—not just outwardly, but inwardly, where we keep our connections to people and places that act as definitions of who we are."^[5]

Jesus was going to have to light some fires and overturn some tables and proclaim that God's time is now, and not everyone would like this. He needed to let go of the old thing before he could pick up the new. Jesus' mission drives him to the edge and then out into the world. As Kate Huey says, "To preach the good news beyond the familiar confines of home, out there, in the world God loves."^[6]

At Annual Meeting today we'll reflect on where we've been, but also consider what is beyond the familiar confines of home. We know each other, we walk with each other, we hopefully don't have too much contempt for each other. And we can be inspired by this strange story because it ends with Jesus passing through the midst of the crowd and going on his way, off into the unknown, off into the world God loves. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Luke 4:22, The Scholars Version.

[2] Luke 4:24.

[3] Luke 4:24, The Scholars Version.

[4] Kate Huey, UCC Weekly Seeds, February 3 2013.

[5] William Bridges, Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes, 11.

[6] Kate Huey, UCC Weekly Seeds, February 3 2013.