

## When Jesus Provokes

Luke 4:21-30

Grace Hills Baptist Church

February 3, 2019

This past Thursday, the seminary I attended closed its doors. The past couple of months since the announcement have been difficult for the BTSR community, and the pain of the school's closing is still very real for many alumni. But we've also had the opportunity to pull up old pictures and reconnect with old friends and recall the memories we share of that place and those people who have influenced the lives of us BTSR alums, and, through us, countless congregations like this one.

One of the memories I called to mind this past week was my first year at the seminary. I didn't get called to my first church until my second year, so that first year I studied hard and applied for scholarships and worked part-time at the seminary library. I also took every preaching opportunity I could get. Preaching, like any skill or artform, has to be developed, and the most effective way to get better at it is through practice. So most Sundays of that first year of seminary, I was driving far and wide, filling pulpits for pastors on vacations, helping out at churches that were between pastors,

and accepting invitations from friends who took pity on a wet-behind-the-ears seminary student.

Now, I've got to tell you, those first few sermons weren't that good. I didn't always get invited back. I remember one Sunday in particular. I went to the wrong church five miles away, and got to the right church during the offering. Flustered, I got up with my notes to preach...and halfway through my message I knocked them all in the floor. I gathered them up as best I could and kept going. Little did I know I had skipped three full pages of my sermon! Who knows how it all tied together!? It's no wonder they didn't invite me back.

Most of the pulpits I had the chance to fill that first year were in churches in Buckingham – my hometown. Now, if you're going to preach when you don't know what you're doing, preach in your home church or your hometown. People were so gracious – at Mulberry Grove, at Mt. Zion, at Chestnut Grove, at Antioch, and at so many more. They would shake my hand and hug my neck and beam at me with pride. I left most Sundays feeling ten feet tall, because these folks who knew me, who had watched me grow up, saw me doing my best to explore the Bible with them and let me know they were on my side, cheering me on. I've looked back at some of those sermons – they were atrocious! But the good folk who attend

church in Buckingham never let on. They knew they just needed to encourage me. It was good to go home.

It was good for Jesus to go home, too, at least at first. I don't know if Nazareth had newspapers, but I can imagine that the Nazareth Times had a banner headline: Local Boy Preaching On Saturday! Come out and hear him! And as you heard last week, he impressed them that day in the synagogue. He got to pick a passage from the Scriptures, and he chose the words of the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," it said, a Spirit that promised good news and jubilee. This, Jesus said, had been fulfilled that very day among them.

I can't imagine the people crowded into the synagogue that day – uncles and aunts, neighbors and work friends of Jesus' dad, boys and girls who had grown up alongside him – I can't imagine they started the day harboring him any ill-will. They knew Jesus, of course, and they had followed his exploits – his healings and teachings and general ministry in Capernaum and around Galilee – with a measure of joy. When he gave his sermon, they probably swelled with pride. The local newspaper editor was already composing the next day's headline: Local Boy Sure Can Preach!

But then...Jesus met them at the back door on the way out, and he started hearing their comments on his sermon. One commentator called it

the “back of the sanctuary conversation.” And if there is one thing any preacher could tell you, it’s this: the same sermon can be heard by any two people and understood two very different ways. The people of Nazareth may have been amazed at Joseph’s boy speaking such gracious words, but Jesus realized they’d missed something between the reading of the Scripture and the back door of the sanctuary.

We have to read between the lines here a little bit, but something was going on. The people in the congregation in Nazareth were proud of their boy, Jesus, yes...but they also were a little confused. They had heard of what Jesus was doing elsewhere, in places like Capernaum. They had heard how he was teaching a new understanding of God and God’s love, based not in the drudgery of Old Testament Law as it had been taught to them, but rather based in the freedom and joy that had inspired and enlivened the Law when it had been given in the first place. They heard how Jesus was making the lame walk and the blind see; the sick were being healed and the demon-possessed were being freed. They heard how Jesus was proclaiming a new kind of kingdom, where the oppressed go free and the powerful are held in check by God himself. And then they hear this sermon – a sermon from their own Scriptures and in their own

synagogue, no less – and they seem to assume he’s going to bring all of this to pass right there, in their midst.

Jesus, though, has picked up on something – something perhaps unsaid, but something he knew from some sort of insight into their hearts. Or maybe it just took someone from there to know how his sermon had been heard that morning. But in that moment, as everyone stands around the hometown boy, amazed at his gracious words and enthralled by the potential he embodied, Jesus decides to push some buttons. He didn’t do the gracious, self-deprecating thing that I would have done or you would have done. Instead, he decided to push back. “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”<sup>1</sup> And in that moment...things changed.

Barbara Brown Taylor opened her own sermon on this text by recalling a spiritual retreat she attended with some friends. The first exercise they were asked to do was to tell the story of someone who had been Christ for them. One person told of a friend who had stood by his side through a long illness. Another shared about a neighbor who had been a father-figure when her own father left. Taylor says,

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:23

“One after the other, they were stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue....Jesus our friend was there with us and all was right with the world, until this one woman stood up and said, ‘Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think of who had been Christ to me was, Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’ She burst our bubble, but she was onto something vitally important that most of us would be glad to forget: namely, that the Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us. The Christ is also the one who challenges and upsets us, telling us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up.”<sup>2</sup>

That day in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus wasn’t being a comfort to his family or an example of hometown pride to his neighbors. Jesus was there to be a provocateur – to provoke his friends and community. And he did it as only a hometown boy can, by knowing exactly what it is that gets under their skin the most.

We don’t know much about Nazareth; in the annals of history, it was fairly insignificant. It was a small farming village just off the main drag; a major trade route missed it completely. A couple days’ journey from Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, it missed out on the thriving fishing industry there. Just northwest of the town, about 2 miles, was the city of Sepphoris – a regional seat of Roman and Herodian power, with a cosmopolitan flair. In every sense, Nazareth was a backwater overshadowed by the surrounding towns and villages.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, 42-43

This sort of situation tends to manifest itself in a fierce local pride that can spill over into insularity and disdain for outsiders. Coupled with evidence that Nazareth was a fairly pious town<sup>3</sup>, the folks gathered in the synagogue that day would not have struck anyone as the most open community in Israel or the easiest town to move to. They most likely believed that God had favorites – and that his favorites were them and people like them.

This is confirmed to us by the way Jesus decides to push their buttons in provocation. Having grown up in their midst, it's not surprising he understood their deep-seated prejudices and perspectives. So when he proclaimed a Gospel – literally, good news – for the poor and the oppressed and the captive and the blind, he wasn't surprised when the good people of Nazareth assumed he was talking about them and them alone. Yet Jesus knew that God's Good News was bigger than that. And so, pulling from the very Scriptures they loved so much, he challenges them with two stories of God's grace not going to the religious or the insider – people like them, in other words – but to the outsider, the alien, even the enemy.

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<sup>3</sup> Harper Collins Bible Dictionary entry, p. 741

First, he points to the way Elijah ministered to the widow of Zarephath. In 1 Kings 17, the prophet was waiting out a famine in Israel when the word of God came to him. “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”<sup>4</sup> While he was there, God miraculously kept the widow’s food supply stocked and raised the widow’s son to life when he died. Elijah had been a blessing to the woman, helping her survive the famine and even saving her son from death. Jesus remarks that God could have sent the prophet to any number of other widows in Israel, but instead sent him to a foreigner, a poor widow far away in modern-day Lebanon.

Then, Jesus turns to Elijah’s successor, Elisha. Elisha was a preacher in Israel who also sought to advise the king in a time of great strife – and much of that strife was caused by an ongoing series of wars with Aram, in modern-day Syria. Yet in one of the strangest incidents in the Old Testament, Naaman, the general of Aram’s armies, comes to Israel on a desperate mission: he has leprosy, and he has heard that there is a man in Israel who can cure him. Elisha does, and Naaman returns home healed and whole. Jesus points out to his neighbors that God could have healed

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 17:9



any number of lepers among Elisha's own people – but that it was Naaman, the alien, in fact the enemy, who was cleansed.

At this, the crowd is enraged. The very people who had just been praising Jesus for his graciousness and oratory – the very people who had likely seen him grow up, who had played with him in the streets and who had broken bread with him at community celebrations – those same folks turned angry. They grew so angry they tried to cast him off a cliff. Fred Craddock tells us, “The synagogue, now a mob, attempts to stone Jesus. Hurling a person against stones was as acceptable a form of stoning as hurling the stones against a person.”<sup>5</sup> Why would they do that?

Something in Jesus' reply struck deep at the heart of the folks in Nazareth that day. Several commentators remind us of the ways Jesus pointed out their own prejudices and privileges...and used their own treasured Scriptures to do it. Craddock says they were suffering from “resentment that Jesus has taken God's favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially Capernaum, said to have a heavy non-Jewish population,”<sup>6</sup> while Barbara Brown Taylor proposes that “the minute he denied their special status he went from favorite son to degenerate stranger, who offended

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, 63-64

<sup>6</sup> Craddock, 63

them so badly they decided to kill him.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus had provoked them with what they already knew. It’s no wonder they turned on him, for as Fred Craddock reminds us, “Learning what we already know is often painfully difficult.”<sup>8</sup> And so “Jesus does not go elsewhere because he is rejected; he is rejected because he goes elsewhere.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus would spend the bulk of his ministry – healing, teaching, and proclaiming the kingdom of God – not in his hometown of Nazareth, but in pluralistic Capernaum, where insiders and outsiders, saints and sinners, could all be found.

We’re not that different from the people of Nazareth. We are generally good folks who love our tightly-knit small town life, follow the commands and teachings of our religious tradition, and take pride in our young people who excel and make a difference in the world. We work hard and do our best and take comfort in the truth – and it is fundamentally true – that God loves us deeply and cares about us and helps us as we face the challenges of life. All of that is good news for us, and we like to hear it.

Yet also like the people of Nazareth, we have some blind spots, some built-in prejudices that we unconsciously foster and some unexamined privileges that we unknowingly cherish. And that’s ok, as far as it goes,

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, 45

<sup>8</sup> Craddock, 63

<sup>9</sup> Craddock, 64

when it applies to prejudices like a love for one state college over another on the football field or embracing the privilege of expecting common courtesy from those around us. But sometimes, we need someone to provoke us like Jesus, because sometimes we forget what we've learned and act as if we are somehow God's favorite children, that we have some special claim to God's forgiveness and grace and mercy and love that shouldn't extend to others, especially to others who are different than us. We look down on people who sin differently than we do, we exhibit little care about the suffering of people who live far away or who look different or who may have made different decisions than we have in life, and we put down those whose experiences have caused them to look at the world differently than we do. We have everyone categorized into "us" and "them," and we firmly believe God is on our side. We hate those who vote differently than we do, avoid those with both more and less money than us, unconsciously reject those whose skin color is different or who live on the wrong side of the tracks, and can't understand how God loves those who don't worship him the same way we do as much as he loves us. Whether we like to admit it or not, we're a lot like the people of Nazareth.

Our text today should stand as a warning to us. As Barbara Brown Taylor states at the end of her sermon on Jesus' provocation in Nazareth,

“The church is not immune to this sort of thing, but we know better. We *believe* better. We know about Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Zarephath. We know about Jesus himself, who preferred the company of misfits to that of religious people.”<sup>10</sup> How will we respond when he challenges us? Will we be like his neighbors in Nazareth, who were enraged and rejected him? Or will we be open to his reminders of who God is and what we know about God? Will we let Jesus come and abide with us, changing our hearts and our lives until we love as he loves, with abundance and acceptance? Jesus wants us to follow him...but he will not force us. He didn’t at Nazareth. He just left to do his work elsewhere...in places like Capernaum, and Galilee, and Jerusalem. As far as we know, he never returned to Nazareth. Is that what we want – for Jesus to move along, doing his work elsewhere instead of here? “If we will not listen, he won’t try to change our minds. He will pass right through our midst and go away.”<sup>11</sup>

May we never give Jesus a reason to move on from this place in the pursuit of his kingdom goal. May we be a place of love and grace, not just for the select few, but for all. And may Jesus provoke us each day to

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, 46

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, 46

become more like him – so that his kingdom may come here as it is in heaven. Let us pray.