

## Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Feb 29th 2016

How do you get yourself nearly lynched by your own neighbors?

This is the question that confronts us in today's gospel from Luke. How does Jesus spark such animosity in a synagogue crowd that had just "spoken highly of him" and was "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (Luke 4:22)? Within seven verses, this very same home crowd was not only booing Jesus...they were "filled with fury," "drove him out of the town," and intended to "hurl him down headlong" from the top of the town's hill (4:28-29). Jesus doesn't just encounter indifference or skepticism...he is nearly the victim of a popular lynching. Why?

For me, the question comes down to identity. The townspeople of Nazareth were surely happy to welcome home the local-boy-made-good, drawing praise across the synagogues of Galilee (Luke 4:14-15). It seems that Jesus made a good initial impression in his Sabbath address. No one protested his fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies to "bring glad tidings to the poor," "proclaim liberty to the captives," "let the oppressed go free," or announce a jubilee year (4:18-21). But they still can't get the image of "local boy Jesus" out of their head, and some seem skeptical that this average Joe (or, better yet, "son of Joe") is claiming such an exalted mission.

After questions arise about his own identity, Jesus "crosses the Rubicon" (or better yet, the Jordan), challenging his audience's sense of entitlement and privilege. Not only does he refuse to deliver any prophetic pork barrel benefits to his native place, but he reminds them that God appears to have a "preferential option for the other"...namely Gentiles like the widow of Zarephath or Naaman the Syrian.

It is easy to betray a kind of smug condescension toward Jesus's townspeople (and the Pharisees, Sadducees, and anyone else in the gospel who seems "intolerant"). Perhaps a better approach is to ask ourselves, "which identities are sacralized in our own cultures today?" Which identities cut to the core of us...to the point that a perceived threat produces deep wellsprings of anger, resentment, and hatred? For example, if we substituted the word "America" for "Israel" in Luke 4:25 and 4:27, how would most local USA congregations react? What about the American presidential candidates who purport to love Jesus?

As Naaman the Syrian demonstrates in today's first reading, it is not easy to overcome ethnic and national prejudice, even if this is in our direct self-interest. In fact, the classification of "insider and outsider" is one of the fundamental tensions that cuts through the Scriptures. This Lent, may we reflect on the "outsiders" in our lives and in our countries, remembering that our outsiders are often God's insiders.

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