

“Too Much Jesus”
Luke 4:21-30; I Corinthians 13
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In a few short months, Jesus had become famous. Word about him had begun to spread all around Galilee. He was teaching and preaching, and people were walking miles to hear him talk about the Kingdom of Heaven.

And he began to heal.

Crazy if you think about it, but they say that people who were lame had begun to walk, that the blind could see, that the mute had started talking. And now he was coming back home. Home to Nazareth, the little hill town where he had grown up. In Nazareth he had just been a carpenter's son. They had known him since the days when he was a little boy. Maybe, in their eyes, there was nothing particularly special about him; he was just another kid, he had brothers and sisters and when his father died, he'd done a good job taking care of the family, of his mother.

And when he left, when he went to go hear John the Baptist, maybe no one even noticed. People come and go all the time, and his younger brothers were old enough now to take care of the carpentry shop and the family. At that point in time he was an ordinary kid living an ordinary life from an ordinary town.

But something changed.

He was baptized, and began to preach, and to heal.

And now word was coming back to Nazareth that crowds were following Jesus.

Jesus? Our Jesus? What must they have thought? Hometown Boy Makes Good, right?

So, on the Sabbath he stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth to read from the prophet Isaiah, this is the year of the Lord's favor, the good news has come to the poor, the captive, the blind... and then Jesus

proclaimed that “today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus tells them that *he* is the fulfillment of the scripture. Can you imagine their surprise? Their pride? “Wasn't that great? Who knew he was such a good public speaker? Isn't this Joseph's son who fixed our chairs? Doesn't his mother live just down the street? Wasn't he in school with our kids? Now look at him!” The scripture says they all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

It could have all gone so well that day...

But then Jesus continues: he warns “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” Jesus knows they are not going to like what he says next. You see, the people are assuming God's favor because they are Nazarenes, Israelites, and now one of their own has come to preach the Good News but Jesus disabuses them of this notion by proclaiming that God's favor is for all.

The message is simple enough, pretty innocuous by today's understanding, right? But when Jesus explains that Elijah didn't come to the widows in Israel or Elisha heals a Syrian General, it becomes clear that Jesus is including others, people who'd been excluded, forsaken, unclean.

Wait, what did he say? You can almost see their faces fall, from that goofy grin that gets frozen on our face when we're at a rock concert or in the presence of someone famous to blank stares and confusion.

Why is Jesus antagonizing them? They were full of admiration for Jesus, but now this is too much. Jesus is too much.

Why did he do it? Maybe Because he looked out at the congregation and saw that they were quite content, quite comfortable, even smug. He wanted to say, “Haven't you been listening? Don't you know what this means? The coming of the kingdom of heaven means that this world gets turned upside

down!” He tells them that they shouldn't count their chickens before they are hatched. They shouldn't rest on their laurels and shouldn't assume that they are in God's favor. Look at history—Look at the story of Elijah and the story of Elisha—God sent them not just to the people of Israel, but also to the Phoenician woman and Naaman the Syrian. The people were proud to be Israelites, Jews, and now they were doubly proud because Jesus was from their town. Perhaps it was their pride that offended Jesus the most. Perhaps, in his eyes, their pride had become vanity.

Vanity. When does pride turn to vanity? Because we can all agree that there is nothing wrong with being proud of something or someone, right? On Friday, there was a last-minute call for volunteers to go down to the Gospel Mission to serve meals and five people from this church stepped up to do it. That makes me proud. Hopefully it makes you proud too. And there is nothing wrong with that. Pride is a healthy warm feeling we get when we, or someone close to us, does something important.

So how does pride become vanity? Maybe if I continued to tell this story not because it is important to make others aware of the needs of the hungry but because I knew it made me look good, made us look good. Here my pride has devolved to vanity because my concern is looking good. Or Maybe I could consider what other churches have done and compare them unfavorably to what we do. Again, my pride has devolved to vanity because my concern is looking better than others. Vanity is not Pride and Pride is not vanity, yet there is hardly anything that divides them and it is a slippery path that takes us from one to the other before we know it.

And maybe that's what Jesus saw that day in Nazareth. A people more concerned with looking good than doing good; a people dependent on excluding and diminishing others in order to make themselves feel more important. The people of Nazareth weren't proud that day, they were vain.

The Nazarenes were mad because Jesus had just told them that God was on the side of the poor and the sick, and what really got in their craw, God was not just the God of Jewish people, but all people. And they weren't happy about that.

Paul faced the same kind of situation a few years later at the church in Corinth. The church was one that Paul had spent a lot of time with on his travels but it is one that has significant problems. The congregation at Corinth reflects the socioeconomic and religious makeup of the city. That means that there was a steep social pyramid that was typical of the culture of that time. There's not a big middle class, but there were a few people who were very rich and most were poor. This caused problems in the Corinthian church. In the city, only rich people could be in charge, only they could make decisions in public courts. For the church, only wealthy people had homes and staff large enough to host the church and provide for its celebration of the Lord's supper; and only the wealthy could arrive early enough to eat the best food and get drunk before the other less fortunate ones could arrive.

They also had great debates and divisions about who was the most important in the church. Was it the one with the most money? Or was it the one who was the most spiritual? Was it the person who was the best teacher, or the one who could speak in tongues? Was it the person who was always encouraging or the person who was the most generous? So, Paul writes to them about how we all have different gifts in the body of Christ. Just like in a regular body there are different parts, hands, eyes, heart, head, etc., just so there are different gifts in the body of Christ and we need them all. But then he surprises them by saying I will show you an even better way. If I could speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love . . . yes there are a multitude of gifts, but love rises above them all. And likewise the power of love overcomes a multitude of human weaknesses.

Vanity is overcome with love. The Nazarenes believed that God loved them best because they were

Israelites. But did they love? The Corinthians believed that they were important because of their wealth or because of their gifts. But did they love? When we run to help at the Gospel Mission, is it so we look good, or because we love? There's a reason why, in his later letter to the Galatians, when Paul describes the fruits of the Spirit that the first one is love. Whether you picked that one as your star word or not, that is the one that should be growing in every Christian life. Love.

For one another, for the enemy, for the stranger. It was too much for the people of Nazareth. Of Corinth. Is it too much for you? Is that too much for us?

Today, a place at the table has been set for you, for me, and we in turn we make room for others, for the Pheonician woman, the Syrian, the poor... At this table, everyone is welcome.