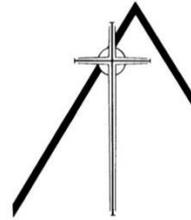


“You Can’t Go Home Again”
Luke 4:14-30
Rev. Jacqueline Decker Vanderpol
February 10, 2019



“I moved out of my parents’ house when I was 18,” the comedian Alyssa Limperis wrote. “I headed off to college and with each passing year, grew older, became more self-reliant and hit new adult milestones, just as my parents had before me. Even if it was a slow crawl toward adulthood, I can confidently say now that for 364 days out of the year, I am an independent grown-up. However, there’s an exception. One day a year, when I go home to visit my Greek family on Christmas.

“As soon as I knock at the front door and listen for the traditional ‘*She’s heeahh!!!*’ greeting, I comfortably, effortlessly and automatically become a child again. It’s the magic ritual of the holidays. We all hug and shriek until I am taken on an in-depth tour of the house (that I grew up in)... [Then, my mother] asks if I’ve been to the dentist. I have. She schedules an appointment anyway...I dress myself every day, but it takes four rounds of outfit changes until [my mother and I] land on the same outfit I wore last year because it ‘Looks nice for ya grandparents.’... After eating [Christmas dinner], the kids — all adults in their late 20s and 30s — go down to the basement to play Monopoly or Clue, depending on how much we want to fight.

“When it’s time to leave to catch a plane back to the city where I now live, ... Mom stuffs two pocket calendars in my suitcase, hands me a full pan of lasagna and presents a clean load of laundry. When did she do the laundry? A magician never shares her tricks. [I walk out the door,] and just like that, I am back to adult life, where I am the person who has to make the pan of lasagna.”¹

Returning home is a strange and not altogether comfortable experience. As it did for Limperis, time has a way of bending and warping until the person we’ve become is swallowed up by the person we once were. Swallowed up by our family’s memories of who they expect to encounter. Perhaps that’s why it seems so appropriate that Jesus ends his forty days of fasting and prayer in the wilderness by going home. Just when he thinks he’s done with the devil’s tests in the desert, he’s confronted by his family. A test all its own.

Let’s be honest: there is absolutely a way of reading this passage that makes Jesus look like a churlish college student who’s come home for Christmas break. High on his exposure to new things and new people, the provincial ways of his hometown look pretty backwater. So, he starts to poke at them, to antagonize them, to pick a fight: “I suppose you’re going to say to me, ‘Doctor, cure yourself.’” “Nope,” his neighbors think. “What we actually just said was, ‘Look at Joseph’s boy, all grown up.’” “And then you’re going to want me to do here all of the amazing things I did in Capernaum.” “Again, nope,” think his neighbors. “None of us had mentioned those things. You’re the first to bring them up.”

Everything’s been going so well up to this point. In fact, so well that Luke starts doing the thing therapists tell you not to do in relationships: using “always,” “never,” and like words. “All the people” loved “everything” Jesus was saying. They were “all amazed.” They’re eating out of the palm of his hand which makes it even stranger when he starts to say what he does.

¹ “An Adult Woman Goes Home for the Holidays,” *The New York Times*, Alyssa Limperis, December 24, 2018.

This may not be his immediate family – although they were probably there too – but Jesus is at his home synagogue. He’s among the family of faith that reared him. Undoubtedly, they had some expectation of loyalty from him, some expectation that Jesus was on the same team as them. That is, until he starts preaching his first sermon.

There is a Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, who has looked around at modern-day Christianity and noticed the parts of the Church who assume everyone has this strong compulsion to “get as close to Jesus as possible.” Then, Hall looked at Scripture where Jesus is always talking about the Kingdom of Heaven like a party, a feast, a banquet (like we did last week). Jesus is forever inviting people to this party, . . . and it seems like no one wants to go; they’re all trying to get out of it. In one story, Jesus throws a party, and *no one* he invites shows, so he’s out in the street trying to get random people to eat the food, so it won’t go to waste. Far from trying to get as close to Jesus as possible, many people seemed to be actively avoiding him. In fact, it’s been said, “those who knew Jesus best hated him the most.”²

This strange dichotomy between how people think about Jesus today and how people experienced him when he lived is well-captured in a story by Barbara Brown Taylor. “Several years ago,” she tells, “I attended a weekend retreat with about seventy other people, where the opening exercise was to tell a story about someone who had been Christ for us in our lives. After we had all thought about it a little while, some people got up to tell their stories to the whole group. There was one friend who stayed put through a long illness while everyone else deserted, and another one about a neighbor who took the place of a father who self-destructed. One after the other, they were stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue. The conference room turned into a church, where we settle in to the warmth of each other’s company. 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 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?”’”³

That’s where Jesus’ first sermon takes us – or, at least, that’s where it took his hometown friends. Back in his home synagogue, having just read the Scripture passage from the Hebrew Bible that was assigned for that week, Jesus takes a seat, as was the custom for preachers of the day – stand to read Scripture, sit to preach – and he launches in. Given that this is Jesus’ first sermon ever, you would expect what he says to have extra significance. It’s like all of the candidates today throwing their hats in the presidential ring. What they say when they announce their candidacy matters; it’s the crux of their platform, the core of what they believe. And, in Jesus’s first sermon, he talks about two things: enemies and money.

Jesus has just read this beautiful passage about bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives, about letting the oppressed go free. And the Jewish people have seen more than their fair share of oppression, so they’re ready to hear some good news about freedom, but Jesus doesn’t talk about them. He tells these two stories about times God *overlooked* them. “Remember that time there were so many starving Jewish widows, and God took care of the non-Jewish widow from Zarephath? Or, remember that time there were so many sick people in Israel, and God healed Naaman the Syrian? That’s what God and I are working towards,” Jesus preaches.

To make matters worse, he reminds them of the year of the Jubilee, the year of the Lord’s favor, the Sabbath year that was supposed to take place every 50 years. Whatever may have transpired for the previous 49 years, the 50th year was a year of restitution, forgiveness. If people

² As told in a sermon by Rev. Dave Davis at Nassau Presbyterian Church.

³ “The Company of Strangers,” *Home by Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor.

had fallen on hard times and had sold their property to make ends meet, on year 50 the property was theirs again. If they had fallen on hard times and sold themselves in to slavery, their freedom was theirs again. If there were debts, they were wiped clean. Every 50 years.

The scriptures where God commanded the Jubilee had been in the Bible since the time of Moses, and generation after generation, God's people read those passages with their fingers crossed behind their back. Acknowledging them, but never acting on them. Never actually having a year of Jubilee. And here Jesus is, right out of the gate, saying, "we're going to do it. We're going to have a Jubilee, but not just for us. Not just for the Jewish people. We're going to include that starving widow in Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. We're going to include people outside of the tribe, and we're going to include every debt that's owed to us, every debt that's continued to compound. And this happens today. We're not going to wait another 50 years. This scripture gets fulfilled today."

That's his introductory sermon. And his listeners response? Scripture says, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Jesus 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."

Extreme perhaps, but think about what Jesus just proposed: all accumulated inequities get redistributed and not just every 50 years. They get redistributed to those who made good life choices and those who made bad life choices. To those who worked hard and those who coasted. To those who were generous and gracious and those who were willfully spiteful. If we took him seriously, if we took Jesus at his word, we just might want to run him off a cliff too. Because if we took him seriously, we would have to listen to the question he asked, and did you notice he asks the same question both about money and about enemies? "In matters of finance and in matters of the spirit," he says, "what debt can you forgive? What debt can you forgive *today*? This happens today. This scripture gets fulfilled today."

As that hometown crowd listened to Joseph's boy all grown up and preaching, maybe they didn't reject him because they couldn't bring themselves to take a kid from the neighborhood seriously. Maybe they rejected him because they took him far more seriously than we do. Amen.