

February 3, 2019 4th Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

Debie Thomas in the blog Journey with Jesus, posted on 1-27-29, Leaving Home (including quote from Barbara Brown Taylor).
Peter Gomes from The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's so Good about the Good News? (New York: HarperOne, 2007), pg. 39, as printed in Feasting on the Word for this Sunday.

Grace and peace to you, from the One who is Love, love that abides. Amen.

My dad grew up in the little town of Red Bud in Southern Illinois, near the wide Mississippi.

His dad and his uncles were all carpenters in that little town.

He knew their craft, the wood frame houses, the barns, the churches they'd built.

He knew the culture of that small town, the way people acted and interacted,
what they said, and what they didn't say.

He knew it, that is, and then he was sent two states away to a church sponsored boarding high school in
Kansas where they prepared teachers to populate the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod schools that sat
adjacent to the churches in every town in the vicinity.

During high school in Kansas my dad realized that teaching in that parochial system wasn't his calling.

A bigger view of the world and academics and helping people, that's where God was nudging him...

He was never really able to come home in the same way again.

Of course, there'd be the occasional trips, maybe for a week or two,
maybe for a summer to earn some money on the highway crew in the blistering sun.

With leaving home, and then returning for a short stint, came the perennial questions about his place in that
town, really, about identity, and who God was calling him to be.

Dad's older brother-in-law, Joe, himself an outsider having grown up on Chicago's Southside,
had the wisdom to reflect: **"People wanted you to come back and be the good ol' boy."**

Joe had nailed it, really.

That's what people wanted or at least what they seemed to want.

"People wanted [him] ... to be the good ol' boy."

And dad could only sense that he wasn't the good ol' boy that they used to know.

Friendships and ideas were evolving, his identity was growing and changing.

His calling was taking him farther afield literally and figuratively.

I know many of you can identify with some element of this experience...

I wonder how it was for Jesus to come home to Nazareth.

I wonder about the pressures to be the good ol' boy—the hometown-hero.

And not just any hometown kid, but the One who at his baptism had been claimed by God's voice: Beloved;
the One who'd been tested in the wilderness, speaking truth to the powers;

the One whose first sermon we heard last Sunday, with big audacious Spirit-inspired identity:

God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives,
to give sight to the blind, and to declare the year of jubilee to those crushed by debt.

Jesus said all that, and rolled up the scroll and declared,

“Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Last week’s reading ended with that very line, the same line that begins today’s Gospel.

The home-town crowd has heard the bold sermon, the big promises.

They’ve heard the reports of water turned into wine,

They’ve heard the hopeful musing, people pining for healing, for miracles.

And finally, finally Jesus is actually back in Nazareth,

and their expectations are tumbling out.

If he could do all that out there, for strangers, no less,

wouldn’t you expect that here at home, for *his* people, his kin, there’d be some sort of preference?

Everything was going so well, today it seemed the scripture actually would be fulfilled.

They just wanted him to be the good ol’ boy.

And then it all turns, in a moment, when Jesus, clear as ever about his prophetic calling

refuses to be boxed in, or claimed, or owned; refuses to be domesticated.

Not too subtle, is he, when Jesus urges them to recall stories they must have known well?

Remember, he says, how Elijah went to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon,

not to a widow in Israel, but to an outsider?

Remember how Elisha heals Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy—why not all those suffering close to home?

God, it seems, is all about working on the margins, the borders, the fringy edges.

God isn’t into their piety, or their power structures, or their expectations.

Peter Gomes writes, “The people take offense not so much with what Jesus claims about himself,
as with the claims that he makes about a God who is more than their own tribal deity.”

More than *our own* tribal deity—whew.

I often turn to Debie Thomas in my sermon preparation and this week she was full of good and hard

questions. She writes, “Jesus ... pushed so hard against his listeners’ cherished assumptions about
faith, they nearly killed him.

When was the last time Jesus made you that angry?”

She continues, “When was the last time [Jesus] touched whatever it is you call holy—your conservatism, your progressivism, your theology, your denomination, your Biblical literacy, your prayer life, your politics, your wokeness—and asked you to look beyond it to find *him*”

This story fills me with tensions.

On the one hand, I know a thing or two about life on the margins and I want to stand up and cheer and weep, and weep and cheer, and probably whisper an Amen.

And on the other hand, I, many of us, are deeply a part of the church and the power structures.

In this passage, too often, much as I hate to admit it, we are probably the townspeople surprised, angry, maybe jealous and confused, for we think we know God, and, it turns out, Jesus, isn’t the good ol’ boy we expected.

God isn’t ours, to possess,

rather the opposite, we belong to God who is active on the edges and invites us to join in.

Lean into the tension, friends, lean into the tension—that is God at work in us.

One story before I wrap up: This past Tuesday, bitterly cold and windy as ever, a few of us from Hope ventured to Bet Shalom Synagogue in Minnetonka to join a couple hundred others from congregations that are part of Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative.

Our congregation has long been involved with Beacon through Families Moving Forward, FMF, we call it.

Our week to host families experiencing homelessness is coming up soon, it starts two weeks from today.

We’re also part of Beacon because we’re teaming with other congregations to respond to the Hiawatha Franklin Encampment and the issues of addiction and mental health and housing and poverty and culturally supportive community that the encampment raised.

Though Beacon has found housing for a dozen or so folks, they are focused on the longer-term response.

Beacon is working with a mental health provider and the Red Lake Nation over the next couple of years to create 70 units of housing that are called Housing First.

In the Housing First model, one doesn’t have the barrier of having to have dealt with chemical dependency or mental health issues prior to getting housing.

It’s Housing First, so first you receive housing, and then, with the stability of housing—and that’s key, there is the space and energy to address addiction and mental health, really...life.

Housing First goes first to the margins, first to the edges.

And, honestly, sometimes that makes us nervous—does it work? do they deserve it?

You can almost hear the hometown crowd’s concerned questions, can’t you?

Truth is, this is prophetic work, work on the margins.

On Tuesday evening, with Governor Walz and Lieutenant Governor Flanagan participating, a speaker told the story of a woman named Mary.

Mary and her husband had been in and out of homelessness for decades,
and living with chemical dependency for decades, too.

Mary's husband died suddenly this summer and she moved into a Housing First apartment called American House.

With safe, affordable housing, with some good supports, with the space to work on her grief and a lifetime of trauma, Mary is now sober.

Moving between the center and the edges, we're teaming up to support the work of advocacy, advocating at the state and local levels to bring this Housing First to being for Mary and for dozens of others.

Remember the story I told you at the start? "People wanted you to come back and be the good ol' boy."

Today's gospel is most truly about leaving home and finding Jesus—that's our calling.

You'll know you're doing it, if it feels risky, a little vulnerable, maybe a lot vulnerable.

You'll know you're doing it, if you feel movement, change, rather than stasis and security.

God is at work in the margins, at the edges.

"Disillusionment," Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "is, literally, the loss of an illusion—about ourselves, about the world, about God—and while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth."

As much as Jesus' sermon (about good news to the poor, release to the captives) is inaugural, setting the stage for everything he will say and do and be and die for, today's hard verses are the same, even the big emotions like rage.

They push us to claim what we believe, to let go of our illusions,
to experience God active on the edges.

Today the scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing.

Ultimately, this is Good News:

God isn't ours, to possess, rather the opposite, dear ones, we belong to God.

We are God's own, created for love, abiding in love,

forgiven daily, held in tender mercy,

called out to do the hard thing even when it scares us.

Amen.