

He's OK: He's Just Like Me!
Sermon for Epiphany 3: Lk 4.14-30

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Everybody knows Jesus

I grew up in a really small town. OK, it wasn't as small as Dixon's Corners. But, it was pretty close to it.

Jesus grew up in a rather small town. It was called Nazareth. In fact, the town that Jesus grew up in was just about the size of my town. At the beginning of the first century AD there would have been fewer than 500 people in Nazareth.

Everyone knew each other. In fact, because this was a society in which everyone was related, they would have all been family members: brothers, uncles, cousins, nephews... Perhaps something like the families and towns that some of you have also grown up in. They would always be getting together for meals, to do things together, for weddings. In fact, one of the reasons that Jesus and his mother were invited to a marriage in the village of Cana nearby is probably because they were related to someone in the wedding. And, these people loved to be together, just like I'm sure many of you do when you get together. Their weddings, like the wedding at Cana, would have lasted for a whole week. (No wonder they were worried when the wine ran out at the beginning of the week!)

But, I digress. Jesus grew up in a small town, just like me, and probably like you. He was just like everyone else in the town. He looked like them; he talked like them. OK, perhaps Jesus was bit unusual. There must have been some things about him that were different. For example, one wonders what it was like for Jesus growing up in Nazareth but knowing that he really belonged in his Father's house?

So, he was a bit different. But, one thing is pretty sure: he wasn't anything like the characters in some of the later Gospels, Gospels that didn't make it into our Bible for some obvious reasons. For example, in one of the stories, Jesus is remarkably like us in his emotions:

When this boy Jesus was five years old he was playing at the ford of a brook, and he gathered together into pools the water that flowed by, and made it at once clean, and commanded it by his word alone. He made soft clay and fashioned from it twelve sparrows. And it was the sabbath when he did this. And there were also many other children playing with him. Now when a certain Jew saw what Jesus was doing in his play on the sabbath, he at once went and told his father Joseph: "See your child is at the brook, and he has taken clay and fashioned twelve birds and has profaned the sabbath." And when Joseph came to the place and saw it, he cried out to him saying: "Why do you do on the sabbath what ought not to be done?" But Jesus

clapped his hands and cried to the sparrows: "Off with you!" And the sparrows took flight and went away chirping. The Jews were amazed when they saw this, and went away and told their elders what they had seen Jesus do. But the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph: he took a branch of a willow and (with it) dispersed the Water which Jesus had gathered together. When Jesus saw what he had done he was enraged and said to him: "You insolent, godless, dunderhead, what harm did the pools and the water do to you? See, now you shall wither like a tree and shall bear neither leaves nor root nor fruit." And immediately that lad withered up completely: and Jesus departed and went into Joseph's house. But the parents of him that was withered took him away, bewailing his youth, and brought him to Joseph and reproached him: "What a child you have, who does such things." After this again he went through the village, and a lad ran and knocked against his shoulder. Jesus was exasperated and said to him: "You shall not go further on your way", and the child immediately fell down and died." (Infancy Story of Thomas 2.1-4.1a, Hennecke-Schneemelcher, 1.444)

If we believe our Biblical Gospel accounts, rather than these other accounts, then with the exception of some things that some people must have wondered about, everyone in Nazareth probably concluded that, yes, in everything that really matters, Jesus was really just like them: he was family.

And, this was important for them, because for people in small towns, there is often a real fear of what is not like us. I remember that the men who used to sit on the hot, dusty street in my town would stare and stare at people in cars passing by on main street when they did not immediately recognise who the person was. And, if there was a new person in town, well, that person was the talk of the town for months! And, if a new person came into church, well.... How much more is that the case in those cultures around the world in which towns and even countries are made up only of family members, all of whom know each other inside out.

Even in Ottawa, in the big city, in my church, I watch what happens when new people come to church. There is a formal recognition of them, but you can really tell what people think about someone who they're not sure is like them by what happens at the coffee hour afterwards. And so, I watch as people huddle in little groups, and sometimes cast an eye toward the stranger. And, then, maybe one or two of the bolder will venture to go and talk to the stranger.

And what about in the rest of our lives? Is it not true that we are most comfortable with people who are just like us? Sure we are. Do we also not fear to some extent what is not like us? Sure we do.

Fortunately, Jesus is just like us so we don't have to worry about him. And surely, Jesus, who is just like us, thinks the same way as we do. Right?

Jesus begins his new ministry

The belief of people living in Nazareth that Jesus was just like them, just one of them, changed one day in the synagogue. In fact, according to Luke, everything began to change in the minds

of the people that day. Up to that point, he had been just like them. A bit different, OK, but still like them in all the ways that counted. All that changed that day when, in the synagogue, he was asked to read from the prophet Isaiah.

Apparently, Jesus had already begun his ministry in the neighbouring, but larger, town of Capernaum, which had about 1000 people. Jesus had gone down to the Jordan valley to see John preaching -- and we heard that something strange seemed to happen to him there. And then Jesus had gone out into the wilderness for a time -- and you know what happens to people in the hot sun of the wilderness!! And, then, apparently, Jesus had come back up to Galilee but not to Nazareth: he had gone to Capernaum where he had healed some people. Fairly quickly, word got back to Jesus' kin in Nazareth.

And, then, one day, Jesus did show up, back at _____, I mean Nazareth. And, he showed up for a Sabbath service. He's greeted at the door just like other family members, and welcomed home. But, you can tell that people are watching him a bit more closely now, not just because he's a hometown boy, but because of those miracles over there in Cornwall, I mean, Capernaum.

As happens at all good synagogue services, part way into the service the synagogue leader would bring out the Law scroll and read it. Then, as happens even to this day, a special person in attendance or a guest, would be asked to get up to read. Apparently Jesus was that special person that day. As Jesus walks up to the front, you can just imagine his close family, watching him, so proud of him: just look at the boy.

Jesus reaches the place of reading and takes the scroll of the prophets that would have been handed to him and turns to the book assigned to be read for that day, following the law. He turns to the prophet Isaiah, because in the synagogue, as in many Christian churches today, there was a lectionary that said what texts are to be read when. And, if this synagogue in Nazareth is like other synagogues, then, just as someone would have read from the scroll of the Law, which is found in a scroll of its own, then someone, in this case, Jesus, would have read from the scroll of the prophets, which are in a scroll of their own, as a kind of commentary on the reading from the Law.

Now, let's keep in the back of our minds for the moment that the reading that Jesus does is a commentary from the prophet Isaiah on the text from the Law that would have been read by someone else. Let's think for a moment just about what this text of Isaiah says. The text is from Isaiah 58 and 61 and talks about God's spirit anointed, in other words, God's messiah, who has been sent to announce good news to the poor, to tell prisoners that they are free, to tell the blind that they can see, to free the oppressed, and to announce that the Lord's year is here! The reading from Isaiah talks about God's messiah who will come to tell people what God alone can do and has done: give sight to those who have only ever known the darkness of blindness, open prison doors to those who were born in prisons, and create an abundance for the poor when what they have always known is scarcity. Sounds good, right?

Well, it would have sounded especially good in light of the reading from the Law that would have gone before. And for this prophet to be read, the Law that would almost certainly have been Leviticus 25, the proclamation concerning the great Jubilee. For the reading from Isaiah is the prophetic confirmation of the Jubilee, that time every 50th year when there was to be "a proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become enslaved for debt, and a restoration of land to families who had been compelled to sell it out of economic need in the previous 50 years" (ABD 3.1025). That would really have sounded good!

Now, imagine that you're the people in that sabbath service in Nazareth. You've never experienced a time when all of your debts were wiped clean, all your credit cards but back to 0. What would you be thinking? Wouldn't you be thinking: "I could get my tractor paid off; I could get a new house. I could ensure my kids well-being. This would be fantastic." They would be thinking of what it would be like to win God's divine lottery and you and they would be right, because that's what it would be like. 50 years only comes around for most people once in their lifetime.

But, while the people are still thinking and murmuring and making notes on their calculators while Jesus rolls up the scroll and gives it back to the synagogue minister, he sits down to speak. Everyone grows quiet. And what Jesus says floors them: "That year has begun today." He tells them, in effect, "it's true, and it's now".

They probably just stared at him for a moment. They had been thinking to themselves in terms of "what ifs" and "whens" and Jesus says: not what if but now! The little boy from _____, I mean Nazareth, the little boy that had grown up here tells them that the Jubilee has begun. So, they begin to murmur again. " He's telling us that we won! He's telling us that we won! God is going to shower down blessings on us. We can get that new tractor, that new house."

Now, at this point, perhaps, one of the more skeptical relatives of Jesus, one who had always been a little suspicious of cousin Jesus called out from the back -- something that would never happen in one of our services! -- "wait a minute, Jesus? prove it: prove that the Jubilee of God is now!" Someone else probably said something like: "yeah, prove it by doing one of those miracles that we heard that you did over in _____, I mean Capernaum. I mean, after all, we are your family here! Show us that we're going to have some of these blessings from God."

But, Jesus refused. He said to them: "No, I am not a magician. I'm only the messenger, and what I am telling you is what the prophets themselves have always told you: There is a time coming when God will bring blessings down from heaven, and that year is now! But, I'm also telling you that he is not going to limit his blessings to you in this little town or to those of your families in the surrounding towns. God is going to bless everyone, not just those who are like you."

Well, that caught them short. "Now, wait a minute, Jesus. Just who do you think that you are?" The people began to get a bit uncomfortable. But, Jesus didn't stop. He continued: "Remember what Elijah and Elishah, the two greatest prophets, did? When there was a great famine, the greatest Israelite prophet was sent to a pagan woman outside of the land of Israel, a woman you

all would call a "dog", and he gave her more than enough food. And, while there were many lepers in the land of Israel, God called Naaman a Syrian, another "dog", and Elisha healed him. Elijah and Elishah were home-town boys, too, but God didn't send them to bless the hometown; he sent them out to bring God's power to those who were far away from God."

If eyes were staring at Jesus before, they are absolutely fixed on him now, as he concludes: "And so, friends, if you think that what I said about the Jubilee year beginning now was true, you are right; BUT, if you think that you are the ones for whom it is intended, you are wrong. God intends this to be a jubilee especially for the "dogs" out there."

Now, the people of Jesus' little town were good people. They really wanted to hear God's voice. They especially wanted to hear things that were familiar to them, things that made them feel that not only was Jesus like them, but that God was like them, too! They did not really want to hear what God himself wanted to say if it meant that he was going to say something so different from what they expected him to say. No one ever does. Even if he was going to tell them that "the road ahead would be hard", they still wanted him to tell them that "in the end, it will all turn out OK, somehow, because God is on our side."

It is good that we are not like that. But, that's not what he told them.

The hard words of Jesus

Now, you know the end of the story: you can just hear them in the background: "What is he saying? Is he crazy? Hey, Jesus, are you some kind of an idiot? We thought you were one of us? Turns out you're nothing but a Gentile-loving traitor?"

Now, you think I'm making this up? Well, one thing we know for sure: whatever they felt about what Jesus said, they were willing to kill him because he had said it! Maybe my words don't sum up the emotion strongly enough! Because what they did next was to take Jesus out of the synagogue to a cliff, in order to push him off, break his legs, and stone him, which is what traitors deserve.

Now, to realise the anger against Jesus, how he had gone from being a favourite son who was given the Scriptures to read to being a criminal that they were ready to stone only minutes later, you must realise how the Jews viewed the Gentiles. The Jews had long been taught not only to be wary of strangers but to fear and even to hate them, never to leave their daughters or their animals in the presence of non-Jews, because they would steal and abuse them. Gentiles were just like that. Sure, a needy stranger might come their way some time, and Jews were to treat him well, but they were to send him on his way quickly and allow things to get back to normal equally quickly.

They were taught the same things that people are taught all around the world today. For example, what do you think that Serbs teach their children about Kosovars, and what do Kosovars teach their children about Serbs? They might live close to each other, but they're not

family. They're enemies, better dead than alive, and one day, God be praised, God will kill them all.

Did you know that in Russia, where the crisis with the little region of Chechnya still drags on, Russian mothers for centuries have told their children at night not to watch out for the bogeyman or the monsters but to watch out for the Chechnyan. Little Russians grow up to become Russian soldiers who, all their lives, have been taught to despise and to fear Chechnyans, who are better dead than those who can pose a threat to my family.

Imagine if Jesus the Serb had begun to say in his little Serb hometown that God was going to rain down his blessings on the Kosovar villages next door? Or Jesus the Russian walks into his hometown church to tell the people how much God is going to do, not for them, but for the Chechnyans. Or Jesus the Hutu begins to preach in the tents in his little Hutu refugee camp that God is going to bless the Tutsi families in the other refugee camps beyond measure? Or Jesus the Aryan begins to tell his family members in his little German town how much God is going to do for the Jews? You know as well as I do what the response would be: it would be exactly the same as the one here. To people who expect God to help them annihilate their enemies and bless their families, this Jesus would be a traitor, and he would have to be executed. He may have one time been like us, but he certainly isn't any longer. He's a traitor.

Conclusion

It is hard to imagine today, in our remarkably peaceful and loving context here in Canada, anything of the anger and rage poured out against those who are different.

In large part it has to do with how deeply the message of Jesus has taken root in the lives of the people of Canada. We don't often realise it, but the words of Jesus have become profoundly rooted in this country and this culture. Thanks be to God.

But, every so often, we forget. And so, God brings strangers into our midst. People who are not like us. And God says to us: let's take some of the blessing that you have and let's share it with these people whom you don't know.

Some times God makes the stakes even harder. He says: here is someone who has hurt you or a member of your family. He's very different from you. But, I'm going to do a marvelous work in his life. I'm going to cancel his debt, wipe the slate clean, and start over. Will you let me? Or will you hold your anger against him?

Who do you think God is interested in proclaiming a year of Jubilee to? Your family members? People who are just like you? Or, is God interested in proclaiming a year of Jubilee to our enemies, those who would strike us on first one cheek, then on the next, those who have so much outstanding debt that they could never pay it off?

It is so hard to believe that God is interested in them, and that he isn't like us, ready to strike back and anxious to preserve his honour. It is hard to believe that God is not interested in protecting us and delivering us from our enemies, and is more interested in converting our enemies. I believe that Abraham Lincoln caught something of this when he wrote: "I can say that I have no enemies, for when I meet one who ought to be my enemy, and make him my friend and he ceases to be my enemy."

Jesus is not OK because he's just like me, or just like you. Jesus is the best precisely because he is the only one I know who has ever proclaimed that the true God is not like us, that God loves those who are very different from him, those who in fact have always been his enemies since the time of Adam.

But, the question is, will we proclaim the same message as Jesus, the same God as Jesus? Or will we proclaim a God who is of our own fashioning, a God who is just like us? Will we proclaim a God who, as Jesus made him known, does not bless only those who are like us, but who seeks to proclaim Jubilee liberation to our enemies, be it the ethnic community on the other side of the river, the farmer down the road, the abusive husband?

If you think that the next time you look in a mirror you are seeing a pretty good reflection of God, then, you need to go out on that hill and give the family of Jesus a hand by giving Jesus a push over it. Because that Jesus is not like you or like me, and he never will be. He will always be preaching salvation to our enemies, something that is very much unlike what I am like.