

Beyond Our Tribal Identities
Luke 4: 14-30
January 27, 2019
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The Church exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world's own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise.

Karl Barth

I love how Luke builds the drama in this story, how he ratchets up the tension to the snapping point.

Jesus goes to Nazareth, where he was brought up.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, lived there as a boy. But like some boys, at a certain age, Jesus left the village. He's been away for some time.

And for some time, the Nazarenes have been hearing stories about Jesus. More recently, rumors have been flying. From all over, people are attributing all sorts amazing things to Jesus. Did you hear what he did up in Capernaum?

And then, one day, Jesus goes to Nazareth, where on the Sabbath, he goes to the synagogue.

He takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah—it's a scroll, not a book, a scroll that he must carefully unwind on one side as he carefully rewinds it on the other side—and he finds where it's written, "A spirit of the lord is upon me."

After reading, Jesus rolls up the entire scroll, which takes longer than closing a book.

He gives the scroll back to the attendant.

He sits down.

All the while, all eyes are fixed on him in rapt attention.

Like I said, nice dramatic build-up on Luke's part.

Jesus is back.

What's he like now? He's been away for a while. But we've heard things.

What's he going to say to us?

What's he going to do here, in Nazareth, where he was brought up?

There's a long, pronounced silence in the synagogue, as Jesus carefully rolls up the scroll, hands it to the attendant, then sits down.

Every eye fixed on him.

And every ear—captivated, impatient. What's he's going to say?

And then he begins.

Jesus begins by saying, "Today, in your ears, this scripture has been fulfilled."

When I read this story, I get the impression that Jesus kept on speaking.

I don't think Jesus amazed people just by saying, "today, in your ears, this scripture has been fulfilled." And then stopping.

He begins by saying, "Today...this scripture has been fulfilled," and then he continues. For some time, words of grace come from his mouth.

I wonder what he says to the Nazarenes, the people who live in that place where he was brought up.

Whatever he says, the Nazarenes admire him. They're amazed by his words of grace. They're touched, deeply moved. They all speak well of him.

Then things take a dramatic turn.

Jesus knows what they want from him.

It's obvious. Everyone knows what they want from him. It's so obvious, it goes without saying.

The Nazarenes heard the stories about what he did in Capernaum. They've heard the rumors from all over about other things he did. They want him to do something for them.

Indeed, he's obligated to do something for them. Everyone knows that.

He's obligated because Jesus is a Nazarene, that's his identity.

Nazareth is the village that brought him up. Nazareth raised Jesus.

The Nazarenes are Jesus' people. Jesus is obligated to his people.

Physician, heal thyself. It means, do for your people what you did for others.

Better yet, do more for us than what you did for them, because, *you are us*. There's no distinction, no separation, between you and us. *You are us*. A Nazarene.

Jesus knows what they want. Everybody does.

And he rejects it out-of-hand.

That's a huge. It's the dramatic snapping point.

Jesus rejects it out-of-hand.

It's hard for us to appreciate the full significance of that rejection, the cultural insult of that rejection. Communal identity, communal obligation, was far more deeply engrained in the hearts and minds of first-century Nazarenes than it is in us Austinites today.

To reject the obligation to one's own community was to reject one's own identity, and to set oneself up to being cast out by one's community.

Jesus rejects it out-of-hand, and the community casts him out.

First he tells them, "no prophet is accepted in his own country."

People reject their prophets.

Then to prove his point, he cites two stories about prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who provided life-saving aid to non-Israelites instead of to Israelites.

Upon hearing these words, the Nazarenes are enraged.

Immediately, they fulfill his "no prophet is accepted" line by rejecting him, by casting him out of Nazareth.

The prophet refuses to do something special for the Nazarenes, simply because they're Nazarenes.

So the Nazarenes reject the prophet they brought up.

In Nazareth, Jesus rejects one of our most deeply engrained human characteristics. Jesus rejects our tribalism and our tribal identities. Jesus rejects the way we humans so often define *our people*.

Human beings are tribal. Throughout our history as a species on this planet, we humans have identified most strongly with our tribe, with the people and the place that brought us up.

Our people, our place.

All others are the other people, not ours. They belong in another place, not ours.

We place a very high value on allegiance and loyalty to *our people*, to *our place*. We often consider this allegiance and loyalty, this obligation to *our people* and *our place*, to blood and land, as a sacred duty.

We shun those who aren't loyal. We consider them traitors when they violate the sacred bond.

Nazareth was a place where the people saw themselves as *our people*. As Nazarenes, Galileans, Israelites, Jews. As a Nazarene, Jesus had a natural obligation to them. A sacred duty. To put them first. To give them the best.

But Jesus says, none of those tribal identity-markers mean anything anymore, not in God's kingdom here on earth. I'm not obligated to give anything to anyone simply because, solely because, they're a Jew, or an Israelite, or a Galilean, or a Nazarene.

Those humanly constructed tribal identities don't mean anything in God's kingdom.

Those humanly constructed tribal identities are not the criteria by which one enters into, inhabits, and embodies God's kingdom. Doing the will of God, here on earth, is the sole criteria.

To reject that deeply engrained human characteristic—our tribal nature, our tribal identity—is very radical to say the least. It gets to the very root of how we identify ourselves, and to whom we place our highest allegiance.

Jesus will push this issue even further, far more radically, later on by asking, who is my mother, my sisters, my brothers? Those who do the will of God, they are my mother, my sisters, my brothers.

Jesus not only rejects tribal identities, he rejects the even more deeply engrained family identity, the blood relationship.

Being part of my biological family, or any biological family, is not the criteria for entry into God's kingdom, Jesus says. Your family of origin, your blood, means nothing in God's kingdom. Doing the will of God, here on earth, means everything.

This is the radical message that Luke in particular develops in his Gospel, and even more so in his Acts of the Apostles.

He completely uproots the way we typically construct our identity.

He completely uproots our usual allegiances and loyalties to blood and land.

Being one of Christ's people, Luke tells us, has nothing to do with tribe, village, nationality, or whether you were a Jew or a gentile prior to encountering Christ.

Being one of Christ's people means completely uprooting your old identity, completely uprooting your old allegiances and loyalties to Israel or Rome, and identifying solely with Christ, giving your sole allegiance and loyalty to God's kingdom here on earth.

Wow, try doing that in first century Nazareth, and see where that gets you.

Try doing that today, and see where that gets you.

This morning we prayed:

God's kingdom doesn't fit the shape our world has taken,
and those who seek God's kingdom are holy misfits in this world,
cross-bearing violators of the world's ways, outside-the-box,
like Jesus Christ.

God, give us strength to follow Christ,
strength to contradict the world.
Your will be done, O God.
Not ours, not the world's, but yours.

May this truly be our prayer as we identify ourselves solely with Christ today, as we give our sole allegiance and loyalty to God's kingdom on earth.