

Luke 4: 21-30 “Hometown Boy Makes Good?” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/3/19

So Facebook memories reminded me that 4 years ago today, I was pulling into Redding to become your new Pastor. It reminded me of the decision process I had gone through in considering a move to Redding. After all, I had worked really hard to distance myself from my family name, and to make a name for myself in the Midwest where no one had ever heard of the Warners, where no one would tweek my cheek and say “Oh isn’t it sweet that you are Glenn Warner’s daughter, that you are Sharon Warner’s sister, that you are Wayne Bryant’s niece, Dan Bryant’s cousin,” all names which permeated West Coast Disciples of Christ congregations. And here I was considering a church that had employed my father some 30 years ago – what was I thinking? Julie Walker will gladly show you a picture of a younger, slimmer me sitting in the backyard of the Burrells’ home for a cook-out when I had come to visit my parents, although I wish she would refrain.

In a sense, my arrival here was like coming home from a long journey of self-discovery. Thirty years ago, I could not envision myself here. I was that sprinter right out of the gate who was ready to run the marathon of service to God, ready to take the community by storm and make it love me no matter what, ready to show folks I had what it took to eventually become leader of the largest Disciples church in the nation, or a Regional Executive Minister, or even General Minister and President. I expected to ride that wave of emotion right to the finish line; but strangely, the closer I drew to the finish line, the more my perspective shifted. I am basically 10 years or so from retirement now, and my tendency to surround myself with only like-minded cheerleaders has dwindled. I used to thrive on the praise and encouragement from my KC friends to go higher, to achieve more. But that turned sour as the support of friends became conditional and wobbly. I will never forget the day I stepped into the pulpit to share

the text at the beginning of chapter 4 that we heard from last week. What would the Spirit of the Lord have Jesus say to us after the LA riots, I pondered? In this suburban Kansas City church, heavily segregated despite the fact that blacks lived just a few blocks away, they prided themselves on doing good, welcoming everyone, and building community from within. To this community which had become my home, I spoke of proclaiming justice and the acceptable year of God's favor. I talked about what happens to human beings who are made to feel trapped like caged animals with nowhere to turn except to lash out and fight for their very existence. At the request of one prominent Elder, an Elders meeting and then a Board meeting was called to formally request that politics not be preached from the pulpit. It was a form of censure and I was put in my place. I was no longer their beloved Janet but somehow a threat to their complacency. Quiet whispers in the hallway, stolen glances when I walked by, and sympathetic smiles revealed I had hit a blockade and without the support of leadership, I couldn't continue.

It was just a small glimpse of what so many people go through when they dare to speak truth to power. It gave me a window into the scene from our text today. At first, the people of Nazareth are quite proud of their hometown boy who has done good for himself. Admiration and respect are showered upon him. All speak well of him and are amazed at his gracious words, but Jesus won't let them be impressed for long as he begins to attack their sense of community. They want him to do for them what he did in Capernaum, after all, they are his own kin not a bunch of strangers. Perform a few miracles, pass on those winning lottery numbers, cure a few diseases, make sure the hometown team wins the big game and so on. So far as we know, he did nothing for them but remind them that God's sense of community was bigger than theirs was. He offended them by telling them not one but two stories about how

God had passed over them and their kind in order to minister to strangers – first the widow from the wrong side of the tracks in Zarephath and then Naaman the Syrian, who was an officer in the army of Israel’s enemies. It was like telling them that God had become chaplain to the KKK, or that God had passed over a Sunday School teacher who was sick in order to take care of an ailing Hindu. Jesus was not telling them anything new. He was telling them things that were right there in their own scriptures, only that was not how they used scripture. They used it to close ranks on outsiders, those from anywhere but home. The minute Jesus denied their special status, he went from favorite son to degenerate stranger, offending them so bad they decided to kill him.

This is how sensitive we are to being told that our enemies are God’s friends. That is how mad we get when someone suggests that God loves eve the people we don’t like to sit next to at church, the people who disturb and offend us, who talk too long and get off point, and who belong to God just as surely as we do. No matter how hard we try, we can’t seem to get God to respect our boundaries. God keeps plowing right through them, inviting us to follow or get out of the way. The problem is not that we are loved any less. The problem is that people we are uncomfortable with, who intrude on our space and we would rather not have around, are loved just as much as we are, by a God with an upsetting sense of community and a troubling sense of what it means to make good.

Parker Palmer is a Quaker theologian and author who I really respect and admire. He wrote a book called [The Company of Strangers](#) which invites the church to take responsibility for renewing public life in this country. For him, the word “public” contains a vision of our interdependence on one another. In public parks, libraries and schools, we come together as

strangers to share common resources. We do not have to see eye to eye on everything, we don't even have to like each other. But in order for public life to work, we do have to respect each other's dignity as human beings, which is what we have in common, and to act with honor among strangers as well as friends. I am coming to better understand this through the Carr Fire Community Recovery Team made up of a large range of Shasta County folks – some have no church affiliation while others are suspicious of any church but their own, including some from mega well-known churches. There would have been a time when I would have nothing to do with some of these folks because of their stance on human rights, but I am not who I was 30 years ago. I have come to see that we accomplish far more by staying at the table and maintaining dialogue than we do by withdrawing off in our own little corner. If you and I are walking toward each other on a public sidewalk, our differences don't matter. We make room for each other, we might even nod and say hello. The truth is our community doesn't depend on our being in agreement with each other about anything, except that we share the sidewalk, where we both belong.

Where public life breaks down is where we regard strangers as enemies. In a scary world, many of us retreat to well-defended private lives. This practice lays the foundation for that age-old persecution of those who are different from us to continue. It sets the tone for sick individuals to place a noose around a black, gay young man's neck having beaten him half to death or to tolerate a yearbook photo from the 80's reflecting black face and KKK outfits as some sort of joke. That which is absolutely unacceptable in God's eyes becomes tolerable to the public when we begin to regard strangers as our enemies. As we overtly or covertly work to mold strangers to be like us, to only speak our language, only practice our customs, we wreak

havoc on public life. The endless variety of humankind becomes a threat, not a blessing, and the whole body suffers. The church is not immune to this struggle but we know better, we believe better. We believe in a Messiah who cares for the stranger and who comes to us as a stranger, reminding us that while he is with us, he does not belong to us.

Speaking truth to power is always more than any of us can grasp by ourselves. It takes a world full of strangers and friends to tell us the parts we cannot see, and sometimes we want to punish them for it. Jesus' own people tried to kill him, more than once. But he passed through the midst of his own kind and went on his way. How did he do that, when they were all ganged up against him? I don't know, but that is how it still works. If we will not listen, if we remove places for all at the public table, he won't try to change our minds. This hometown boy will simply pass right through our midst and go away.