“***Where Are Prophets without Honor?***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Aug. 9, 2020

**Matthew 13:54–58**

54 He came to his home town and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? 55Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” 57And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.” 58And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Summer is a time to travel, and many often return to their home town. We usually notice that things have changed. And often someone may comment how *you* have changed. Here we have Jesus returning to his town, and he’s no longer the hard-working teenaged carpenter’s son that folks remember. He speaks with power and authority. Some of the locals cannot adjust to the change. They resent his claim to authority.

Being unappreciated was not new to Jesus. He was also misunderstood by his own family. In today’s passage, the unbelief of his former neighbors prevents him from doing “many deeds of power there” (13:58). They knew his whole family by name, but that was no help. It just became fuel for the “who does he think he is” argument. In fact, Luke speaks of the people of Nazareth being so offended by Jesus that they were ready to “hurl him off the cliff” (Luke 4:29). Our story in Matthew doesn’t mention that, but you can feel the undercurrent of resentment and potential violence.

It is not honest skepticism that Jesus is encountering. It is envy and resentment. Their first observation is “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?” (13:54). His wisdom and power are evident in his words and presence, but they immediately question his right to *have* such power, as though to say “What’s so special about him? We know where he’s from; we know his family. Where is he getting all this?” This is the carping criticism of resentful people. These are the same kind of people who would resent others who seem too happy or too successful. It is a kind of bitter envy that wants to chop down anybody who rises above the average.

Prophets are honored and respected except in their own country and among their own family. They have had personal changes because of their life experiences. The prophets have been through challenges that have forever altered how they see the world. Their vision has been stretched, their understanding deepened. The “townies” have not been exposed to these life changes and cannot accept these changes. It is a bitter irony about human beings, that they often resist the insights of those closest to them. They close their hearts. They cannot accept change, and they don’t want to change *themselves*. Generally, people resent excellence, and take it as a personal affront. Their competitiveness kicks into gear, and they say “who are you to think that you’re better than us?” Pride springs eternal, as do envy and judgmentalism.

We even see this with Jesus’ family. At one point, Mark says, “they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind’” (Mark 3:21). People were making an issue out of his exorcisms, and were saying that he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebul (3:22). His family should have not given any credence to this foolish rumor, but apparently they gave in to the pressure from certain neighbors.

Their attitude shifted a little when they saw that they might be able to soak up some attention from their affinity to their famous relative. We see that once when some of Jesus’ family, lusting for a moment of fame, interrupted his preaching, sending up word that “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you” (Mark 3:32), which earned a rebuke from him: “Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (3:33, 35). Those who honor this prophet can enter into symbolic family relations with him. Spiritual relationship with Jesus is more important and enduring than genetic relationship.

Now at least two of Jesus’ brothers—James and Jude—later became preachers and leaders in the church, so the message resonated eventually. The seed took root, and James, for one, seems really to have understood the moral thrust of Jesus’ message. In the end, James and Jude gained faith, and they no longer let anyone shame them for their faith. They would not let the crowd diminish their personal religious experience.

You can’t trust the opinion of the crowd. The judgment of the crowd is often determined by prejudice, conformity, and lack of imagination. Life gives us tests, and those tests may push us out of our comfort zone. Will you be ready to not just blend into the crowd but to stand out, to speak with your true voice?

I want to point out that Jesus’ saying about prophets contains admiration for the rejected prophets. They *do* stick out above the crowd. If you pursue truth, you will run up against opposition. If you pursue justice, you will meet resistance. If you are honest and good-hearted, some people will suspect that you are playing a trick on them. Be honest and good-hearted anyway. Seek justice and truth anyway. This puts you in the same group with the persecuted prophets, and that means you’re in the same group as Jesus himself. Jesus himself was a rejected prophet.

Sometimes the prophets are even killed. As we know, that is what happened to Jesus. Jesus was not killed because God decreed that it had to happen. He was killed because people in power felt threatened. This still happens today, of course. The cross does not stand for something God did, but for the thing that cruel oppressors do every day. The gospel shows how religious leaders sometimes conspire in these acts of persecution. Since this same behavior continues today, we must keep our ethical principles intact, opposing violence and cruelty in all cases. It may mean that you have to follow a lonely path, that you have to dissent from attitudes you find around you. But who said everything was going to be easy, on such a world as this?

The gospel demands that we change, and let our light shine. Prophets ask us to change our way of thinking, to widen our vision. These are things that we often resist. Since we sometimes fear change, let us pray to let go of fear and be receptive to change that God wants us to undergo. Let us pray for the help of the Spirit with endurance and strength during times of transition. God’s love is the best stabilizing influence when other things seem uncertain. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Heb 13:8). Faith will smooth our path when the going is rocky. But we have to be ready to undergo change, a change in our thinking, in our assumptions, maybe even in our values, or the way we think about our values. I had to change the way I thought about Arabs when I met some Christian Arabs. Karen tells me that her family used to badmouth blacks and Hispanics, but she learned not to accept their opinions once she met and befriended such folks. Probably you’ve had similar experiences.

Being a Christian means “to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self” (Eph 4:23–24), as it is written in the letter to the Ephesians. And Colossians, in similar words, says you “have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Col 3:10). The new self is linked to the ability to see the image of God in others. When we allow the new self to emerge, then we have become people who are willing to listen to a true prophet. Even as we have a new self, so also will our families and our communities be transformed. Self, family, community, cosmos—all are changed.

Jesus is the one who can help us to navigate any change. He provides continuity amidst change. He helps us keep focused on doing the will of God. He steadies the ship in every storm, and guides us into port.