



“Good News for Nazareth”

What happened? At first, his teaching astounded them. “Where did this man get all this”, they asked? He definitely had the mojo going. He had wisdom – he seemed to know what he was talking about from the inside. He displayed power – he not only talked a good line, he made things happen. When he spoke it was as though their consciousness was elevated, their hearts opened, spirits were lifted, and whenever he was around, God seemed to be close. So, what happened?

Well, they began to question Jesus’ authority. “Is this not the carpenter?” Carpenters can build a table and chairs. They can even build houses. But carpenters don’t take a seat in synagogue and start acting like spiritual teachers. Isn’t this the son of Mary and the brother of those brats, James and Joses and Judas and Simon, who use to stick bubblegum under the seats at synagogue when they were kids? His sisters, in fact, are standing right here with us, now. So, who does he think he is? We know this guy. He’s one of us. That’s when they start questioning Jesus authority, along with their own experience.

Is that really what’s happening? Maybe they are questioning themselves more than they are questioning Jesus. Look deeper and you’ll see that the issue is the village’s own poor self-

image – their withering internalization of the adage that was circulating throughout Israel at the time: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was known as the backwater Podunk village of the north. Newly minted ministers still today fear that they may be settled in Armpit, Saskatchewan. Well, that was Nazareth. And if you were from Nazareth, you knew nothing and nobody of importance came out of the likes of you. Jesus exposed their poor opinion of themselves.

They began to “take offense” at him. Who did he think he was? Clearly he was getting “too big for his britches”. Ever heard that one? How many of us have been on the receiving end of that zinger? We showed a little pride in our performance on the field or at the piano recital, and then the hammer came down. It’s meant, most often I’m sure, with the best of intentions. With the proper inflection, it can be offered as a gentle corrective to hubris. But sometimes the message comes from a deeper and darker place. Sometimes, the sender of that message has simply taken unconscious offense at this display of radiance. Who does she think she is? Doesn’t she know she’s just one of us? Does he think he’s better than the rest of us?

Who knows why we do that? Perhaps we don't know how to be in the presence of somebody who sees their own power and potential and wants to express it. O, we love it in strangers – in a Roger Federer. He dresses like a prince on and off the court and we're pulling for him. But he's from "away". When we see somebody close to us shining like the sun, it is often a different story. If one of our own displays power, speaks with wisdom, we have more ambivalence. Perhaps we don't know how to deal with the reality that some people have more potential than we do. We could simply celebrate it, but it doesn't always occur to us to do this. More often, we measure ourselves against it, and come up short. Maybe we want to make everybody equal – even if it's the son of God! The United Church of Canada has this going on. God forbid that someone should excel, gain a reputation, or shine in anyway, and if it happens, that person had better be self-effacing in the extreme. In fact, they had better be humility personified.

Or maybe if I see all that potential so up close and personal from one of our own, it freaks me out, because I'm called to raise the bar a little – like the feelings a crew has toward a fellow construction worker who skips the odd coffee break because he loves his work so much. I've been on crews like that, when I worked for the city of Winnipeg, who took offense at the gifted and motivated in their midst.

Just this past week, our own beloved Minister of Music, Neil Weisensel, called me up and shared that he was little rattled by a vision that was brewing inside of him. It was his BHAG – a big, hairy, audacious goal. We have this new Purpose of teaching and enacting an evolutionary Christian spirituality, but when Neil and I talk over hymn choices each week, there are precious few that reflect this orientation. So Neil has this idea that we should get our poets and musicians at Canadian Memorial to write hymns. He's a composer, so he can set them to music or work with others to do the same. Furthermore, he was telling me, we could become a publisher of hymns, prayers, and liturgical material with an evolutionary orientation, and then make them available throughout the world. Why wait for other people to produce it? We have everything we need in our midst.

Is this not the son of Weisensel, youngest son of 8 brothers and sisters, born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Minister of Music for our modest congregation in Vancouver, B.C.? Oh, we know this voice all right. We are all from Nazareth, when it comes to being suspicious of excellence and of the presence of the Spirit in our midst. Nazareth is a place we're from both inside and out.

We're not nearly as afraid of failure as we are of our being challenged to step into the fullness of our own potential, in my experience. For all these reasons, and many more I'm sure, we know what it means to take offense when we're in the presence of

so much radiance – especially if they are one of our own.

Jesus, the story says, “couldn’t perform any works of power there”, except for a few minor healings. A great line follows: “He laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Cured a few sick people, but apparently this was a bad day for Jesus. He wasn’t firing on all cylinders. I had always assumed that this loss of power was related to the people’s lack of faith in Jesus. But at bible study this week, Frederick offered the possibility that it was the lack of faith inherent in the Nazareth culture that stymied Jesus. It’s like when a church consultant walks into a congregation to do some work, but the morale and the trust level are so low, and the song they sing is a litany of failed attempts at renewal, and she can’t make any headway – perhaps just a few minor adjustments. The consultant has no power to overcome the loser image of the congregational culture. Jesus had to get out of town to allow his power to fully manifest. And sometimes we need to do the same with our families, congregations, or places of work.

We’ve all had this experience of losing our power with those with whom we are most familiar. Have you ever had the experience of going home for the holidays and the closer you got to the door of your childhood home, the more depressed and powerless you become? We were all formed in the culture of our families. The messages we received, silently, in actions, or in words are bred in our bones. You might be a world-beater 1000 miles

from home, but then you realize that that’s why you’re 1000 miles from home. Because when you enter the culture of the family the old roles and the old rules apply. You lose your power. All that potential just vaporizes.

Jesus, the text says was “amazed by their unbelief”. By now you know that I’m interpreting this as a culture of unbelief – a pervasive and stifling self-doubt, bordering on self-disdain, that manifests is captured by Woody Allen’s quip: “Why would I want to join any club that would have me as a member?” Nazareth didn’t believe anything good could come out of it, especially not a wisdom teacher, not a prophet of God, not a son of Mary and Joseph who seemed to have the power, not just to make new furniture, but to make a new world!

So Jesus gathered up those who *did* believe that ordinary people could make a difference, and that God was calling the likes of them, fishermen, tax-collectors, wives and mothers – people like us – to go and show what could happen if a culture of belief was loosed upon the world; culture of belief that God isn’t finished with us yet; a culture that says “If not us, then who? If not now, then when?”; a culture that understands, after all, that it’s not our small self, our egoic selves that God is summoning, because this part of us lives in Nazareth, and really doesn’t want to change addresses. In fact, this small self will take offense at anybody who dares to tell them that Nazareth is an inner condition as much as a place on a map and that if you stay there too long, you’ll never

get out. No, God is summoning our authentic selves, born of God, powered by Spirit, and one with Christ. Christ is calling us to create a culture of belief – not just in him, and not in God necessarily – but in what he represents and what God believes about us, what God entrusts us with, what God sends us out to do.

Jesus gathers them up and tells them that they have the power to heal; and that they have the power to form alternative communities, based on love and compassion and the awareness of the Holy right in their midst. He trains them to believe that what God is doing through him they can do. Pay attention to how Jesus sends them out. He sends them out without baggage: “nothing for their journey, except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money; just a pair of sandals” – not even a change of clothes.

He sends them out with only what poet Tim Lilburn calls the “slender self” – without baggage. And the luggage he’s telling them to leave behind is just the outer manifestation of the inner baggage they were called to leave behind – all that stuff that gets in the way of being the radiant presence of Spirit in the world and for the world. Leave behind the self-doubt, the self-recriminations; leave behind your withering guilt for past mistakes; leave behind the excuses; leave behind your identity as victim; leave behind your perfectionism; leave

behind your insecurity and your fears of not having enough. Take only your belief – your heartfelt conviction – that if this world could just remember that love is its birthright and its destiny – everything could change.

Jesus instructs them to invite the people they meet to “repent” and here we might want to change the language. Earnest Christians who interpreted it to mean that we are bad at core and we need to be remade have ruined the word. Well, in an evolutionary model, our problem is not that humans are bad. Rather, we’re in the process of growing up, of becoming fully mature, of waking up to the truth that we are Spirit’s offspring and that our hearts were made for love. The problem is that messengers of divine love are staring us in the face, and we’re so caught up in our small ego-driven projects, that we take offense when we could just as well fall to our knees in gratitude.

How about if, instead of repent, we used “reorient”. Reorient your life around the presence of God. Live as though God was on your side – within you, around you, above you and below you. Live your life as though there is a well of goodness, a lake of creativity, and an ocean of compassion, right in the centre of your being. The Kingdom of God is not somewhere else. It’s right here, in our midst. In Nazareth, of all places!