

“Unpopular”
I Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30
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Last week Brian got us started with part one of a story that begins in Luke 4:14. As Jesus began his ministry, he was moving around in the region of Galilee where he was visiting and teaching in the synagogues. His hometown of Nazareth was in Galilee and when he got to Nazareth, he went to the synagogue there like he'd been doing in the other towns. In the first part of the story, Jesus stood up and read a familiar passage from Isaiah that described the future that they were waiting for the Messiah to bring. As Luke tells it, there seems to have been a dramatic pause when all eyes were fixed on Jesus and then Jesus said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Last week, Brian began to talk about the people's reaction to that declaration and to whatever else Jesus said after making it that isn't included in the text, but the reading ended with Jesus's statement. The people's reaction to Jesus is all in the second part of the passage which we read this morning.

At first, as we saw, the reaction was positive. The NRSV says that the people were amazed at the “gracious words that came from his mouth,” and the more literal meaning of the phrase is that they were impressed with the outward beauty of his speech. Some people have a way with words, and some people are gifted public speakers. Apparently, Jesus wowed them with his teaching and public speaking skills, and they were amazed that this was the same little kid that they remembered from the neighborhood who was all grown up now, giving this incredible talk like a pro.

I'm going to come back to this moment in the story, but before I go any further, I want to go back for a minute to the beginning of this chapter which begins with the account of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. As Jesus prepared to begin his ministry, he was tempted to doubt and forsake God's truth and his calling. Save yourself. Serve yourself. Use your power and your position to your advantage. Sometimes we might think that it was easy for Jesus to be Jesus because he is God, but as we observe his struggle with temptation in the wilderness, we are reminded of his humanity and the vulnerability that came with it. The story about Jesus's temptation in the wilderness is the only time when the Gospel writers talk explicitly about Jesus dealing with temptation, but we shouldn't believe that after those 40 days Jesus was never tempted and never struggled to resist temptation again. I'm sure his experience was like our own, filled with temptations popping up here, and there, and everywhere, and one of those moments may have been right there in the synagogue that day, right after he read from the scroll and gave a message that thrilled people.

That was the moment when Jesus had them.

Right there at the end of verse 22 when they were all saying, "Wait, that's Joseph's kid, isn't it?" They were impressed and amazed, full of accolades, and ready to claim him as their hometown hero. Right there at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus had the chance to be *popular*.

I know that not everyone relishes the idea of being famous, but if you think that the idea of being popular wasn't a temptation for Jesus, think about any of the unfortunate examples of God's servants who started off well, but got derailed after being sucked in by the admiration, and the privileges, and the power that came to them because they were popular. In many ways it's easier to be popular

than it is to be unpopular, and it can feel really good to be popular—way better than it feels to be unpopular. Just look at Glinda and Elphaba from the musical *Wicked*.

If you haven't seen it, *Wicked* is like the prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* and it tells the backstory about Glinda and the Wicked Witch of the West. When they were young, the two met at boarding school where Glinda was very popular and Elphaba was an outcast because she was green. Because of her popularity, Glinda's experience at school is much better than Elphaba's, but after a rough start with each other, Glinda softens toward Elphaba and decides to help her by teaching her how to be popular because of course, what could make one's life better than going from being unpopular to popular?

Jesus had already wrestled with the devil in the wilderness and resisted the temptations to live an easy, self-centered life over a life marked by rejection, and service, and sacrifice, but here again, as the people in the synagogue went on about him, there was another chance to take the easy way.

I've read this passage of Scripture many times, and I've never thought about it or recognized it as a moment of temptation and a moment when Jesus resisted temptation, and specifically the temptation to embrace popularity, but I read a commentary this week that helped me pick up on this. We have to dig in a little bit to what Jesus says to catch it.

The moment of temptation and resistance to the temptation appears to come right away when Jesus responds to the positive feedback that he receives. Instead of allowing himself to be idealized or idolized, he comes right back – just like he did with the devil in the wilderness - with the remarks about how they are surely going to ask him to do amazing things right there in his hometown, but a prophet

is not accepted in his hometown. The people in the synagogue knew about the ancient prophets who called their ancestors to repentance and warned about impending judgement, and they knew that their ancestors had rejected, and mistreated, and ignored those prophets. By calling these prophets to their attention, Jesus was saying, “As nice as it is that in this moment you all think I’m great and you’re liking what I have to say, I’m not the guy who is here to make you feel good about yourselves and tell you what you want to hear. There were people like that in the days of the ancient prophets, but Jesus wanted to say I’m like Jeremiah who prophesied to the people in Jeremiah 23:16,17 ‘...*Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They keep saying to those who despise the word of the Lord, “It shall be well with you,” and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, “No calamity shall come upon you.”*’” That was bold, and brave, but he didn’t stop there.

After clarifying this truth about himself, then he goes on to imply an unflattering truth about them. He references a time in Israel’s history when one of the bad kings, Ahab, was the leader and Israel was steeped in idolatry. During that time, when God’s people were unwilling to listen to the prophets, God sent Elijah and Elisha outside of Israel to a widow and a soldier who became the recipients of God’s care and blessings through miracles that God performed through the prophets. When Jesus made reference to Elijah and Elisha and the miracles they did *outside* of Israel, Jesus was suggesting that the good people of Nazareth had something in common with the ancient Israelites who were unwilling to listen to the prophets and didn’t like the sound of uncomfortable truth.

When you begin to realize what Jesus was really saying with these comments that may at first be hard for us to make much sense

of, all of a sudden, the reaction of the people that sort of seems to come out of nowhere starts to make sense. They were mad! We just welcomed you with open arms. We were gonna blow you up and make you famous, but you're going to reject our favor and then judge and insult us?! Off the cliff with this guy!

I have to imagine that it wasn't easy for Jesus to take this stand and say these things to the people who were gathered there in the synagogue that day. For one thing, this was the community that had raised him, and I'm sure Jesus would have liked it as much as any of us would like it for his hometown to be proud of him and not angry with him. And beyond that, it's never easy to be the one saying things that no one wants to hear, but in that moment when popularity was being dangled out in front of him, Jesus acted decisively.

I think it's important to say something about prophets here, and to point out that a prophet is someone with a unique call and unique spiritual gift. The lectionary pairs this text in Luke with the call story of the prophet Jeremiah from Jeremiah 1, and in verses 4-10, we learn 4 important things about prophets. First, a prophet is called by God to the prophetic ministry. Second, a prophet is sent by God to speak. Third, a prophet is protected by God, and finally, a prophet has authority given by God. The Apostle Paul says that the Spirit has called some to be prophets, and I believe that means that some are still gifted and called to be prophets today, but not everyone is a prophet like Jeremiah, or Isaiah, or Jesus. That said, though, as followers of Jesus we are all called to be *witnesses*, bearing witness to Jesus, and the gospel, and his kingdom, and in the same way that prophets were and are sometimes unpopular, witnesses to Jesus, and the gospel, and the kingdom can sometimes be unpopular, too.

I don't think anyone *wants* to be unpopular, and I don't think anyone needs to go out of your way to try to make yourself unpopular.

I think sometimes Christians do make the mistake of thinking that being rejected or mocked for being a witness is a badge of honor. Then, they kind of act like jerks and when people react badly they think it's because they were being a witness but really it's just because they were being a jerk. Being unpopular is not a *virtue*, but it may likely be a byproduct of being a witness to Christ. And it is likely that it will be a byproduct of speaking truth that makes people uncomfortable and of bearing witness to a King and a Kingdom that are at odds with the rules and powers of this world, but glorifying unpopularity so that we can wear it like a badge of honor isn't a good reason to embrace it. And our motivation for speaking truth and pointing others to Christ and his kingdom shouldn't be so that we can bask in the self-righteous glory of being right. And our motivation for being witnesses shouldn't be to try to garnish favor with God who doesn't love us any more or less because we are such willing martyrs.

I don't think Jesus *wanted* to be unpopular, but Jesus was willing to accept it for one very simple, and profound, and compelling reason, and that reason was love. From the very beginning of his ministry right up until he took his last breath on the cross, Jesus did not relent from his ministry of telling the truth that brings life and salvation to the world. After they tried to throw him off a cliff, he kept going. When his disciples struggled to understand his teaching, he kept teaching them. When the Pharisees told him to stop because Herod was going to kill him, he persisted saying, "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings*" (Luke 13:24). Jesus kept telling the truth because of his great love for people and the whole world, and it is why he continues to speak the truth through Scripture; through prophets and preachers; through the ministry of the Holy Spirit whom he sent to guide us into all truth; and through all of his

disciples who are willing if necessary to resist the temptation to be popular for the sake of being his witnesses and sharing in his ministry.

As people who believe God has revealed all truth in and through Christ, and as people who are longing and looking for Jesus's return and the arrival of the new Creation, we can grow impatient. We want everyone to just get on board and to live as followers of Christ. What a peaceful world it would be if everyone would just listen to Jesus and trust him. How much pain and violence and injustice could be avoided if everyone would listen to Jesus and believe that he *is* the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. But not everyone does. People remain unwilling to listen. People remain committed to playing by the rules of this world. People's hearts remain hard, and oh how we want to force it, but this is not the way of Jesus. Jesus doesn't force himself or his way. He just keeps telling the truth, and keeps offering and inviting people to follow. His way is the way of love which is patient and kind; it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This is the way that Jesus did and does reveal truth, and it is the way for us to be his witnesses, too- courageously, consistently, and charitably, always trusting God alone with the outcomes and *believing* that love never fails. Amen.

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