

“The easy part is speaking truth to power. The hard part is speaking truth to your community.” Although those sentences were spoken by the publisher of a local newspaper in the small midwestern town of Benson, Minnesota and were featured in an Associated Press article this week, perhaps Jesus could relate to them in today’s Gospel reading.

Today’s reading picks up where we left off last week. So, if you weren’t here, or if you have forgotten, after he was baptized and after he successfully overcame temptation in the wilderness, the Holy Spirit was with Jesus, as he arrived at his hometown of Nazareth. There he went to the synagogue and was given the honor of reading from the scroll of Isaiah. He picked a section that spoke of the Messiah as God’s embodiment of love through healing, liberation from oppression, and forgiveness of sins. Then he sat down to preach, saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That sentence is both where we left off last Sunday and start today.

Notice that at first Jesus’ hometown positively received the reading and his short sermon. It sounds like they might have been proud and perhaps even impressed with the gracious way he spoke or that he spoke of God’s grace. Either way, Jesus was well received back in his hometown. Until he obviously wasn’t. Until something changed or went wrong. The hometown crowd went from proud to raging after Jesus spoke of two of the great prophets of history who showed God’s grace to people considered foreign: a widow from another place who miraculously during a famine was able to keep making honey cakes for her, her child, and Elijah for years when she only had enough ingredients for one day. When her son was ill to the point of death, Elijah restored him to wellness. The prophet Elisha healed the leader of the enemy’s army of the disease leprosy. These might sound like pretty harmless stories. To us, they could even sound inspiring and hopeful. So, we might wonder, why did the people in Jesus’ hometown get so upset as to threaten violence after Jesus mentioned them?

There are, of course several interpretations. One of which unfortunately has led to anti-Semitic reactions, and that is really too bad because the Gospels are not intended to make us hate anyone person or group of people or blame them for our discomfort. Instead of pointing fingers and finding fault, the Gospel is intended to reveal God incarnate, God manifest in Jesus. This revelation is intended to be just as healing, liberating, and bring about forgiveness as Jesus himself, not cause more suffering.

The reaction of the people in Jesus’ hometown could stem from disappointment that Jesus caused when he said he was not going to bring attention to his hometown. We need to remember who Jesus was speaking to. It was the not only the *place* where he grew up. These were most likely the *people: the neighbors* who watched him grow up. The ones who scolded him for running too fast, or wiped his nose when it was runny, or helped him up if he tripped and fell when he was a little boy. These were the people who taught him, who watched him grow and learn the work of his family. Notice they referred to him by his family. Anyone who grew up in a small town can relate to that. For many years of my life, I was recognized by the people in my hometown – the teachers, farmers, people who worked at the post office, stores, restaurants, and car dealerships, even my church, as “Bill Woolsey’s daughter”. There is nothing wrong with that, and I am proud of my father and to be a member of my family. However, my hometown community had a hard time imagining I could be anything other than the local plumber’s daughter, even after graduating from college and then managing a local independent children’s bookstore for eight years. It wasn’t until I left for seminary and then was ordained a priest that the same people who watched me grow up and then mature could call me by my name instead of my father’s name. And they are disappointed I went so far away after I was ordained. They had an expectation that I would stay at least in the area if not in town so they could continue to watch me grow, maybe even find a way I could give back to the community that raised me.

I wonder if the good folks at Nazareth were similar to the good folks of Waupaca? They certainly aren't that different from the good folks here in Athens County who are eager for this sermon to be over so we can get the service over, so we can all get home, get the annual meeting over with so we can watch our own local hero Joe Burrow fulfill his dream of playing professional football and lead the Cincinnati Bengals to victory over the Kansas City Chiefs, and go on to take his team to the Super Bowl. That is the hope.

This community watched Joe, who lived in The Plains, grow up and cheered him on when he played football in Athens High School. This community was pleased and proud when he signed on to play for the Bengals, because he could have played for any number of professional football teams, but he chose to stay close to home. The icing on the cake, however, was when he made his now famous speech to the nation about achieving his dream of playing professional football and drew attention to our county and the terrible poverty and food insecurity this county suffers. As a result of his speech, millions of dollars poured in from all over the United States to our local food pantry. Our parish representative, the Rev. Katharin Foster, who sits on the Athens County Food Pantry Board told me they got so much money they didn't know what to do, and had consultants speak to them to help them figure out a plan to help reach more people in the county.

And, justifiably so, everyone in the county was elated. Elated that our small community was suddenly noticed by this great big country. Elated to be given so much good will and money from people all over the country. We can't help but lift up Joe as a hero. One of the ways this jubilation was expressed was people started comparing Joe Burrow to Jesus because his speech led to feeding so many people in his hometown, or at least his home county. And while I do not want nor intend to take anything away from Joe, and want to go on record again stating I am impressed by his philanthropy, it is not theologically accurate to compare him or anyone else to Jesus. In today's Gospel Jesus did not lift up his hometown the way Joe lifts up his, and at the end of the Gospel reading today the people in Jesus' hometown tried to kill him. Besides, such a comparison puts a heavy, unrealistic, and unfair burden on Joe.

Jesus is not a hero nor a professional football player looking to give back to his community. Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is God manifest whose mission was like that of the prophets who went before; outward focused, led by the Holy Spirit, and the manifestation of the liberating, healing, and forgiving love of God for all people.

Jesus wasn't going to hang around Nazareth doing miracles, he was going to other places to be among many other people so they could see God's love in their midst. Jesus' message to his hometown community is the love of God can't be contained to one place, or time. God doesn't wear one team's colors, and that can be a difficult message to hear, just ask a Green Bay Packers fan. That truth is so difficult to hear, it seems the people in Nazareth were offended and angry enough to threaten violence.

This is not the last time crowds will turn on Jesus. Today's Gospel reading foreshadows Holy Week's events that led to Jesus' crucifixion. But today, we are many weeks from Holy Week, and Jesus walked safely through the angry crowd like a miracle, the only one his hometown witnessed. Again, this interpretation is not intended to make the people of Jesus' hometown look bad, I don't endorse continuing to vilify or demonize anybody or group of people. Instead, I wanted to show how easy it can be to get upset when a local celebrity appears to turn their back on their hometown. Ask any Green Bay Packers fan how difficult it was to forgive their former beloved hero quarterback and 3-time MVP Brett Favre for playing for their longtime rivals the Minnesota Vikings. It was not pretty.

Perhaps it is not a good idea to think of Jesus as a celebrity who inspired charity and instead recognize him as the savior of humanity. This might be much more helpful when we find ourselves suffering and disappointed Jesus doesn't step in and rescue us with a miracle, like magically eliminating the covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps instead, the miracles are around us in unexpected places: the generosity

of another, the person who helps us feel seen, or when we can help someone else feel seen, like when a young professional football player drew attention to the suffering poverty causes in his hometown, or when we can face a difficult situation and in so doing find unexpected peace. When we can let go of getting our way and listen to the Holy Spirit letting God have God's way, that's when we all can share in the miracles of God's healing, liberating, forgiving love, in any time or place.

And, it is still okay to take a break and enjoy a football game and local celebrity too.