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Lessons in Luke: Rejection in Nazareth

Luke 4:14-30

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In the fall of 2010, I was fresh out of seminary and, like a lot of my peers, looking for work, but apparently, in all the wrong places. The job search was going pretty slow for me and of all places, I was having a fair amount of trouble even getting my foot in the door in my hometown of Ankeny, IA. There was one particular job that I was hoping to get that I had been interviewing for since the spring of my last semester at school. Six months I was in this process. Well, I made it all the way through a bunch of rounds of interviews to the last round, and I got invited to do a full-day of them on-site round of interviews. Things were going well, I thought. I started with coffee and donuts, and then a visit to the campus of the church, and then just before lunch I got to meet with the senior pastor for a brief sit-down interview. That was when he said something that will sound familiar in just a moment. He said this, “Oh, you’re from Ankeny? Boy, you know what they say? A prophet is never welcome in his hometown. You sure you want to work here?”

As an aside, have you ever been in an interview where they obviously don’t want to hire you and they just lob a question like that out there for fun, just to see what you’re going to do? Like, what are you going to do? Not answer it? Well, I tried and long story short, I didn’t get the job. I know it is 100% hindsight, but it’s a blessing that I didn’t because I think that at the time, there was no way I was ready or prepared to go back to the place I was from, changed as I was by three years of seminary, to be a pastor. I wouldn’t have made it.

Now, the vast majority of you won’t interview to be a pastor in your hometown. However, in just about 30 minutes when worship is done, we’re going to send you back home, hopefully changed just a little bit, to be a disciple there. And that begs the question, How are you going to continue growing in your faith after worship? What handles will you hold? What practices will you employ? Just in case those questions are

leaving you searching or unsure, I want to give you three handles today for when you ride home from your next life-changing encounter in worship, at camp, or on the road a life.

To begin, though, let’s read about Jesus’ experience doing the same:

¹⁴ Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit’s power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. ¹⁵ He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. ¹⁷ The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, ¹⁹ and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”

²⁰ He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. ²¹ Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!” ²² Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. “How can this be?” they asked. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” ²³ Then he said, “You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: ‘Physician, heal yourself’— meaning, ‘Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.’ ²⁴ But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. ²⁵ Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. ²⁷ And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. ²⁹ Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, ³⁰ but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks

be to God.

The first handle I want to give you as you make your way to your hometown from here today is this: **Start with Identity, Not a List.**

Coming home from seminary wasn't the first time that I came home from a deeply spiritual transformation. The other time was the fall that I came back to my fraternity after I worked as a camp counselor at Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camp. I do want to preface what I am about to say about my experience by noting that A LOT of good came from my fraternity experience. It wasn't all bad. That said, there was some bad.

The day I returned to campus I remember that there was pressure to be who I was before I left. (That's a whole other story.) The trouble was that while I genuinely experienced change over the summer, my model for applying that change to the situations I faced in my fraternity, it was a list. In other words, I had a neat little list of Christian do's and don'ts that I learned at camp that I had to figure out how to apply to different situations in my fraternity, especially on Friday nights.

The result was that I was constantly feeling guilt about not keeping a rule, or I was feeling an uptick in pride when I was able to keep it amongst my brothers in the house. It was not sustainable. The guilt I felt for failing the test ate me up inside and the pride I felt, and apparently exuded, pushed me away from my brothers. The two forces together made my new life crumple like a tin can on the bottom of the ocean. So, what's an alternative? Again, with the benefit of hindsight and wise friends, I've learned to start at a better place, not with a list, but with identity. And Jesus did too. Because, in what comes just before this passage that we read today, we find that in his baptism Jesus starts his ministry with identity, not a to-do list. I like to think of the difference between identity and a to-do list using a comparison Rob Bell used some years ago in his book, *Velvet Elvis*, "A list is like a brick wall." Each of the bricks is a proposition or an idea. It's easy to stack, it has fine lines, it has a fine structure. Now if you came away from worship or a camp experience with one of these, you might be feeling pretty solid, pun intended. But what happens when the bricks start coming out of your brick wall. Does it get stronger or weaker? Weaker. Ideas about sexuality, church & politics, and God & science are some of the most common brick stealers. And over time, with enough rearranging the integrity of the bricks, the

wall fails. And so often does our faith. And so what's an alternative. The Identity Trampoline. Now the surface you jump on is your identity in baptism, your Child of God self. And it stretches, and catches you, and launches you, and it doesn't break. The springs around the sides can be those ideas and propositions, but instead of them being rigid like a wall they are flexible and move with you. Stress doesn't make the trampoline fall apart, it just makes you jump higher. And you just might have some fun, and see something from a different perspective along the way.

A second handle this story encourages us to hold onto as we go home is a **Small Group**. It is a well-established fact of life that the people you surround yourself with contribute to the success or failure of significant (and insignificant) life changes. There is a reason that Alcoholics Anonymous exists. There's a reason that crossfit happens in a gym or a box. There's a reason that the plot line of every Marvel movie seems to have something to do with teamwork—because when life is hard, we're better together. I think it is easy to overlook the fact that Jesus' ministry starts the way that it does. Even Jesus, after he experiences some setbacks in the beginning of his ministry, immediately calls the disciples. Jesus needed a small group! Even Jesus, the Messiah, knew that he needed a group of people to surround him with to do this important work. It stands to reason, then, that we should find a way to make a similar arrangement in our lives. How do you do that? Well, I realize that some of us are more naturally social than others, so I want to give you a small, medium, and big step for this. A small step you can take is by downloading a really cool app called the Youversion Bible app. It's a place where you can add your friends from your favorite social networks as friends on the app, who can journey with you through a Bible study, or simply be people you share and discuss a Bible verse with. It's super simple and you can do it at your own pace. A medium step is to attend our drop-in Bible study, Engage online and eventually back on campus where you can meet people from Prince of Peace who are also trying to figure out this new life in Christ. If you want a big step, then I want to encourage you to take the leap into small group leadership so that you can be a person that creates spaces where other people can journey together.

A third and final handle that I think this story gives us is a **little bit of Boldness or Hutzpah**. Can you imagine Jesus in this moment? So, he's a 30 year old guy, been away for some time wandering the desert and then

he comes strolling into his hometown with a chip on his shoulder. Now, some of you are from small towns and so you know full-well how difficult a task this would be. In small towns everyone knows everyone. Everyone is in each other's chili, as Gauche would say. People get labeled early in life and it's often a narrative they have the rest of their lives. It isn't like the suburbs or the city where you can be anonymous. This is the context where Jesus walks, charges in to read this passage from the scroll of Isaiah no less. Hutzpah.

One of the things we lean into during this season after Easter is that we are not alone, but that we are energized by the Holy Spirit. At the end of Jesus' ministry, before he ascends to heaven, it is the gift, the Spirit, he gives to us to give us boldness to proclaim who we are when it is scary to do it. And, friends, it is scary to do so today. I'm not one of the people who is going to say that somehow Christians in America are a persecuted minority—we're not—and I am especially mindful of that as I am embodied as a white, cis gender male giving this sermon. I WILL say, however, that I have found an identity in Christ with a life that follows that I don't see many other places. And I want that for you and for other people. If you have found that identity and that life like I have, then why not share it with someone? Hutzpah. There are a million other options for people to find life these days, but I think this is the best one and if you think that too, then maybe pray for God to fill you with the Holy Spirit so that you, like Jesus here in this story and certainly the disciples in the book of Acts, might have the boldness to share it.

Our reading for today doesn't end particularly well for Jesus. He narrowly escapes the people from his hometown. Nowadays it is highly unlikely that you'll face fierce opposition for being a Christian, that is unless you stake your faith to a list, then you might. The fact of the matter is that today you're much more likely to face one of two things: 1) options 2) nothing. The world we live in has a multitude of identities, self-help books, groups, clubs, fads, and religions that you can be part of if you want to be. The 21st century is a veritable toothpaste aisle of options for meaning. When that happens it can be really hard to hold onto your faith in the constant swirl of options. The other reality we have to contend with is that people just don't really care what you believe sometimes. You might face no resistance at all and if the way that you form your faith or identity is in opposition to other things, then it's going to be hard to find that resistance

today. You might be building a lean-to with nothing to lean to.

It's for these reasons and more that I think these three handles are key: 1) Put your identity at the center. 2) Find a community. 3) Have a little boldness. If you do, then whether you're going to your hometown, a new relationship, or a somewhere totally new, you will ensure that what happens here stays with you there, even when it's hard.