

“And they took offense at him.” Jesus gave the people Gospel truth instead of pap, and the people took offense.

“You can’t go home again.” It’s been said thousands of times, probably most famously by Thomas Wolfe in the title of his novel. But Jesus hadn’t read the book, so home he went to Nazareth. He didn’t slip quietly into town to visit the family. He arrived with his followers and he ended up in the synagogue on Sabbath day. The story tells us that he began to teach, and the people were astounded. “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” “Wait a minute, wait a minute, you can’t fool us! We know who this is. It’s Jesus, Mary’s boy. We know the whole family. This is Jesus, the carpenter.”

Can you hear what they were saying? “Is not this the carpenter? He’s only a carpenter. Who does he think he is, putting on airs, pretending to be some kind of know-it-all?” The people thought they knew all about Jesus. They were sure that they had him all figured out. So when he started to teach and what he said didn’t fit with what the locals knew about the hometown carpenter boy, down came the blinds and up went the wall. And they took offense at him. And he could do no deed of power there. How sad. The people who thought they knew all about Jesus knew nothing, and they locked up Jesus in a box, and they rendered him powerless in his own hometown.

This disturbing story shouldn’t surprise us. It’s a perfect fit for Mark’s Gospel where we spend so much of this liturgical year. Jesus bursts onto the scene in Mark’s Gospel with a sense of urgency, and there is controversy and confrontation and conflict at every turn. It’s as if he’s spoiling for a showdown, as if he refuses to stay in that box, and that he’s going to give people what they need rather than what they want or expect.

I called this story disturbing, and I want to go back to that for a minute. Maybe it’s not disturbing to you, but for this preacher, it’s disturbing. When preachers greet the congregation at the door after church, what we would like to hear is, “Your sermon really spoke to me today,” or “Your sermon challenged me, and I needed that.” What the preacher doesn’t want to hear is, “That

was a nice sermon.” And what the preacher really doesn’t want to hear is, “Your sermon was offensive.”

Can you imagine the scene at the end of a Sunday when the preacher arrives at home and he’s asked, “So, how did your day go?” And the preacher responds, “It was great! I offended a whole slew of people.” That’s not a likely exchange, and that’s why I say this is a disturbing story.

As a preacher, if I’ve said my prayers, I shouldn’t allow anything to make me worry about causing offense. I shouldn’t ever allow a desire to keep the peace or to make nice prevent me from saying or doing anything I believe I am being called by God to say or do. That’s what I learn from Jesus in this story today. Jesus wasn’t in Nazareth to engage in pleasing and polite conversation. He was there to teach people about the kingdom of God and to tell them some Gospel truths.

But some of the people who were listening couldn’t learn because their hearts and minds were closed, and they took offense.

Two thousand years later from our post-resurrection perspective it’s not difficult for us to acknowledge that Jesus knew the truth and that he had some important things to say. But do we realize that we have a piece of that truth, too?

If we take our baptismal promises seriously, if we study scripture, if we say our prayers, if we pay attention to our own experiences, and listen to the experiences of others, then each of us is entrusted with a piece of Gospel truth. We don’t get the whole truth, but we get a piece, and it is our responsibility and our privilege to proclaim that truth to others. When we do that, the kingdom of God is expanded and our understanding of the Gospel truth is enlarged.

But we should remember that some people may take offense. They may think they know everything about us. They may think they have us catalogued and labeled and neatly and conveniently locked up in a box. It’s my impression that we have experienced this recently in a number of Supreme Court decisions, and I believe we experience it in the church, too.

Sometimes we think we know everything there is to know about the other — conservative, liberal, exclusionist, recontextualizer, orthodox, revisionist. We

close our minds and we close our hearts, and we render Jesus powerless.

It's hard and it's complicated, because the truth as we perceive it doesn't always match the truth of someone else. But we have to keep talking to one another and listening, and we have to try to understand that the truth that has been revealed to us and given into our care is our truth to live and our truth to proclaim, come what may.

Last Saturday in Salt Lake City, The Right Reverend Michael Curry was elected as the next Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Michael Curry will be the first African American Presiding Bishop in the history of our church. He will succeed The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori. When Katharine Jefferts Schori was elected nine years ago in Columbus, Ohio, she was the first woman to be elected Presiding Bishop, not only in the history of our church, but also in the history of any of the member churches in the world-wide Anglican Communion. In both of these elections I believe the Episcopal Church proclaimed something important about the kingdom of God. I believe we learned something we need to know about the Gospel truth.

But let's not be naive. In both of these elections there are people who have taken offense. Does that mean that the Gospel truth that was proclaimed loudly and clearly nine years ago in Columbus and again last week in Salt Lake City should have been left unspoken? Absolutely not!

In the early nineteen hundreds America started down a road toward the equal treatment of women in our society. We've learned a lot about ascribing dignity and honor and power to the women in our midst, but we're still on that road, and we still have a long way to go. There are 178 members of the House of Bishops in the Episcopal Church. Eighteen of them are women. The numbers in positions of leadership in business and industry reflect the same kind of disproportionate representation.

We're on the road, but we still have a long way to go. In the nineteen fifties and sixties the United States made great strides in ending segregation and in working to achieve equality and a deeper understanding among the races.

On June 17th, 2015, nine African Americans were shot dead during an evening Bible study at Emmanuel AME Church. The alleged shooter was a young white male who said he hoped to start a race war. Since that night seven black churches in the south have burned. At least three of the fires have been confirmed as arson, and the investigation is ongoing in the others.

We may be on the road, but we still have a long, long way to go. We're traveling other roads that will deliver us to a steadier, braver proclamation of God's truth in relation to others who share this time and place with us.

The journey has begun, and turning back is not a choice, not because it's a long road, and not because it's a hard road, and certainly not because someone might take offense at us. The Gospel truth has been given to us, and it is ours to proclaim. And if we are worried that some people might take offense, look at Jesus. As a preacher he was a miserable failure. He attracted far fewer people than he offended and turned away. He provoked conflict and controversy everywhere he went. He was executed by the authorities in poverty and relative obscurity. And yet we call him Lord. Why?

Because he was faithful to God, and he was faithful in telling God's truth.

If we want to be followers of Jesus it is our responsibility and our privilege to do the same.

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