

Home Field Disadvantage

Luke 4:21-30
January 31, 2010

I.

Today's Gospel is a continuation of last week's reading about Jesus' return to his home town, Nazareth. Let's try to put the reading into a helpful context.

For the last several weeks, as we all watched the New Orleans Saints work their way into the Super Bowl, we heard a lot about the home field advantage. The obvious idea is that when a team plays at home, in front of its own fans, it's more likely to win.

And suppose Bret Favre came back to the Kiln speak with the people with whom he had grown up. Don't you think they would welcome him, and perhaps put up banners and hold a parade?

We probably expect that kind of enthusiasm for sports figures and local teams. But it also applies in other areas as well. A national news magazine once said Billy Graham was the most respected man in his home state of North Carolina. Even public officials know the importance of making a good impression. None of them want to be tarred and feathered in their own home towns.

And of course in today's society we try to exercise the virtue of common courtesy, don't we? Bret Favre never would come back home and tell people they were a bunch of jerks who didn't know anything about football.

II.

And so, what happened in today's Gospel? It seems to describe an unlikely scene, doesn't it? The stage was set for Jesus to receive a warm reception in Nazareth, where he grew up. After all, he was the home town boy who went into the world and made a name for himself. He performed miracles and attracted crowds wherever he traveled, and now he had returned to his roots.

Don't you think the people would have welcomed him? He might have transformed Nazareth into a religious center unrivaled in the region. Pilgrims could have come from all over to see where Jesus lived as a boy. Think of all the T-shirts they could have sold.

And things started off on a good note because the people thought Jesus would continue his miracles in Nazareth and they all would benefit. But what actually happened? They wanted a wonder worker and instead got a prophet. And like the Old Testament prophets who often were rejected and reviled for what they said, Jesus also did not have kind words for his listeners.

As we heard in last week's Gospel reading, Jesus stood in the synagogue and read a prophecy from the Old Testament book of Isaiah about the coming of the Messiah. And he delivered the punch line in today's reading when he said he was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Then he continued by showing he was not pleased that all they wanted from him was miracles, and he told them that no prophet is accepted in his hometown, obviously referring to himself. After that he continued by emphasizing how God enabled some of the Old Testament prophets to heal and perform miracles for Gentiles rather than Jews.

That must have been the last straw because the people became infuriated. They had an "us" and "them" mentality. Perhaps they thought Jesus belonged to "us" and would take care of "us," the Jews, and instead Jesus spoke about reaching out to "them," the Gentiles, the unbelievers.

The reading says, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage." They thought Jesus was not respecting his origins. The unspoken words from the people of Nazareth

were, "Who does he think he is?" After all, Jesus was preaching and teaching and being called a rabbi by his disciples, and the people thought they knew better.

He's no rabbi, they thought, he's just a carpenter's son. He has had no formal education, no training like our other rabbis. He has a lot of nerve coming back here and telling us what to do and how to live our lives. Why, he hasn't even gone to seminary.

This reminds me of the young seminarian who told his Bishop that he would serve anyplace in the diocese, except for the town of Hillcrest. The Bishop asked why, and the seminarian said "Well, that's my hometown, and Jesus said that a prophet is not accepted in his hometown." The Bishop hesitated, smiled and said, "Son, don't worry. No one will mistake you for a prophet."

In any event, today's Gospel illustrates a problem Jesus faced during his ministry. He regularly went into situations where people were divided into "us" and "them," but his message was addressed to "you all." And just as he almost was stoned in today's reading, the things he continued to say after he left Nazareth eventually led to the cross.

III.

What does this story mean today? Well, certainly twenty-first century Americans should not expect to be threatened with physical danger for what they say. Even so, some of us might feel hesitant to talk about our faith outside of our own comfort zone.

This can be especially true with people we know. Sometimes it's easier to talk about God with complete strangers than with friends, family, and co-workers. We might think there is a home field disadvantage instead of the other way around.

Even though we have our social groups and personal interactions with people outside the church, we might avoid discussing religion just because we're not sure what to say. Or we might be concerned about not being able to answer a difficult question. Or we might be worried about intruding on someone's privacy.

I recall a survey given to people attending a training session for a Billy Graham crusade. One of the questions was, "What is the hardest part of speaking about your faith to others?" A few said they did not feel called to do so, or they wanted to get their own lives in order first. However, the large majority expressed concern that the other person would react in a negative way.

If any of us might feel that way, we are not alone. It's a natural feeling. We don't want our friends and neighbors to react to us as the people of Nazareth reacted to Jesus.

So, what can we do? Well, I might tell you not to worry about it. I could tell you that you don't need to be a theological expert, or that you don't have to have answers to complex religious questions. And I think I can predict that your friends and neighbors still will be your friends and neighbors whether or not you talk to them about faith, or church, or God.

But if I was teaching a course or a seminar on effective outreach and church growth, I would start with three basic principles that could be guides on what to do.

First, we should remember that most people are not saved by being told what's wrong with them, but rather what's right with God. And telling people their lives are incomplete without the church probably is less effective than explaining how your life has been more fulfilled with it.

Second, we cannot say that our faith is an insurance policy against difficulties in life, or that it turns away all problems. Being a Christian does not automatically resolve the hardships of life. We experience victory not because of the absence of problems, but because of the presence of faith. And our faith will equip us to overcome the fears and worries we encounter.

And third, rely on the Holy Spirit. I am aware of many situations where people shared their faith with someone else, and it made a difference. The other person was just waiting for someone raise the subject. Sometimes people want to hear about God, but they feel awkward about taking the initiative. That's when the Holy Spirit can move us to reach out to someone.

IV.

So I would encourage people to talk to others about the church, or their faith, or what God has done for them, or how Jesus fits into their lives, or whatever else fits the situation. But it is not necessary to beat people over the head with the Bible, and at times we might not start off by discussing complex doctrines like salvation and eternal life.

And that statement requires the elaboration I mentioned earlier. I do not diminish Christ's death and resurrection as the source of our eternal hope. Acceptance of that truth is the end result of effective evangelism, and is at the core of our faith. But like the core of an apple, it sometimes takes more than one bite to get there.

Some people have doubts about church doctrines we take for granted. They might not be ready to talk about the next world. They could be more likely to start a journey of faith by first hearing what God can mean to them in this world. We can begin by focusing on a Christian life in the here and now, which in turn will lead to an understanding of eternal life in the hereafter.

An example of this is on television every week. Have you seen the programs produced by Joel Osteen and his Lakewood Church in Houston? Some people wrongly criticize him for promoting the "gospel of prosperity," when it really is the "gospel of joy." He talks about hope, not money.

Joel Osteen preaches for thirty minutes about the wonderful things that God in Christ can do for us today. He tells his viewers how they can be transformed in faith and live a victorious life right now. And at the end of the program he frequently urges his viewers to find a good Bible church if they already have not done so, and to begin their walk with Christ.

In some ways this can be a so-called "feel good religion." But that's OK with me because it's offered as a point of entry into the faith, not as a discipline to sustain faith over the years. People who are brought into the church through Joel Osteen's uplifting message are in a position to move on to a more mature faith as they deepen their spiritual experiences.

The same thing applies to us. Put God's best foot forward. Tell people of the blessings and fulfillment God has given us. Even the simple act of talking about our faith can be a positive example. Tell people about St. Thomas and the welcoming and loving community we have here. Give people a reason to walk in the door, and we will let the Holy Spirit lead us in the next steps.

V.

We have a ministry at St. Thomas. But it's not just to the sick or the needy. It also is a ministry to our friends, our next door neighbors, our golfing buddies, and bridge club members.

We are called to reach out to them, and the Holy Spirit will help us. Sometimes this means reaching beyond what we think is our comfort zone. But it really isn't that hard. After all, they are our friends. They are people we know.

But we might not know whether they are searching for something more in their lives. What if they really want to hear, but no one tells them? Perhaps the most enduring legacy we can leave for our friends is to show them the way to a new life in Christ. And the angels in heaven will rejoice if we can help them take that first small step. *Amen.*