

Find Home
Luke 4: 21-29

Today's Gospel passage from Luke chapter 4. The beginning of the story is that Jesus returned to Nazareth, a place where he grew up, he enters a synagogue and he read some verses from the Book of Isaiah. The verses we read today was the second half of the story. We heard the first half last week. But last week I did not deal with that text, because the entire story hasn't been read yet.

After Jesus read Isaiah, he said, "Today that scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." All the people praise Jesus. Jesus went on to say, "No prophet is welcome in his hometown." This is the line most likely we all remember. This sentence kind of becoming a sentiment we accept. People often feel the need to leave their hometown to develop their careers. Isn't it for this reason, when some churches when they look for ministers, they go all the way to Vancouver to search for one?

Why does prophet not welcome in their hometown? Jesus grew up in Nazareth. A place I believe many people knew who he was. Many knew him as the son of Joseph. Although they have seen him grown and knew his family, they did not know the mission and calling of Jesus. Jesus returned to his hometown to share his mission to his people. Why can't they accept? What can't they accept?

Hometown? Where is hometown? Does hometown know me? Do I like my hometown?

We have many reasons to leave home or sometimes the country of origin. Whatever the reason, most of us, and I wish will one day revisit our places of birth, places where we spent our childhood.

Often we feel strange, odd, and out of place. We thought we understand the place where we came from, and to desire share our experiences with the hometown crowd. This is not always an enjoyable thing to do. Because no matter how much we think we understand our hometown, we no longer the person we once were. We

have changed. They too. This is the fact that sometimes even we ourselves have overlooked. But the place we now call home, odd enough, sometimes we also feel out of place. "Where is home?" This certainly is the question we will encounter in life journey.

Starting from the end of November last year, I have been to various places. I have been to Shanghai, Suzhou, Nanjing, Beijing, and Hong Kong, and then returned to Toronto. None of those places above I can say my home. Although Hong Kong is the place where I was born and grew up, every time I go back has a different feeling. Yes, I was born in that place, but that place isn't my home.

Home does not necessarily mean the place of our origin, where we were born. Home is not necessarily a place where we work. Home, is not necessarily that big house that worth hundreds or thousands of dollar. That may be a house, but not necessarily a home. Home is where people meet and connect. It is where we can be ourselves, welcomed and loved. Home is about relationship. It is not necessarily be the place where we are in, but a goal we aspire to achieve.

Jesus returned to his hometown, to make people understand the importance of his mission. But they were not ready to listen. In a time when time was difficult, the reason why they did not accept Jesus has nothing to do with knowing him too well." I think the opposite is true. Jesus gave "home" a new concept; people weren't ready to accept. The home Jesus talked about home is not individual home, but the larger human family coming together as one people, as the earth is our collective home.

Often we talk about "Jesus of Nazareth." That is the name we use to describe Jesus. Nazareth is a small town in Israel. But this town is part of the Roman Empire, as Israel is not an independent country as it was then. This small town is part of the Roman empire. When we read the New Testament, we usually haven't paid enough attention to an important key, that is, how the political climate of the day affect Jesus' ministry, to the point of even affecting the words of his apostles. Nazareth, a small town in the Galilee, no longer be able to understand in a single

language, culture, and politics. It is part of the larger empire, where inevitably other cultural, ethnicity, and political forces influence one another.

If you will, you may appreciate how the people of Hong Kong today who are now part of the larger country called China, a communist country, how their passion for their future clash with the politics of China. Using this analogy, we can grasp or understand the tension that formed the backdrop of Jesus' ministry. It is in those times, the people who lived under the forces of the empire, unable to see their future but retreated into their self-created ghettos and stayed there. Then, we may get a glimpse of why Jesus of Nazareth was not welcomed in his hometown.

Under the Roman Empire, all people regardless of ethnicity and culture, can move freely without restriction. This is a multicultural phenomenon of the first century, unprecedented, a cultural integration brought in place because of the empire. Biblical scholars have pointed out, the region Galilee in the first century, including Nazareth, more than half of people there were Gentiles, who are non-Jews. Jews and other ethnic people from other cultures living in one place.

Yes, of course, the die-hard Jews claimed that it was their place. Or you can guess under these circumstances, friction was created due to the interaction of people from various nationality and ethnic origins. So when the Bible says in the scriptures that we read from last week, Jesus came to the place where he grew up, according to custom he entered into the synagogue on the Sabbath. He stood up to read the Book of Isaiah."

According to custom, this does not mean Jesus was not thoughtful or just follow a routine, but to say he respected the Jewish tradition. That Jesus did not forget his people, culture, and religion. But the section of Isaiah where Jesus read, do not tell us only to uphold and value one's culture only, and then belittle others. Jesus wants people to understand that the Jewish faith include hospitality and welcome the culturally others.

He read from Isaiah 60:1-2 and 58:6, through these verses we understand what the mission of Jesus and those who follow Him to be. That is to preach the gospel to

the poor, proclaim captives free, to let blind to see, the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor, the Jubilee. The Jubilee is about the biblical teaching that says every 50 years, debts will be canceled and slaves set free, the land will be returned to the original owner. Although the Bible is written this way, many people doubt how many ancient Jews actually practiced these policies. Here Jesus tells us what God concerns the most. To welcome the people who are being misunderstood and socially excluded. Some people of faith excluded people they say who were unworthy of God's love.

Jesus describes a new type of "human family."

Jesus used two stories to illustrate. He used the example of the prophet Elijah and Elisha, how God blessed the Gentiles. The people didn't like to hear. Especially Elisha the prophet, Jesus helps them remember how a Syrian named Naaman, a Gentile. He was the only at that time cleansed from the diseases called leprosy where many others did not.

Naaman was not simply a Gentile, he was a Syrian military general, that is to say, enemy. The Galileans did not expect Jesus to make the door of welcome wide open. The text says, "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this." Jesus came along to challenge the concept of family, about who they welcome and who they exclude. Jesus' idea of family cannot be narrowly isolated as only those who are Jewish or treat well by any theological system. Jesus concerns about the marginalized people, the people whom the religious people left behind. God's house is big enough for many culture and expressions. God isn't afraid of diversity like we do. God wants us to open up God's people's frame of mind, but they shut the door tight.

Through Jesus, the message of the gospel, God expands our ability to get along with others. Jesus helps us to recognize God's sacred values. Home is no longer a mono cultural, monolithic reality, but welcomes other people whom we may call others. This is the reason why Jesus wasn't welcome. Some people find it difficult to worship a merciful, welcoming, and inclusive God. They rather want to hear a judgmental and angry God.

The story for us today who live in North America Chinese are huge. Many of us share multiple cultures, languages, and practices. We come together as church, as one God's family. We need God's grace to help us live out this truth.

Last month, I went back to Hong Kong to attend the church where I used to worship when I was young, that is a United Methodist Church. I find the way they worship even church life have changed very little. I thought to myself, they do not need to deal with the issue of joint worship because they have joint worship every Sunday, using a single language. But we are different. We will need to deal with cultural differences and language issues.

How to be church, especially a Chinese congregation in Canada, is a task uniquely given to us. We cannot forget the fact that our church life embodies different cultural assumptions. We cannot deny the fact that people in this family like to listen to different kind of songs, speak different languages and want to live with different cultural ethos. The consequences are we always have different point of view, different style of doing things and different ways of thinking. I cannot say these are unique to Chinese congregations only, but I say these characteristics are heightened in communities such as ours.

But I also have a belief, this belief comes from the power of God's unconditional love. Because I believe that we are God's people, who had been nurtured by the gospel. I believe that people who confess faith in Jesus obtain the gift from God to face their own assumptions, willing to understand each other, and to continue to find ways to create a beautiful home we call church. I still believe this is a valid assumption.

The congregation we love so much and want to build is complex and diverse. To move on, we are willing to seek compromises and slow in criticizing others. All the people involve in this process learn to be considerate. This is the case the way I see it. This is the sentiment we need for we who live in North America. It is true for individual family, and also for the church as a whole as well.

Finally, I would like to say what I talked about before. Home is not necessarily the state where we are in; it can be a goal we aspire to achieve. In our search for mission and meaning, we welcome Jesus to guide us beyond the confinement of our location and limited history, or even the places where we come from. To learn to love the world as God loves it. Set people free. Rejoice with all people in whatever culture and language. And yes, to learn to sing God's praise beyond our finite construction. We let God build us up with grace and mercy, with hope and celebration.

Some of you may be troubled by the following quote that I am about to say. But I really love it. I can be a closet NDP. The late Jack Leyton just before his death, his released a letter to Canadians. In closing, he has this to say that I find inspiring:

“My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world.”

What God wants for our lives and all creation does not always coincide with our wants. Faith is not always an easy way to live, and always must be a way engaged with love.

Once upon the time, the people of Nazareth did not welcome Jesus who preached a message of welcoming, care and inclusion. I hope the Chinese churches in the 21st century, particularly those in North America, so filled with the Holy Spirit, understand this truth, willing to welcome his message. May Jesus enter into our hearts, our lives, our homes. Amen.