

The summer before I was called here I worked at Camp Nawakwa during the week and supply preached most weekends, and one Sunday I filled in at Bethany in Altoona while Pastor Drew was on vacation. I'd been ordained a little over six years, but I was anxious about going to Bethany because a number of the members there had belonged to St. Paul before it closed, which was where my family attended from the time I was born until I was about 10. So I was a little nervous about preaching to folks who might remember when I was baptized. Or maybe they'd remember the first year I went to Vacation Bible School and had a full blown crying meltdown when I realized that my mother had left me...in the building I'd been in all my life, in the care of people I'd known all my life. Or they might remember the Sunday we discovered that I really did need glasses, when even though we were sitting in the second pew, I couldn't read the numbers off of the hymn board so I started belting out the wrong song. And when I arrived at Bethany that Sunday morning, some of those former St. Paul members confirmed that yes, they did remember some of those moments from the early years of my spiritual formation. But I didn't really start to sweat until I got into the pulpit, read the gospel, and then pulled out the manuscript to...not the sermon I had written for that morning. It could have been worse: it was sermon on that text, I'd just somehow printed out the one from three years earlier, the last time that reading had come up in the lectionary. So I managed to cobble together a message from what I had intended to preach that day and what I had apparently preached to a completely different congregation several years prior. And the congregation was quite gracious: if they noticed that the sermon was a bit disjointed, they didn't say so to me. But unlike today's gospel story, where the people who watched Jesus grow up were *astounded* when he returned to preach in his hometown synagogue, I have occasionally wondered if the people who listened to me that morning though, *Yeah, this is pretty much how we remember her. Maybe she just needs new glasses again.*

Only Luke's gospel gives us any history of Jesus in the years between his birth and adulthood, narrating the trip to Jerusalem when his parents lose track of him and find him debating the scholars in the Temple. We can only speculate about the extent to which Jesus' divine identity was apparent to those who knew him all his life. The response of his neighbors suggests that they did not expect Jesus to have the capacity to preach, teach, or heal as he has been doing throughout the region. They cannot reconcile Jesus' new—or new to them—wisdom and power with his upbringing as a carpenter. But they're not just surprised, they're offended: *Is not this the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not these his sisters?* The absence of Joseph's name on that list is probably not a dig at Jesus' paternity but is an indication that Joseph has already died and an indictment of Jesus, who *should* be acting as the head of household, but instead has been shirking his duty by wandering around Galilee, starting his own revival. Cultural custom dictated that Jesus should have been providing financially for his

widowed mother, be mentoring his younger brothers in the family business, and be protecting and eventually arranging marriages for his sisters. If Jesus isn't fulfilling these basic family responsibilities, who is he to stand up in the synagogue and teach?

Jesus' response, that prophets are never honored in their hometown or within their own family, was not a new bit of wisdom, yet he is still amazed at how little he can accomplish amongst them because of their unbelief. What his neighbors, and earlier in the gospel, what his own family, fail to recognize is that Jesus' challenge to the culture is not a sign that he's doing something wrong but the logical result of him doing something right. If people were already living the way God intended, there would have been no need for God to intervene with the human community through the incarnation in Jesus. Of course he's going to show them a different way being in the world. This is not to say that Jesus is anti-family, but a culture that only recognizes literal relatives as family or places the burden of an entire family's livelihood on one person's shoulders is not exactly reflecting abundant life in a caring community. Jesus can't be limited by the role the townspeople assigned him. As the circle of God's love grows ever wider, Jesus looks beyond the wellbeing of just his biological family, or his hometown of Nazareth, or his twelve disciples, or even the people of Israel; the longer the story goes, the more people are included.

Jesus responds to his hometown's rejection by going to the surrounding villages to teach and sending his disciples to cast out demons and heal the sick. Perhaps it's no accident that first he took them to his own home and showed them that their message wouldn't always be well-received before he sent them out to rely on the kindness of strangers. The people of Nazareth acted as though they had nothing to learn from someone they believed they knew well. Now the disciples go to people they *don't* know, to teach them that they should repent—that is, to turn from the way they had been living to this freer, more abundant life that Jesus modeled. As the disciples are to take no provisions for their journey, they are at the mercy of other people's hospitality. They will have to learn as much as they teach and receive as much as they give. And they won't always succeed; Jesus prepares them for times when they will not be welcomed and encourages them to simply shake off the dust and move on...as he has moved on from Nazareth.

This Christian living stuff isn't easy; it's not easy to grow beyond the expectations that other people have of us when that growth makes them uncomfortable; it's not easy to stretch our care, concern, and mercy beyond those who are closest to us; it's not easy to learn something new from people we think we already have all figured out; it's not easy to accept help and hospitably when we're used to the veneer of control that comes from being the host; it's not easy to let go of our plans and projects and shake off the dust, even when Jesus himself tells us to. But these are some of the ways God opens up to us a world that is much bigger than what we have seen and a life much holier than what we can imagine. May we learn, grow, and serve wherever God sends us, going boldly, because we do not go alone.