

“No prophet is accepted in the Prophet’s home town.” Under that supposed truism, maybe I should have asked another priest if we could exchange pulpits this week. This story appears in all four gospels and each recounts the negative response Jesus received in Nazareth. However, it is only in Luke that Jesus is described as having been driven out of town, and almost over a cliff. Peter Gomes, my first divinity school professor, and the chaplain for Harvard University until his passing in 2011, always reminded his preaching students of this story when they were preaching their first sermons. The moral was that even Jesus bombed in his first sermon, so be not afraid.

In the three other gospels, the negative response Jesus receives seems to happen because they know him too well. It’s hard to think of a hometown boy as the Messiah.

Shortly after my grandfather’s death, my grandmother, mother, and I were waiting for my grandmother’s Methodist minister to come to the house to discuss the funeral. When my grandmother caught sight of the minister coming up the front steps, she said to my mother, “Joann, put out that cigarette. The minister’s coming.” I responded, “Grandma, I’m a minister and she’s been smoking in front of me forever.” “Oh, well, honey, that’s different,” my grandmother said. There I was, a priest without honor in my family’s home town, in my family home, even.

But, here in Luke, the initial response to Jesus’ preaching seems to be positive. They were amazed at his gracious words. “All spoke well of him.” I believe I hear more excitement than doubt, as they were marveling that he was a hometown boy. Perhaps he’ll render obsolete the common phrase of his day, “Can anything good ever come out of Nazareth.”

Robert Mitchum, in speaking about his tough inner city high school alma mater, is quoted as saying, “I went to a finishing school. You went there and then you were finished.” Could it have been the same for Nazareth? Except that, here is Jesus, son of a local working man, and it sure sounds as if he’s goin’ places. Maybe things were looking up.

But, then Jesus makes reference to two stories that they would have known well, from their scriptures. We remember Elijah, mainly, for driving out the prophets of foreign Gods, but that was not his only encounter with foreigners.

Jesus reminds his own neighbors in Nazareth that Elijah was sent to the (non-Jewish) widow in Sidon and her son, and that God blessed them, and that when the son died, Elijah raised him up from the dead. This was when many Jews were dying as well.

Even more dramatic is the story about Elisha’s healing Naaman, the commander of an enemy army. At first Naaman balks, when told to wash in the Jordan. But then he does so and his leprosy was healed. He was converted, just as was the Syro-Phoenician woman.

The folk in Nazareth flew into a rage when reminded of these two believed prophets who went out of their way to help foreigners. A timely topic at many points in history.

Referring to their Civil War loss, Lincoln, in speaking to southern troops, said that “the will of God prevails. In great contests, each party claims to be acting in accordance with the will of God. Both may be. But, one must be wrong. God can’t be for and against something at the same time.” That war pitted, literally in some cases, brother against brother.

And, as I speak, there are good folks, good members of St. Christopher’s, who are at home getting ready for their Super Bowl parties. A Super Bowl in which the two coaches are brothers, pitted against one another. I saw a television show the other day in which the parents of these two coaches were interviewed. They were pondering the impossible: that the game would end in a tie. That both brothers would win.

How do you pick one son over another? As Christians, we claim that all are brothers and sisters. And, the truth is that we can NOT claim to be God’s chosen people, when going up against others. We are ALL God’s chosen people.

God’s grace is like the agape love Paul writes about in his letter to the Christians in Corinth. Last week we heard about the importance of all parts of the body of Christ. That is in response to the Corinthian problem that at least some people, some of those parts of the body of Christ in Corinth, considered themselves MORE equal than the others.

There were those who were speaking in tongues in Corinth, lauding their gifts. There were those who were giving generously, yet also bragging about it, revealing themselves to be anything but generous. “The overriding purpose of all we do,” says St. Paul, “is to show unselfish love for others.”

I really don't have a dog in this year's Super Bowl game. But, I remember a few years ago when the Carolina Panthers and the Boston Patriots were playing. Born in North Carolina, and having spent eight years in New England, each of those teams could be considered “my team.” For most of that game, the teams were in a tie, and at one point, I said, “Hey, both of my teams are winning.” I didn't make friends, with true fans on either side.

Jesus is not against Nazareth. He is very much FOR Nazareth. He is trying to teach them. He is also for their heavily Gentile neighbor, Capernaum. For the Jews of Jesus' home town, they became blinded by Jesus', and Elijah's, and Elisha's love for the outcast, the unclean. The “other.”

Let's not think God is against us when we see his love for our enemies. It should remind us of how Jesus told US to love those enemies, too. To be the savior of all, Jesus at times will seem to be against some. Jesus will always shake off those quaint little hometown images of himself. To bring good news to the poor, he's going to ruffle the feather of the rich, almost surely. To heal the sick and blind, he'll need to leave the safe streets of the healthy. To be a friend of sinners, he'll need to speak harshly at times to the judgmental righteous.

It is not God's harshness, God's aloofness that makes us angry often. It is God's mercy, toward the “other.” God's mercy is often going to seem too big, too wide, too non-exclusive. It extends to our enemies, to those who hurt us, to those who scare us. Too often we want justice, not mercy. And, we want justice on our terms.

By their words to us today, Jesus and Paul both remind us to seriously rethink that.