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Once upon a time, there was a young aspiring opera singer. She longed to sing the great roles of the late 19th century like Leonora, Tosca, and Aida. But sadly, she lived in a small backward hamlet where the only opera that was truly appreciated was written before the end of the 18th century, and on the rare occasions that the local opera company did want to do the Leonoras, Toscas, and Aidas, they hired someone from the Really Big City to do them. But our young heroine was determined. So, accompanied by her faithful knight, she headed for the Second Biggest City, because she was too small town a girl for the Really Big City.

Though the Second Biggest City was also an early music town, it was close enough to the Really Big City for some of it to rub off and our young opera singer thrived in her chosen style. She sang Leonora, Tosca, and Aida. She sang in the big houses. She was even PAID!

But one day it came to pass that her father, living back in the hamlet, became ill and she needed to go home. So she and her knight packed up their cats, left the Second Biggest City and headed back to the small town. She told herself, though, that since she had been a success in the Second Biggest City, surely now the backward hamlet would hire her to sing Leonora, Tosca, and Aida! But she was sadly mistaken. A singer, like a prophet, has no honor in her own country.

This fairytale has a happy ending, though, because the aspiring not-so-young-by-then singer left the world of Leonora, Tosca, and Aida behind her and, in an hilarious piece of irony moved to the Really Big City! She became a priest, moved to an even smaller hamlet, and she, her knight, and their cats, lived happily ever after. Well so far, at least…

Truly I tell you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.

Jesus says this in today’s reading from Luke. If you remember where we left off in last week’s Gospel reading, it didn’t look too bad for Jesus. After he makes the extraordinary claim that Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled in his listeners' hearing, meaning that HE is the anointed one whom God has sent to preach the good news to the poor, his family and friends speak well of him to each other and are amazed at his gracious words.

So what happened? All of a sudden, his own friends and family – the people he’d know since he was a kid – turned on him. In Matthew's and Mark's version of this story his people reject him, but they're merely scornful and unbelieving, not enraged and murderous.. But in Luke's version which starts out so well, things quickly turn ugly as the crowd gets increasingly offended and eventually tries to throw him off of a cliff.

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What caused this change in attitude? What changed the friendly and wondering crowd into a mob? Unfortunately, Luke doesn’t help us out much. He tells us that Jesus talks about two stories involving foreign enemies who are helped by God in preference to the Jews, but that’s all. We’re left to interpret what that means.

Jesus starts out by saying the Isaiah's prophecy, which is from Isaiah 61, is fulfilled in him – that he has come to bring good news to the poor, free the captives, bring sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. All well and good.

Not only is he repeating a beloved prophecy, but there's something about him that's compelling. I imagine the townsfolk staring at him in pride and wonder. They know they're hearing something special. They know they're in the presence of something lovely, something transcendent. Perhaps they even know they're in the presence of God.

Jesus could have left it at that. Without pushing them, Jesus could have left them to chew on the idea that somehow Isaiah's prophecy has come true. They might even begin to get a glimmering that he's talking about himself, although Luke isn't specific. But Jesus doesn't leave it there. While they are still in a happy, dazed state, he puts words in their mouths, almost sarcastically. Doubtless, he tells them, you will be asking me for miracles like you heard I have done elsewhere. But I'm not going to do it.

It's interesting to note that in Matthew and Mark's versions of the story, Jesus is unable to do miracles because of his home town's unbelief. In Luke, he strongly implies that he won't be doing anything for them. This is when he says that no prophet is acceptable in his own country and goes on to tell them stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha who were sent by God to help Israel's enemies rather than the Chosen People.

It's like he threw a bucket of cold water on the crowd. There they are in a blissful haze of righteousness, expecting wonders and miracles and other goodies, and here is this young upstart – after all, he's just Joseph and Mary's boy, isn't he? Who does he think he is, anyway? – this young upstart is telling them essentially that God prefers outcasts and enemies over them – God's chosen people.

Why did Jesus do this? Remember that the Gospel of Luke is the first part of the two-part story that is Luke-Acts. One of the notable things about Luke-Acts is the way it reaches out past the Jews, to include the Gentiles. As an example of this, Matthew's genealogy only goes back as far as Abraham, or in other words, includes only the Jewish people, but Luke's genealogy goes all the way back to Adam, thereby including all humankind – Jew AND Gentile. So Jesus here is setting the stage for the ministry to the Gentiles that makes up a good part of Acts.

But even more than that, Jesus is setting the stage for the radical inclusivity that is the hallmark of his own earthly ministry, and the pattern he sets for his followers. This is what I think made the townsfolk of Nazareth so mad at him. In those few short sentences, Jesus demanded that they break out of their comfortable lives, that THEY do something to make Isaiah's prophecy come true. And they turned on him.

It seems like it's often human nature to react with anger when something difficult is demanded of us. It seems like sometimes we'd prefer the status quo to change – especially a change that might demand some of our energy or resources.

And the other side of the same coin is that Jesus is telling us that we have to change the way we do things in order to follow him, the Messiah. We have to be willing to take a stance for what's right, even if it's unpopular or even dangerous. Not only does society have to change, but we, as his followers, have to become the prophets in our own town. And this is very uncomfortable.

Jonathan Myrick Daniels understood that discomfort only too well. While he was a seminarian at the Episcopal Divinity School in Massachusetts, he went down to Alabama to take part in the civil rights protests with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There were many white people, a lot of them Episcopalians, whose consciences caused them to take part in the civil rights movement, and they were hated and vilified by many of the white people in the south.

Jonathan Daniels was arrested after a protest and held for six days, Then, on the day of his release, he died protecting a teenage African-American girl from a murderous white man's shotgun attack. He literally put his life on the line for what he believed was right.

This is what Jesus did at Nazareth that day, and ultimately on the cross, and to truly follow him, we must be willing to do the same. We need to stand up for what is right and holy, and be willing to face the consequences when those who would prefer the status quo get angry.

We, the Church, the Body of Christ, need to stand up for the poor in our community, and not stand idly by when they are vilified for their poverty. We, the Body of Christ, need to push back when we encounter racism – especially when we encounter it in our own unconscious behavior. We need to take a stand against violence – against gun violence, against domestic violence, and against bullying.

We need to be radical in our welcome to anyone who comes through our doors, and we need to reach out to those who are on the fringes of our society, not because we want new members, but because it's what Jesus would do and would have us do in his name.

And finally, we need to do all of this with love – God's great unquenchable love – in our hearts. Love is our motivator and our call to action. And love sets us apart as followers of Christ. As St. Paul puts it:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

And this great love is our shield and protection against the anger and hatred of the world. Steven Charleston, the retired bishop of Alaska, very eloquently writes about this radical, world-encompassing love:

Let love now be present in every corner of your life, in every room you enter, every street you walk. Let it be beside you, around you, within you as you face what your life has to offer. Remember that in your best times it was love that brought you the joy you have known, and in your worst times it was love that sustained your hope against all odds. Rely on this love, draw deeply from its wells of strength, be filled with its possibilities. Even if you imagine it to be only a spark amid the shadows, its light will never leave you. Let love be present now, and discover who you truly are.

Let us go out there and TRULY love our neighbors as ourselves, even in the face of their anger and rejection of us. This is what Jesus did, and this is what he is calling us to do.