

WGUMC February 3, 2013 "Hometown Hazards"
Luke 4:21-30

Some of us are too young to remember the film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* The movie, which came out in 1967, is about a young white woman from an upper middle class family in San Francisco who goes off to Hawaii and falls head over heels in love with a young black doctor, played by Sidney Poitier. The drama begins when she brings him home to meet her supposedly progressive parents. The reactions of her mother, played by Katharine Hepburn, and her father, played by Spencer Tracy, remind us of the old adage, you can't go home again.

Jesus learns the same lesson in the Gospel of Luke. He started out as a small town Jew and then left home. He went to the Jordan River and was baptized by John. He was driven into the wilderness and tempted by the devil. Then he began his itinerant ministry, teaching and preaching and making a

name for himself all around the region of Galilee. This small town boy was beginning to make it big.

But just as he was becoming known, he discovered that you can't go home. We all learn this growing up. We come home from college or after we've started a career or a marriage, and the people who used to know us when we were snot-nosed little kids won't let us bring home everything we are and everything we have become. Especially if we've moved far away and see family infrequently, our relationships with them don't get the chance to grow beyond where they were way back when. So, we get stuck in a time warp. At least when I go home, my siblings don't see me as a big city pastor. For my siblings, I'll always be the cowgirl in the family.

But what is hard for us was much harder for Jesus. Jesus left Nazareth as Joseph's son. But he came home as God's Son. He left Nazareth as just a man, a carpenter. He returned as the Messiah, the Savior.

At first, it seemed that he was going to be well received. In the synagogue in Nazareth, he was handed the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. "Let's see what you got, kid." And so he read to them: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6]

Now these were familiar words, gracious words, read by a man with the tongue of an angel and when Jesus sat down and said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," for a moment, the people were mesmerized. Had the Messiah come? Then Jesus started preaching, and the moment was suddenly gone.

The real reason that Jesus couldn't go home is because what he had to say next hit too close to home. In fact, his old

acquaintances realized that what he was trying to do was to deconstruct their home.

Now the words he had read were comforting words. Isaiah was saying that the Messiah was coming to bring good news to all Jews, including the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed—those at the very margins of their community. But the people who heard these words also believed that the community had a very definite boundary. The margins stopped at a wall. On one side of the wall were the people of God. On the other side, everyone else (and they didn't eat with them, worship with them, marry them...)

If we ask, "Why the wall?" we'd learn that there were historical reasons for it. The Jews had long been surrounded by enemies. So over the centuries, they had built both physical and cultural walls around themselves to secure their unique identity and to safeguard themselves against idolatry. In their own minds, they had created a gated community.

So you can imagine that when Jesus started talking about the Prophet Elijah who brought a blessing to a widow in *Sidon*, when he reminded them about the Prophet Elisha who brought healing to Naaman the *Syrian*, the townspeople were disturbed, to say the least. This man was talking heresy. This man was crazy. Here's the good news, which was supposed to be just for the Jews, and Jesus was throwing it over the wall. They got so angry, they decided to throw him over a cliff.

Jesus knew they would do this. That's why he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Jesus knew that he couldn't go home because in a real sense, Nazareth was no longer his home. The mental wall that had secured their identity had become a wall of bigotry. And it was bigotry that was holding the people on both sides of the wall in captivity. As far as Jesus could see, breaching that wall was the only way to bring them liberty.

February is Black History month, a time to remember the walls we once built and celebrate the people who helped us bring them down. One of my African American heroes is Paul Robeson, who was born in 1898. His dad was an escaped slave who became a pastor in Princeton, NJ.

Robeson was a very good student and, in 1915, got a scholarship to Rutgers University where he became a debate champion, class valedictorian and college football All-American. From there, he played in the NFL while also attending Columbia Law School and singing in off-Broadway productions. He gave up law and football to pursue a career in musical theater and on the concert stage.

He married and moved to London and starred in *Showboat*, setting the standard for any subsequent rendition of "Ol' Man River." When he returned to the U.S., he appeared in *The Emporer Jones*, the first American film to feature a black man

in a starring role. He also had the lead in *Othello*, the longest-running Shakespearean production on Broadway ever.

Through it all, Robeson was very conscious of his wall-breaching career. He was the first African American to refuse to perform for segregated audiences. In later years, whenever he sang "Ol' Man River," he would change the words. Instead of "Ah gits weary / An' sick of tryin'; / Ah'm tired of livin' / An skeered of dyin'," Robeson sang "But I keeps laffin' / Instead of cryin' / I must keep fightin'; / Until I'm dyin', / And Ol' Man River, / He'll just keep rollin' along!"

His international acclaim as a singer and actor grew and grew, as did his political activism. His outspoken opposition to fascism during the Spanish Civil War and Second World War got him the opportunity to perform in the Soviet Union. But when he traveled in Russia, he didn't hesitate to talk about the racism back home. Like Jesus, Robeson talked about touchy subjects, because he was trying to break down walls: the walls

between blacks and whites and between Russians and Americans. But when he tried to breach that wall, the powers that be threw him over the cliff. The FBI blacklisted him. The State Department seized his passport. The McCarthy Commission interrogated him. The press crucified him. "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

Unable to sing at home or travel abroad, his career was ruined, and eventually his physical and mental health. By the time the Supreme Court reinstated his passport, it was all but too late for Robeson. By 1961, he didn't have the strength to sing or speak out anymore. But others did. Even though Robeson never took to the stage again, by then civil rights marchers were taking to the streets. And they would break down the walls that he had been so brave to sing over.

Flashback to the beginning. One of the walls that would soon fall was the ban on interracial marriage. Seventeen days after they finished filming *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*,

Spencer Tracy died. Two days after that, the Supreme Court struck down the miscegenation laws that were still on the books in 17 states. More than forty years later, we're still working on marriage equality, but we're making progress.

Yet there are always plenty of walls all around us that need us to send some good news over. I was at Sacred Heart yesterday, part of a crew that packed 1700 grocery bags for people in need in this community. Hard to imagine, but next week, they'll need 1700 more. There is no wall higher in this valley than the wall between rich and poor. And we can say that we're changing the world all we want, but things won't change much if we are content to live with that wall.

Friends, our hometowns are likely dominated by walls, so why would we want to go back home? Those walls not a part of God's world. If we make our home in God, that's not where we live anymore. So, anytime we run up against such a wall, in our workplace, in our community, in our country, it's our job to

take it down, even if there are people out there who would want to throw us down.

But just remember Jesus, when they drove him out of town and up to the brow of the hill. By the power and grace of God, he simply "passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Remember Jesus is the Way. Let's follow him. And while we're at it, let's sing some good news over that wall.

[Ruth Duck and Jim Strathdee's *"Walls Mark Our Boundaries"*]