

**Hometown Prophets**  
**Luke 4:14-30**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**January 15, 2017**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

Seventy-seven years minus one month ago this week, a prophet was born. Troy, Alabama was a tiny town surrounded by sharecropper farms, many operated by African-American families that had been on the land in one role or another — slave, servant or sharecropper — for over a hundred years.

John's family was one of those sharecropper families. When he was 14 years old, he heard about the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, calling separate but equal schools inherently unequal and a violation of the constitution. But he noticed that nothing in his local school changed. He began making noise about the clearly illegal Jim Crow laws that he felt held him and others back. But that message wasn't going down so well in Troy, Alabama. You see, John decided to enroll at Troy State, the whites' only college in their little town.

But it wasn't the white folks who ran the school who made the most noise about it. (They didn't really know much about it.) But it was John's parents and their friends who just couldn't hear of it. John, one of almost a dozen children in the Lewis household, was no Rosa Parks, no Martin Luther King, Jr. — he was just little John Lewis. So they stopped him from trying to desegregate Troy State and sent him instead to Fisk University and then the American Baptist Theological Institute where he became instrumental in desegregating lunch counters in Nashville. And the rest, as they say, is history — literally, for John Lewis became one of the Big Six who led the historic march on Washington where Dr. King declared he had a dream.

Today we encounter Jesus just after his period of temptation in the desert. After more than a month of fasting and contemplating his future in prayer and supplication, Jesus has stared down temptation to use his gifts of the Spirit for earthly power and now he has returned home. One can almost imagine him stumbling back into Galilee to see the streets just like those he had left, though he has been changed so much. He begins preaching and teaching in the synagogues and eventually finds himself back in Nazareth, in the small religious community of his childhood.

And so he does what you do when you go home. He goes to church with the family. But now, when it's time for the scripture reading, he takes up the scroll and reads those inspiring words from Isaiah, words of hope and renewal and transformation and he reads them right in front of the hometown crowd. Their immediate reaction is to be amazed. Little Yeshua, son of the carpenter, knows the texts, is interpreting them in a way where they can almost feel the excitement?

What a fine man he has become, you can almost hear them saying, even though they are a bit surprised that Jesus is the one this could happen to.

But Jesus isn't finished. Sensing their trepidation at one of their own being the proclaimer of God's jubilee, he goes on reminding them that great prophets and deliverers before were sent to the stranger and the enemy. He recalls the story we had this past fall, of Elijah sent to the widow in the hometown of his greatest enemy, and how he fed her and her family. He recalls the saga of the Syrian General, Naaman, the one who had invaded and defeated Israel, who is then healed in Israel by Elijah's student, Elisha.

Their discomfort grows. Why does he have to bring up those stories? Stories that insinuate that God loves people we hate? We don't like to think about that. Yet, Jesus rubs salt in the skepticism of his hometown crowd, but in a way that declares that the healing, gracing power of God is not just for them but even for the infidels and their enemies.

How dare he?

It's an odd little exchange, to be sure. And we have to wonder why this is what Luke remembers about Jesus' first recorded sermon. We have to remember that Luke is writing roughly two generations after Jesus' ministry, likely sometime between 75 and 90 CE. And Luke's Gentile audience wants to know why so many of the Jewish people didn't accept Jesus. Why did Christianity break away, after the fall of the temple in 70 AD, and become a faith more readily identified with Gentiles—the non-Jews—than it was with the Jewish followers of Jesus who founded the church?

Jesus' hometown crisis is that story told in brief. The people reject their own. This hometown crisis is the first way to remind us that Jesus will face opposition from his own people all the way to the cross, just as modern prophets face opposition.

But Luke also wants us to see Jesus as one who carries the tradition of the past, but interprets it in a new way that will transform his and even our time. Luke remembers Jesus proclaiming that the gospel, the messiah, the deliverer we will eventually see him to be, the Christ he will become in the resurrection, is not sent just for his own people. Yes, most of his followers will come from that group for the first generation or so of the church, but by bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, to the peoples on the margins, the church of Jesus Christ is too big for one culture, too big for one way of looking at the world.

I wonder if today's exchange doesn't also ask us — who do we not want to hear that Jesus is good news for? Who are the Naima's and the foreign widows of today that God's grace is good news for, even if it makes us mad? What would it look like

if we could acknowledge that whichever of the folks ascending to power or descending from power in Washington — that we DON'T LIKE— are just as beloved of God as we are, as John Lewis is, even if they don't deserve it?

Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, would have us think about Avery. He tells the story of Avery Jenkins, a death-row client with severe mental illness. Every time he visited Avery, the man asked for a chocolate milkshake. It was an obsession — sometimes the only thing he'd talk about. But no matter how hard he tried, the prison would not allow him to bring his client the ice cream treat he craved.

Avery's father had been murdered before he was born and his mother died of a drug overdose when he was just a year old. He'd been in nineteen different foster homes before he turned eight. When he was ten, Avery lived with abusive foster parents who frequently locked him in a closet, denied him food, and subjected him to physical torture. When they finally had enough of him, his foster mother took him into the woods, tied him to a tree, and left him there. Hunters found him three days later.

By fifteen he was having seizures and experiencing psychotic episodes. At seventeen he was deemed incapable of management and was left homeless. He was in and out of jail until he turned twenty, when in the midst of a psychotic episode he wandered into a strange house where he brutally stabbed to death a man he believed to be a demon. Prior to trial, his lawyers did no investigation of Avery's history, and this mentally ill man was quickly convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Interestingly, Mr. Stevenson also tells the story of the hostile prison guard he dealt with the first time he met with Avery Jenkins. This new guard did everything in his power to intimidate the lawyer, making the visit one of the worst prison experiences he'd ever had. Unfortunately, it was this exact guard who would be responsible for transporting Avery to court for his hearing.

After the hearing, Mr. Stevenson went back to the prison to visit with Avery Jenkins, bracing himself for another difficult encounter with this guard. Surprisingly, the guard sounded earnest and sincere this time around. There was no forced strip search, no hostile or intimidation tactics. Instead the guard said this:

"You know I took ole Avery to court for his hearing and was down there with y'all for those three days. And I, uh, well, I want you to know that I was listening...I appreciate what you're doing. I really do. It was kind of difficult for me to be in that courtroom to hear what y'all was talking about. I came up in foster care, you know. I came up in foster care, too." After a long pause, the guard's face softened as he admitted, "Man, I didn't think anybody had it as bad as me. They moved me

around like I was wanted nowhere. I had it pretty rough. But listening to what you was saying about Avery made me realize that there were other people who had it as bad as I did. I guess even worse...I guess what I'm trying to say is that I think it's good what you're doing. I got so angry coming up that there were plenty of times when I really wanted to hurt somebody, just because I was angry. I made it to eighteen, joined the military, and you know, I've been okay. But sitting in that courtroom brought back memories, and I think I realized how I'm still kind of angry."

The startling confession continued for a bit and then the two men shook hands, the lawyer noting the large Confederate flag tattooed on the guard's arm. As he walked toward his client, the guard sheepishly said one last thing:

"Listen, I did something I probably wasn't supposed to do, but I want you to know about it. On the trip back down here after court on that last day—well, I know how Avery is, you know. Well anyway, I just want you to know that I took an exit off the interstate on the way back. And well, I took him to a Wendy's, and I bought him a chocolate milkshake."

Today, our hometown prophet reminds us that, though we may quarrel and we may disagree, though we may see one another as evil, our stories are linked because we all bear the image of God. We all are who Jesus came to proclaim release to; we all—the demagogue and the civil rights hero, the murderer and the prison guard—are beloved. And though acknowledging that may make us uncomfortable, even angry, it also gives us a way to cling to our humanity and the humanity of those with whom we stand in conflict. It inspires us to engagement, not hate.

Challenging days lie ahead for us all, but at the center of them all is a hometown prophet who says the breadth of his love is greater than we can imagine. And that, dear friends, is surely good news and a place to begin.