

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Suppose the MVP of the Super Bowl was a Terre Haute boy. And suppose that, after the game, he decided to make a victory tour, including a stop in Terre Haute. I'm sure he would get a warm reception. A lot of people would turn out to get a glimpse of him.

“Local kid makes it big!” might be the headline in the paper. Many would rejoice that we had been so well represented on such a large stage and having such a native son do well would not only bolster our image. It would also give us to believe that there was something right about us—something beyond argument.

If our home town hero started to admonish us, though, and propose some changes that went counter to that self-image, it would not take long for him to fall out of favor. “I don't care who he is. He should stay in his own lane!”

It's really in the nature of things that a home-town boy who makes good, is going to have trouble fitting back in. By definition almost, we claim those of us who have done well because they are one of us, sharing our identity and aspirations, but only written in capital letters. There's no room for anything that is different than what people expect.

“Is not this Joseph's son?” is how the people of Nazareth put it. As long as he remained a chip off the old block, everything would be fine.

Of course, when we think of Jesus, we don't start with his connection to Joseph. St. Luke had already prepared his

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

readers for seeing more deeply into Jesus' reality by detailing a genealogy that went through Joseph to include ancestors all the way back to Adam and ultimately to God.

Jesus brought all that with him into the synagogue in Nazareth and that's what people could not accept. It was foreign to them and their self-understanding. Especially when Jesus pointed out times in their history when God had chosen to act outside the limits of their own ethnic identity, they began to see that he was about something quite different from what they were.

Where they wanted to maintain their separateness from and supposed superiority over other peoples, Jesus wants to enlist them in the task of proclaiming God's good news to all the nations—Syrians and the people of Sidon included.

Jesus reminds the people of Nazareth of an unpopular strand of Jewish tradition. They were not chosen by God to form a closed society and become the sole beneficiaries of divine blessings and abundance.

They were chosen to bring the benefits of the one God to all people. The focus is not on themselves, but on what they can do for others.

Luke recounts, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff." So much for the home-town hero who did good.

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

One way of understanding what Jesus ran into when he returned to Nazareth is to put it in the context of the pleasure-displeasure game that the mind likes to play.

A certain word or event pleases us; another word or event displeases us. We smile and we frown, swinging back and forth between the poles. This fluctuation may confuse and tire us, but we accept these alternating inner states as normal.

When Jesus says things that please the Nazarenes, he is praised. When he says things that displease them, he is attacked. Of course, it is not just the citizens of Nazareth that are run by the pleasure-displeasure game. We all are.

Ask any politician who has ever tried to “curry favor” to win votes. People go up and down depending on whether they feel enhanced or threatened by what is happening. We can see that easily in others. It’s much harder to see how we fall prey to the same dynamic.

Awareness is hard to come by. It takes long-term practice, mindfulness. A quicker, but more painful approach is simply to join the good no matter where it is happening. Sometimes it visits us and, at other times, it visits others. But it always needs hearts and hands to increase its effectiveness.

Begin by lending a hand and see what will happen to the heart. Join the good when we will get nothing out of it. After we stop grumbling about the sacrifice, we will find ourselves filled with the goodness with which we are cooperating.

A breakthrough will arrive: we can be joyful whenever or

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

wherever the good is happening. Suddenly, we feel no resentment for the widow of Zarephath in Sidon or for Namaan the Syrian.

We simply rejoice that her hunger has been filled and his skin has been cleansed. And finally, the prophesy of *human* liberation, not just our own well-being, will be fulfilled in our hearing.