

Text – Luke 4:21-30

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some years ago, I watched a PBS television program about wild horses in the American West. It was a stunning presentation featuring beautiful photography, and capturing these magnificent animals in their natural habitats, and this led me to do some reading about wild horses.

Bear with me as I talk about this, for in a moment you'll know why I have chosen this topic as a "sermon starter." Likely you already know that wild horses are given to running in herds, but wild animal experts have documented that some of these four-legged animals end up in a more solitary existence.

And some wild horses go it on their own part of the time, and as part of a herd the rest of the time. This raises the question, "How does a wild horse join a herd?" Believe it or not, they don't just trot in and exchange a few neigh-whinny-whinnies!

If a wild horse wants to join a herd, it has to go through a greeting and meeting ritual, an elaborate "affirmation, challenge" ritual, as some call it, a ritual showing respect to the "alpha horse" of the herd, the lead animal, which is often a mare. This ritual begins with the "alpha horse" staring down the new horse, with her ears locked back.

The new horse usually responds with a more submissive gesture, of licking and chewing, and dropping its head. In response, the "alpha mare" assumes a less threatening posture of exposing her flank side to the outsider.

The new horse responds by coming in a little closer. And then the "alpha mare" challenges again, the new horse bows down, and the ritual repeats itself. When the new horse and the "alpha mare" are close enough to stand flank to flank, then the outsider wild horse is officially accepted as a part of the herd.

This wild horse affirmation and challenge ritual is a good illustration of an aspect of Jesus' leadership style. Jesus established a pattern of affirmation and challenge with his disciples, and even with the crowds who followed him, a pattern that made his leadership style incredibly effective.

This rhythm of affirmation and challenge is evident in today's Gospel, which is an interesting story of contrasts. The passage begins with Jesus being praised by a crowd of people.

As the invited reader in his hometown synagogue, Jesus had just read to them from Isaiah, chapter 61, which makes reference to the ancient "Year of Jubilee" practice in which all existing debts were wiped clean. Jesus then announced that the scripture he had just read had been fulfilled in their hearing.

It's not likely that the crowd immediately caught the connection that Jesus was intending to make. He was the fulfillment of the passage. However, since most of the Jewish people during this time expected deliverance from the oppression of Rome, those who had heard the reading probably listened to Jesus' interpretation through a political filter.

And that was welcome news for them. So everyone initially spoke well of Jesus, and they were amazed at the graciousness of his words. Little did they know, Jesus was about to take a different tack.

Jesus was never one to allow a serious misconception to go unchallenged. He understood the oppression these people were under, and that they were looking for some sort of hope.

But false hope is worse than no hope at all, because when it proves to be nothing but smoke and mirrors, the final state is worse than the first. Besides, the people were basing their assumption of deliverance on being God's chosen ones.

In their minds, God was obligated to save them. But then Jesus burst their bubble. We can tell by Jesus' initial statement to the crowd that he expects them to be hostile to whatever he is about to say. "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!'"

Jesus expands this thought by saying, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown." A modern-day version of this saying is found in the cliché, "familiarity breeds contempt." How sad but true this is. No matter how qualified a person might be in any field of endeavor, he or she sometimes gets little respect among those who know the person well.

There might be a tinge of jealousy. They say to the would-be prophet, "We knew you 'back when.' You're really no different from the rest of us. You may be a big star out there, but among those grew up with you, you're just the same ol' guy we used to know."

While this might be common in our culture, there's no reason why we have to adopt this posture as individuals, or even in our community here. If someone we know well has obvious or extraordinary gifts, let's resist the temptation to knock that person down a peg or two just because we might know some of the intimate details of that person's life.

Who knows? He or she may just need a little boost from one or two of us to accomplish extraordinary things for God. Let's treat others the way we'd like to be treated if we were (or will be) in that position.

From this beginning, Jesus presses his point. His hearers are placing their trust in their religious heritage and their bloodline, and not in an attitude of brokenness and contrition.

So Jesus names two people in the Old Testament who were Gentiles who received help instead of the people of Israel, people who trusted in God with a humble heart, and not in their national heritage: the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian.

It's human nature to think we are entitled to something from God for any reason. In the gospel passage, the people pointed to their heritage. Today, it's not uncommon for us to think that we are entitled to special treatment from God because of our suffering.

We begin with the erroneous assumption that life must be fair. And because we have experienced a significant loss, or series of losses, we conclude that we are entitled to special treatment or compensation from God.

When that goes unfilled, we may start expecting exceptional treatment from others. We all know how burdensome it is to be around someone who has an ever-deepening sense of entitlement. Let's not become one of them.

Along the lines of suffering, it's also useful to note here that Jesus acknowledges that not everyone who needs help necessarily finds it. Everyone who needs healing does not necessarily receive it.

This is helpful to remember when we wrestle with the problem of evil and what we feel is God's apparent unwillingness to stop the suffering of innocent people.

Jesus does not offer any explanation here, but he does acknowledge the presence of the hungry and those still in need of healing. If we are suffering for any reason, it's sometimes helpful to be reminded that God knows what's going on with us, even though our suffering may be prolonged.

The crowds were not about to take their bubble-bursting lightly. They went from adoration and admiration for Jesus to homicidal rage in the course of about two minutes (or however long it took Jesus to deliver these zingers).

Hell hath no fury like a sense of entitlement that's been denied, or even worse, told it has no legitimate reason to exist. Apparently the crowd was so enraged that they tried to grab Jesus, to run him toward the edge of a cliff, and to throw him over.

But just as suddenly as their attitude toward him had turned, so had their ability to do him any physical harm. The text is not clear how it happened, but Jesus somehow walked away unharmed.

So what can we learn from this brief encounter that Jesus had with a crowd? First, it's not helpful to allow misconceptions about ourselves, even if they're flattering and complimentary, to keep going on unchallenged. It is better to be authentic and straightforward.

Second, we shouldn't be afraid to balance affirmation and challenge with those within our own circle of influence, especially those with whom we may have a leadership role. If we're only being affirmed and never challenged, we may come to think that we can do no wrong.

If we're only being challenged, however, we can become discouraged and lose initiative. When we lead, we need to be both supportive and constructively critical if we're going to be effective.

Next, let's not be afraid to boldly exercise our gifts, even among those who know us well. We should do our best even around those who may be envious and somewhat jealous of our gifts, even though they may know some of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

And we should support those in our community who may have a degree of familiarity that prevents them from receiving the respect they're due. We should humbly acknowledge our own weaknesses and mistakes, but then get down to business. Let's never let the possibility of a negative response keep us from doing what's right. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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