

“Hometown Views, Hometown Blues”

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; Luke 4:16-30 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Before I read our second scripture lesson, I want to talk about why I chose it. We are in the lectionary year for Luke, but I’m pretty sure we used chapter 4 much earlier in the year. Since it’s a story from very early in Jesus’ ministry, it makes sense that it would come up in the first few months of a year. But there’s another timing-related reason I decided to have us read it again this year.

When I first entered into full-time ministry, the Special Day Offerings – for Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Thanksgiving – all went into the same pot, Disciples Mission Fund, to support the work of the denomination generally. Around 2003, when I was still very new, as part of an effort to inspire higher levels of giving, the wider church decided to try something different. And so each of those “Special Days” got assigned a special recipient. Christmas offerings go to our Regions, the Easter offering goes to General Church ministries, Pentecost donations support new church planting, and the Thanksgiving offering is for Disciples higher education, that is, our colleges, universities, and seminaries. The most obvious connection in that schedule, of course, is the Pentecost offering going to plant new churches, since Pentecost is the “birthday” of the church. But I’ve always had an affection for connecting the Thanksgiving offering to higher education. It’s not about giving thanks exactly; it’s about the timing.

In theory, Thanksgiving weekend is when Disciples churches might have the joy of welcoming back young people who have gone off to college. They may have left town, gone out on their own, and learned amazing new things. They're just starting to figure out how the person they were relates to the person they're becoming, in ways their church might celebrate with them. Or maybe they've had trouble holding onto who they are, and coming back to their faith community helps them remember and reclaim their true identity. When we're watching young people grow up, sometimes the changes are so gradual we don't notice them. But when they're gone for a few months and then return, we suddenly realize that they're practically a grown person now, with ideas and gifts and perspectives we can learn from. Sometimes this goes well. Sometimes, they've learned just enough to be annoying. And sometimes, they've gained enough perspective on where they came from to offer critiques we may not be ready for.

Since we are starting our collection of the Thanksgiving Special Offering for Disciples higher education today, I thought it might be fun to focus on a story about a young person coming back to the faith community that raised him. So without further ado, let's read this story from Luke 4. It starts on page 61.

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might both proclaim and build your vision of creation flourishing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

It didn't take long, did it? One second, they're all admiring, proud of their connection to this hometown boy who's so articulate and faithful. The next, they're trying to throw him off a cliff! Was his mother sitting nearby, wishing he would just sit down and shut up? No doubt she was well acquainted with Jesus' tendency to provoke people. Is there any sass sassier than having your own words thrown back at you? Jesus was reading from the scroll of Isaiah. He was referencing well known stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha. But it wasn't the scripture references that were the problem, was it? It was the point Jesus was making in referring to them.

You're sitting there in worship, feeling contented and proud of this young man your community helped raise, and then he tells you that you shouldn't feel special or holy or self-satisfied because of who you are, because God – who can find faithfulness all over the world – is more interested in what you do than in who you are or who you know or what tribe you belong to. The nerve! Who does he think he is anyway?

What's funny about this story is that supposedly Jesus was more like 30 than 19, but it definitely feels similar to the dynamic when a college first-year comes home for Thanksgiving break, having taken a freshman philosophy seminar, full of advice for his family whom he now sees are doing everything wrong and likely for all the wrong reasons. He may even quote his parents' lessons back at them, with pointed critiques of their hypocrisy, citing all the ways they don't follow their own advice. This is the kind of incisive commentary our Thanksgiving Special Offering supports!

Not really, well, not mostly, though possibly.... The truth is that young people are paying closer attention than we sometimes assume. They hear our words, and at first, they believe us. Then they test us, to see if we really believe what we're saying. We tell them about how the world is, and then they start to watch if we're living as though we really think that's how things are. We tell them that God is love and love is the most important thing, and so they keep track of how often we're choosing love – over fear, over worry, over comfort.

One of the most salient memes making the rounds on social media lately are the testimonies from young people who have left church, because as they say, essentially, “You told me to love my neighbor, and then you got mad when I did.” Love people, but not like that. Love people, but not those people. Love people, but not in a way that requires me to change.

Could it be that “Thanksgiving break” is the one of the most important moments for the future of the church? Not actual Thanksgiving break, but all the moments when our young people are emboldened to give us feedback about whether we're living up to the ideals we taught them. Do we even have these moments in our lives? Can we learn to seek them out? When they arrive, are we ready to listen? What are we doing to prepare ourselves to hear such critique, without giving in to the temptation to throw someone off a cliff? Can we accept these reminders of who we say we want to be? Will we at least support the communities that send our young

people home for Thanksgiving break with new tools for seeing and naming these uncomfortable truths?

The passage Jesus read from Isaiah isn't the one we read today. But I wanted us to hear those verses from Isaiah 65 as well, because they offer us a clear description of the vision God has for our world. These are images I hope we are filling our young people's heads with, and our own as well! A world where people live in safety, with economic justice and self-determination. A world where good health and long life are the norm, because everyone is taken care of. A world where babies are cherished and delighted in, not condemned to die of starvation or bombings. A world where honest work is satisfying because it sustains a life worth living and sometimes even because it's enjoyable.

We teach our children about what God desires for our world, but we sometimes then forget that they're watching to see if that's the world we're building. We need them to pull us up short and reflect on whether we believe in what we've told them. I think sometimes we tell our children about the way we wish the world could be, without letting on that we don't believe it ever will be. But the thing about that is that our words still have power. Because if we speak that world into existence, even simply as an aspiration, our children grow up assuming that's how things should be, and they act accordingly. And if and when we don't, they will and should call us out. And instead of getting mad, if they trust us enough to point out our failures, we should give

thanks and listen. Because maybe God is doing something new, through those we shaped with our stories about how things could be. Maybe things could be different, better, more just and holy and delightful. Maybe if we all acted like God's vision for the flourishing of creation is possible, it would become more probable. Maybe if we devoted each and every "Thanksgiving break" that comes into our lives to listening and responding with humility, honesty, and courage, a new world could begin to emerge. We can join our young people in proclaiming good news, if we start by listening to them. Hallelujah and Amen.