



*“Everyday Heroes”*

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Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California*

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Luke 4:14–30*

Occasionally people tell me that they wish that they could have lived at the time of Jesus and witnessed his ministry first hand. When I've pressed these folks for their reasons behind such statements, I have heard self-effacing comments about being sure that if they had seen Jesus' ministry first hand, they would be stronger believers and more faithful Christians.

These kinds of comments fascinate me for a number of reasons—not the least of which has to do with the fact that there's little biblical evidence indicating any correlation between eye-witness experiences of Jesus' ministry, belief that he was the Messiah, or faithful discipleship.

The gospel readings for today and next Sunday are a case in point. In these passages, Jesus reads a prophecy from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, and despite the fact that says plainly, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” his contemporaries don't believe that he is the Messiah. And, when he challenged their disbelief, the men grew so angry with him that they drove him out of the synagogue, and out of his hometown, and eventually to the cross at Golgotha.

As a pastor who has served several churches filled with members who have struggled with the question, “Was Jesus the Messiah, or just a good guy?” and as a pastor whose authority to preach has been challenged on account of the fact that I am not a heterosexual man, and as a person who has been invited to preach on this text in my hometown, I have been fascinated by Jesus' comment, “...no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.”

I wonder, “Where does the doubt about Jesus' messiahship come from?”

## II

On the one hand, I think that such questions—even doubts—are totally legitimate. I think that faith questions ought to be named and explored, and that patent acceptance of doctrine is not the same as faith. True faith is tried and tested, in my view.

So my point is not to shame people into believing certain doctrines or faith statements that have become accepted belief by orthodox Christians. No. My question about our doubts is more existential than the way a more orthodox pastor would pose it. And so are my possible answers to this query about the origins of doubt.

Where do these doubts about Jesus come from? What are the origins of doubters' resistance to his ministry?

Two sources argue that Jesus' contemporaries resisted his proclamation, because he reminded them of something that they already knew, but didn't want to hear.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus reminded his contemporaries of the prophetic teachings of Isaiah and others, who said that God was on the side of the poor, the oppressed, and the infirmed. And Jesus said that if the men of the synagogue wanted to get right with God, that they needed to spend less time worrying about rituals, and more time meeting the needs of the marginalized.

According to Luke, Jesus' reminder was very unpopular. It had the effect of a child regurgitating a parent's lesson at an inopportune time in a very public setting—only magnified several times.

I remember, for example, that during a visit with my sister's family, my sister noticed that our mother had bequeathed my grandmother's wedding ring to me. Nobody had been trying to hide this news from my sister. We just hadn't mentioned it, because it hadn't seemed like a big deal.

When my sister noticed the ring that I was wearing, she said, "Hey, you're wearing Grandma's wedding ring!"

I said, "Yes, I am."

She said, "How'd you get that?"

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year C*. (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994) 92-93. And, Carol Lakey Hess, "Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 288.

I explained that I saw it lying on mom's dresser the last time that I was home, and I asked her if she was going to wear it, and she said that she wasn't because it was too big for her. So I asked her if I could have it, and she said, "Sure."

"Oh," said Mar, "I want a turn!"

"Um," I replied, "Why do you need a turn? You've got more diamonds than fingers. Grandma's diamond is the only one that I'll probably ever have."

About that time, both of my nieces who were young teens, chimed in, in sync, "Sisters have to share!"

It's rough being reminded of the lessons that we've tried to teach the kids. We understand why the men in the synagogue didn't necessarily want to hear what he had to say that day.

Where do doubts about Jesus' identity and mission come from? What are the origins of doubters' resistance to his ministry?

Two other sources suggest that the resistance to Jesus' ministry has to do with the fact that he described and demonstrated God's favor for people outside his own ethnic and religious community.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that the folks around him lived with a sense of scarcity and were afraid that there wasn't enough grace, or healing, or liberation to go around—that it was in short supply—and they didn't like the idea of Jesus helping other people. They thought he was "giving away the farm," so to speak.

According to Luke, Jesus defended the ancient prophetic position, and the universality of his ministry, by recounting Old Testament stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha ministering to people outside of their nation and faith, and explaining how this pleased God and how the whole people of God—Jews and Gentiles alike—were blessed on account of this wider ministry.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus, points to the stories of Elijah feeding the widow at Zarephath and her son (both Gentile foreigners) and himself in the midst of a famine and Elisha healing Naaman, a Syrian military leader, and converting him to the faith.

Some saw Jesus and God's resources as limited, and they didn't like to see these resources "squandered" on persons and groups outside of their home culture. So this is a further reason that some of his contemporaries resisted Jesus' preaching and his mission.

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 63. And, Gay L. Byron, "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Vol. 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 313.

In addition to these two reasons that biblical scholars offer to explain why Jesus' messiahship and mission were rejected, I venture a third. I propose that the men of the synagogue resisted Jesus' pronouncement, because they doubted themselves as much or more than they doubted him.

I propose that they doubted who Jesus claimed to be, and that they doubted what he claimed that he could accomplish, because he was one of them. He was from their town, their enclave, and in many cases, their family. And, for reasons grounded in their own self-doubt and self-loathing, they couldn't imagine that anyone like them could be who he claimed to be.

Note how at first the men of the synagogue were excited and enthused by Jesus' reading and his pronouncement. Luke explains, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" But then the situation devolved.

We are helped in understanding this devolution by reading John's gospel, where we hear Jesus' identity and authority questioned by Nathanael, one of his first disciples, who questioned whether anything good could come from Nazareth. (See Jn. 1:46.)

Nazareth was a First Century equivalent of "Nowheresville." Some modern scholars even question whether the place existed when Jesus was alive. At best, Nazareth was a small village of little consequence before it became associated with him.

There's a parallel in our time to this situation, don't you think? There is an odd tendency in our culture to associate great people with great cities, so that rising movie stars and performing artists, and politicians running for high office, typically change their zip codes and names in order to be associated with fancier places and more prominent people.

And yet, the one whom we have chosen to set our sights on is from Nazareth in Galilee. To borrow a phrase from John Lennon, Jesus' contemporaries saw him as the first century equivalent of a "Nowhere Man" from "Nowheresville."<sup>3</sup>

### III

Like it or not, this is who Jesus was—a Nowhere Man from Nowheresville. He didn't fit the part that most people were looking for him to play. He didn't have the right pedigree, he didn't come from the right family or the right social class, or have a fancy education, or possess any of the trappings that his contemporaries associated with greatness—and neither did most of his followers.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nowhere\\_Man\\_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nowhere_Man_(song))

The Apostle Paul pointed out this truth in the first chapter of his first letter to the church at Corinth, where he wrote:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: Let him who boasts boast of the Lord. (*NIV*, I Cor. 1:26–31)

Some folks are rattled by the news that Jesus didn't seem to have the resume for the messiah job. Certainly this was show-stopper for several of his contemporaries, and a matter that gives the influential of every generation pause. But personally, I find these facts about Jesus all the more interesting and inspiring, and I hope that you do too—especially those of you who struggle to believe that you came from the right people or wonder whether you have the right stuff to be a member of this church or of any church.

#### IV

The story of Jesus, the history of the early church, and even the history of this church reveals that God has chosen and continues to choose fairly ordinary people to do things that may seem—when taken in increments—not at all extraordinary, but that when considered as a whole reveal a magnificent mosaic that is part of the prophets' vision of a better world.

Some of you know that we've had a couple of memorial services here at Eden Church the past two days. Through the course of my conversations with family and friends of those who have died, I was reminded of some of the great qualities that I have come to associate with the members of this church.

One story is associated with Ruth and Les Ferguson. Ruth died on January 10 of this year. Her husband Les died in 1997. Ruth was a member of Eden for over 60 years. Throughout all of those years, she and her husband were faithful worship attendees and volunteers. Les was active with the Trustees and helped care for the property, and Ruth was involved in women's fellowship, church school, and the nursery.

Ruth is perhaps most remembered by the children of this congregation who are now in their 30s, 40s, and 50s as their warm and loving nursery provider and church school teacher.

When our children came to the nursery or to church school, it was Ruth Ferguson who welcomed them with open arms on Sunday mornings. It was she who loved them unconditionally, she who read them Bible stories that made those ancient characters come alive, and she who helped them work cold, hard homemade play dough into soft supple shapes. It was Ruth Ferguson who helped our children transform their otherwise dull craft projects into Christmas gifts and Mother's Day masterpieces. It was Ruth who made real the words of the gospel, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

Ruth Schaap, a friend of the Fergusons and another Jubilee member of Eden Church, shared another story with me this past week that I had not heard about the Fergusons before. She explained that for many years Les and Ruth prepared the communion elements on communion Sundays and cleaned up after the services.

## V

Listening to these stories about the many behind-the-scenes jobs that the two were them engaged in reminded me that it's these kinds of people who have always made Eden Church go, and who have made this community of faith great. It's been people who understood duty, who quietly got things done, and who have appreciated the fact that a job well done is its own reward. The Fergusons were everyday heroes in their everyday lives—they were not fancy or flashy people—they were just regular people like you and me.

Their legacy lives on in every person who's willing to help in the nursery, teach a church school class, serve communion, make the coffee, patch the roof, weed the gardens, trim the hedges, take food to the FESCO pantry, stuff the bulletins, assemble *Chimes*, wash the linens, pound nails at a Habitat project, visit the sick and homebound, sign the holiday cards, pick up trash, sing in the choir, raise the money, take the pictures, sign the checks, send a kid to camp, invite friends, welcome strangers, count the offering, crunch the numbers, cook the lunch, host a small group, and more . . .

There's no doubt about it. The message that Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue that day was outrageous. He said, "Today is the day!" He said that he was the guy that the prophets had been preaching about. He said that the world as everyone knew it was about to be turned upside down. And perhaps the most outrageous thing of all that he said was that people like us have the power to join him in this auspicious endeavor.

Our options are several in the face of his invitation. We can reject Jesus and his message. Or we can claim our own power and potential, and dare to be the people who God has called us to be: everyday heroes in our everyday lives. The choice is ours. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. Amen.