

January 30, Epiphany 4C (1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30)

## **If Jesus is with the other guy, how can he be with us?**

by [Katie Hines-Shah](#) in the [January 12, 2022](#) issue

A few years ago I asked my six-year-old daughter what she learned in Sunday school that day. She put down her fork, turned to me, and in a very serious tone said, “We learned that Jesus was not a Lutheran!” What a shock!

So I did what any modern parent does with this kind of stark theological realization: I posted it on Facebook. And then came the comments: “Of course not, Jesus was a Presbyterian,” typed a Presbyterian friend. “Next they will be telling her he wasn’t even a Christian,” quipped another. And my favorite, from a fellow pastor, “What incompetent pastor approved that curriculum?” That, of course, would be me.

We know that Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew; the joke is that somehow we imagine that Jesus was like us, and because he was like us, he *liked* us. That’s how Jesus can become, say, a light-skinned, blue-eyed Christian American who votes the way we do, or at least roots for our favorite football team. And we aren’t alone. This idea that Jesus is our guy goes all the way back to the first Christians, to the first disciples, to the people who knew Jesus before anyone did—the people of Nazareth.

The assigned Gospel reading is a continuation of last week’s—two diametrically opposed scenes in one narrative. The first one is nothing but good news: Jesus reads the Isaiah scroll at the Nazareth synagogue. He preaches his first sermon, just one short verse: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This is good news, at least as far as the people of Nazareth are concerned. They know this Jesus—he’s the son of Joseph, the guy they grew up with. And now they assume salvation is coming their way. The Jews of Nazareth aren’t xenophobes. They don’t wish ill on their neighbors. They simply believe what we all believe: these promises, this good news, these miracles are primarily and maybe even exclusively for us.

And then Jesus upends everything.

It's helpful to remember that Jesus doesn't just go around doing nice things. It's useful to know that the point of scripture isn't always to make us feel good. Communities of faith and their leaders aren't always going to meet our expectations, partially because they are human but also because sometimes we have to hear things that we would rather not. Which may be why Jesus says in Nazareth that day, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." And then he goes on to prove it.

"Remember Elijah?" Jesus says. Of course they do. Elijah was the greatest of Hebrew prophets. But whom did he feed in a time of great famine? Not anyone from Nazareth or Jerusalem or even Capernaum, but instead a widow in Zarephath—a small town in Lebanon.

And Jesus doesn't stop. "Remember Elisha?" he continues. Of course they do. Elisha's everyone's favorite wonder-worker. But did he heal anyone in the Northern Kingdom? No. Jesus reminds the congregation that the only leper Elisha heals is Naaman the Syrian. The people of Nazareth probably haven't forgotten: Naaman was also an enemy army commander. It hurts. No wonder the people of Nazareth want to throw him off a cliff.

There isn't really a cliff in Nazareth. When you go to the Holy Land and ask to see the place where this happened, they will take you to a gentle hill. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't want to get thrown off of it, but still—doesn't it kind of seem like Jesus deserves it? If he's with the other guy, how can he be with us?

Jesus escapes—if not certain death, then at least certain bruising—but how? Luke includes a tantalizing detail: Jesus goes through "the middle." He refuses to be caught in the binary trap. He is not pro-Jew and anti-Samaritan. He's not pro-Capernaum and anti-Nazareth. He won't be pinned down as supporter of any political party or football team. Jesus will not be a Presbyterian or, as much as it pains me to say it, a Lutheran. He won't be contained.

Jesus came to be with us, whoever we are. This is so important because at some time or another, we will find ourselves on the wrong side of a dividing line. Our gender, our age, our race or color, who we love, how much money we make, our physical abilities or challenges, our nationality, where we went to school, how we pray—these will make us unworthy in the eyes of some. Someone once said

whenever the world draws a line, Jesus steps across to the other side. His love is just that big.

First Corinthians maps out a great promise of faith. Paul writes that our love should be too big for envy or boasting or rudeness to gain a foothold. Our love should be big enough to bear with one another, to see the good in our neighbor, to rejoice in truth over convenient lies. In an era when so many would pit us against one another, when bearing with one another is not the norm, Jesus calls us to remember: we are beloved siblings, and a beloved sibling cannot be our enemy. Our enemy is sin, death, and the devil—and Jesus has defeated them all.

The world we live in is full of division. Even a six-year-old can see it. And yet, we live with a diametrically opposed sure and certain hope. As the people of Nazareth once rejoiced to hear, we still believe: the scriptures are being fulfilled. The work Jesus began in Jerusalem broke through boundaries to reach people in every space and time. Jesus walks in the midst of all people: widows, lepers, folks who root for the opposing team, and even the unlikeliest: Christians like us.