

On the Gospel: Jesus and the Nazareth villagers have a disagreement (“A prophet is without honor in his home town”) Epiphany 4, February 3 2013 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Last week we heard the first half of this passage: “Everybody Loves Jesus” Now we get more, and what’s remarkable is that there’s a sudden change in the tenor of the meeting – provoked, it would seem, by a surprise outburst by Jesus with that very familiar aphorism that is now standard in the English language: “a prophet is not without honor, except…….” Apparently it was also well-understood in the first century, and it really ticked off Jesus’ fellow-villagers.

So why the sharp language? What’s going on here? Well, several things all predicated on honor. First Century Mediterranean culture was an Honor/Shame culture.

Honor was something you had or didn’t have depending on your birth. If you were born into a wealthy land-owning family you had a lot of honor. If you were a peasant you didn’t have very much – but what you had you guarded with your life.

There was only so much honor in a culture – think of it like money – no one (except the Government) can print money. So if one person somehow acquires more money than someone else must have given up some of theirs – it was the same with honor.

As with money today, there were legitimate and illegitimate ways to gain honor. Robbing a bank is not a legitimate way to gain money. Simply proclaiming in a sermon an honorable teaching would not be okay unless you were a rabbi or a priest, or a scribe. You would be stealing some of their honor away from them, just as surely as, today, reaching into someone’s pocket and taking their wallet is considered stealing.

Legitimate ways of acquiring honor included others heaping it on you – we’ll see that a lot later in Jesus’ ministry – or you could acquire honor through the skillful use of rhetoric in the age-old game of challenge and riposte.

For Jesus – a tekton, a worker with his hands – to start preaching, rather than simply reading from scripture and stopping there, was a real “no-no”.

And his fellow villagers jumped all over this violation immediately: “Isn’t this Joseph’s boy?” The implied meaning of that question is this: “Joseph’s boy is getting uppity, thinking above his station, insulting our real teachers and priests and scribes.” That’s the challenge.

Jesus’ sees’ what’s coming and his response, his riposte, really is a pre-emptive strike....a seriously insulting pre-emptive strike – According to Jesus a prophet is honored by “the nations” – foreigners – but not by locals, not by fellow Jews, not even by family or kinship groups.

Them’s fighting words!! And Jesus’ listeners would have felt their own honor challenged.

One way to regain or fend-off a challenge to your honor was to kill the challenger. That’s what they try to do.

Beneath the challenge and riposte, the struggle over honor and shame, there's something else, though.

Jesus represented a significant challenge to the way that a prophetic ministry was understood in the first century. By that time the office had become greatly institutionalized, and focused on the Temple, with its thousands of priests and scribes.

Jesus looks more like the prophets of the 8th Century B.C. – 800 years before. The people have forgotten what that prophet looked like, and so were unable to understand the new thing that was happening with this familiar man now doing such unfamiliar, challenging things right in front of them.

Unable to embrace the newness, and the change it represented, they closed their minds.

We shouldn't look down on them. They are us. We human beings have never been good at embracing newness and change. Columbus was laughed at and had trouble raising money to continue his search for this continent. Many thought that the new-fangled "automobile" simply wouldn't catch on. The Swiss thought the digital watch technology they invented was so worthless they didn't even patent it.

In a sense, the challenge to those Galilean peasants 2,000 years ago is the same one we're faced with: can we open our minds and our hearts to that undiscovered country that is God's future for us, or are we going to allow ourselves to be captured by "business as usual"?

Today's annual meeting offers us good news about our community – good news financially, organizationally, spiritually. We've paid off 90% of our building costs in under four years – two million dollars! We only owe money to ourselves.

When we built this building we did so with the understanding that once built we need to wear it out with use – and not only use for ourselves but in service to the needs of our community here on south Whidbey.

So what's next? Because there's always a "next" if we're faithful. What's next. Now there's a question for us! AMEN.