

## **“Illuminating Identity: Permission to Grow”**

*A sermon preached on Luke 4:21-30 by Emily Hull McGee  
on February 3, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

You’ve heard the story, I’m sure — or at least, you know the story under the story, you understand the meaning below the reaction.<sup>1</sup> This one begins with a pastor, arriving at the First Baptist Church of a small county seat town in the South to follow the impossibly beloved 30-year pastor who had recently retired. There were no limits to the shared love between that old pastor and his church. He was the type to make 5:00am hospital visits for routine surgeries and preach every sermon without any kind of notes. The sanctuary was full under his leadership, people pouring even into the corner recesses of the balcony. His portrait hanging in the hallway seemed to twinkle with the smile that reached his eyes. And somehow when he preached, his people sat up straighter, they listened more carefully, they whispered to their neighbors in the pew, urgently: “I think he’s speaking directly to me!”

The pulpit, you see, is where this story takes a turn. It was a pulpit like ours — vast and sturdy, a substantially-sized piece planted in the center of the sanctuary to reflect the centrality of the proclaimed word in Baptist worship. Legend even had it that that pulpit had been bolted directly into the foundation of the sanctuary. The congregation at First Baptist loved that legend and what it represented so much, they repeated it often, somehow forgetting with each transmission that is just wasn’t true.

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<sup>1</sup> Story of Dr. Craig Sherouse as told by his son and my dear friend, Alan Sherouse, <https://fbcgso.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/sermon-1-31-2016-as.mp3>.

When the new pastor came to town, he found that out early on. For one Sunday, he leaned against the pulpit and felt it move. “Huh!,” he thought to himself. “Perhaps then we should move the pulpit on occasion — you know, for next Christmas when our choir and orchestra lead worship, or in the spring when our children lead us in a time of music and missions, or when we hold weddings or piano recitals in our sanctuary.” He then took that question to the church: “can we make our pulpit moveable?”... which somehow translated in the minds of some people as: “our new pastor wants to remove the pulpit.”

Those good folks of First Baptist knew that this was just how it starts! First, you remove the pulpit. Then the flat screens would come marching across the platform, they imagined. The organ pipes would be melted down and sold for scraps. The pews would come up, and modular sectionals, club chairs, and bean bag chairs would go down. After several days of angry phone calls, the new pastor felt he had to address this surprising controversy through his weekly pastor’s column in the newsletter. “Folks, I said *moveable*, not *removable*,” he tried to clarify, “you know, for weddings and piano recitals and children’s programs,” but for some, the impression had already been made.

Some years later when this pastor had been called to another congregation, the church gave him a lovely reception where he was greeted warmly by his dear congregants who thanked him for his meaningful years of service in their midst. A gentleman came through the line to shake his hand and said, “You know pastor, I always liked you. But some folks just never got over the fact that you wanted to sell the pulpit.”

## II.

Needless to say, it seems that the metaphorical pulpit-bolted-to-the-foundation phenomenon is nothing new, for it stretches at least as far back as Jesus's hometown synagogue in Nazareth. We heard last week what happened there, where the Gospel of Luke records Jesus's first sermon, his inaugural address, capturing for all the world to hear the core mission and message of the Messiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus proclaimed, "and from this will come good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, and God's favor, God's jubilee — that every-50-year holy reset of debts and imprisonment, where all God's children are given a fresh start, a clean slate of restoration and reconciliation." And as David reminded us, Jesus finished the reading with a one sentence sermon: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Last week, our scripture invited us to reckon with such a sermon to begin Jesus's public ministry, to ask ourselves what Jesus's "why" meant for our own. But today, we must reckon with the aftermath of such a bold sermon, the reaction from his listeners that began in amazement and celebration and ended in murderous rage as they attempted to hurl Jesus off a neighboring cliff. We have to wonder: what *happened* in the in-between? What in the world could Jesus have said to cause that level of anger from his listeners? Could it be a much more serious case of "moveable pulpit to remove the pulpit to sell it off" in their hearing?

We have a clue in the only words of reaction attributed to the crowd that day. "Is not this Joseph's son?," they said to one another. Now without

the advantage of tone, inflection, and body language, it's hard to decipher what they meant by such an exclamation.<sup>2</sup>

They may have been skeptical — yes, they'd heard the rumors about Jesus, and yes, he was eloquent in his speaking. But really — *isn't this Joseph's son? You know, the little neighborhood kid we've known all these years?* The question could have resounded with patronizing condescension, distrust that Jesus could have been anything more. "He's acting above his raising," like David said earlier.

Or they could have been a bit opportunistic — hearing in Jesus's words the possibility that his hometown would get special treatment in his ministry. *Isn't this Joseph's son! He's one of us! How impressive — I wonder what his call for jubilee will mean for Nazareth, what of God's favor will come for us?* The question could have echoes of assumption about how sharing a hometown with Jesus will give them a leg up and a direct channel to God from within.

But either way, they heard those old stories of Elijah and Elisha, of the widow and leper, stories of God's favor on the outsider, and they got what Jesus was saying. They knew he was subtly telling them their 'insider status' didn't privilege them in God's dawning kingdom, that God's good news wasn't just for the descendants of Israel. They knew he was challenging them to rethink what assumptions they'd long held about matters of holy significance. For like the prophet Jeremiah we heard from earlier, the prophet Micah my Wednesday Bible Study is reading, and Jesus himself, the hometown listeners can't help but to confuse messenger with message. Those Nazarenes weren't

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<sup>2</sup> With gratitude for the excellent commentary at the Salt Project for teasing apart how to read and receive this verse of scripture! You can find it here: <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/29/two-kinds-of-fury-salt-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-four>.

rejecting the person of Jesus; they were rejecting the inclusive, transformative, changing message he brings.<sup>3</sup>

So it's no wonder that his first sermon ended the way it did. For as one writer says, "Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced. Learning what we already know is often painfully difficult. All of us know what it is to be at war with ourselves, sometimes making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the truth in love."<sup>4</sup>

### III.

I'd love to position myself as one in the crowd who heard Jesus that day and yet had the wisdom to at least stay behind, and at best admonish the angry when the rest of the crowd drove him out. But I know myself too well. I know my tendencies to react when someone presses on my deeply-held convictions. I know how I confuse message with messenger, how I'd mostly rather just stay safe and comfortable (*thank you very much!*), how my ego feels like it takes a hit when someone tells me truth I'd rather just not hear. No, I think too often I'm right there in the crowd, scanning the horizon for the closest cliff I can find.

And if the biblical witness teaches us anything, it's that we all can be implicated in that crowd, right? For when some person or idea or way of being calls your very sense of self into question, it's human nature to react with fear, with anger, with paralysis, with violence. Sometimes the growth of another sparks our imagination, inspires us to make shifts and changes,

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<sup>3</sup> Pulpit Fiction podcast, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/epiphany4c>

<sup>4</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, "Luke 4:16-30," p63.

encourages us to consider again the paths we're on. But too often, we'd frankly rather things stay as they are; for another's sameness stabilizes our own identity, right? If Andrew quit drinking, then who would Rahmi or Nick be without him at the bar every night? If Adam began posting about the injustices he saw on the edges of town, then what would Kim think every time she drove past quickly and fearfully? If Courtney started spending more time volunteering at the homeless shelter than bingeing on Netflix at home, then how would her spouse and family react?

And yet, at the very outset of his ministry, Jesus models for us what it looks like to deepen one's understanding of God, to grow in one's love for the breadth of God's creation, to let oneself be changed by people that were traditionally overlooked. In **his** own growth, Jesus gives **us** permission to grow, and then spends the rest of his ministry telling us and modeling for us what that growth could look like.

I've quoted the late pastor and author Peter Gomes to you before, and he had this to say on the pattern of growth in the Christian life: "One is always being lost and found, one is always leaving and joining the church, for if one is alive one is growing in the experiences of God as perceptions develop and grow. To store up the past religious experience like a bit of preserved ginger to sniff on in emergencies seems to me to be a sorry parody of living faith. The matter of Christian growth, then, seems to be a willingness to expose oneself to new ideas, to widening opportunities, to new awareness of what's happening in the world around."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Gomes, "Growing Up," *Sermons*, p39.

It strikes me that the type of growth Jesus modeled and invited doesn't always look like a dramatic departure from everything familiar. It doesn't have to mean quitting your job, dropping out, moving halfway around the world, or even selling the proverbial pulpit. For Jesus framed his ministry around scripture the synagogue crowd would have long known and loved. He told them stories of widows and lepers that they could have recited themselves. He took what they knew — the traditions, the rituals, the words, the space, the stuff of everyday life — and reimagined them, widened them, broadened them, illuminated new facets that had not yet been seen. And in so doing, he threatened the establishment and riled up the crowds... but in the end, he changed the world.

Friends, I wonder what might happen if we hear and heed Jesus's call to grow — a call to ourselves as individuals and our community as a church. I wonder how it might expand our capacity to love each other — letting go of the fear or anger we experience when pressed or pushed by a different idea or challenging person, and instead embracing the opportunity to catch a glimpse of how God is at work. I wonder how it might compel us to live as Jesus did, to seek out the poor with good news, to grant the captives liberation, to shed light upon the blind, and to celebrate God's favor that falls indiscriminately upon all of God's creation. I wonder how we might be transformed by him!

That is hard, hard work to do. Such a call demands a depth of examination into our lives and motivations, our privileges and deeply-held beliefs. It asks us to look generously on one another, to hold loosely to what is ours that we can hold fast to what is God's. It asks us to look around us to

the prophets in our spheres and let their proclamation get under our skin. It asks us to orient our lives, our priorities, our time, our resources first around the one they called Joseph's son.

But it's work that matters, matters for God and the world God so loved, matters for the church and our church, matters for you and me.

For would that we **not** be the people among whom Jesus passed through and went on his way. Amen!