

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 24, 2010 (3 Epiphany, Year C)

Nobody likes a know-it-all. The problem usually isn't with the person's knowledge. We all agree that knowledge is good – it's why we send our kids to school; it's why we sacrifice to get advanced degrees. Knowledge is power and it's empowering. So it's not the know-it-all's knowledge that irks us; it's the attitude. It's the in-your-face, holier-than-thou attitude that grates on us. And we all know at least one know-it-all. Someone who is never, ever wrong. Someone who never had an opinion he wasn't willing to offer as hard fact. And, in my humble opinion, there's little that's more trying than that.

So you can understand the irritation that must have pervaded the synagogue in Nazareth when a young, brash Jesus stood up to read from the Torah. Generally, reading from Scripture was reserved for the elders of the congregation. Picture guys with long gray beards. So the fact that Jesus stood up to read at all was shocking. It was completely out of order. And Jesus certainly knew better – this was his hometown synagogue. He grew up going to services here. For years he had sat with his family to listen to the teachings of the rabbis. And you can almost hear the murmurs; the shuffling in their seats; the coughs piercing the awkward silence as Jesus walked up to read.

To put this event into context, Jesus had recently been baptized and was then driven into the wilderness to be tempted by satan. In Luke's gospel, this is his first stop after his forty days in the wilderness. He has claimed his identity as God's Son and has returned to his hometown to give what is, in effect, his inaugural address.

And the people of Nazareth – Jesus' childhood friends and neighbors – must have been surprised to see him. There may have even been some shame at work here – first-born sons didn't just pick up and leave town as he had done. They were expected to stay and help provide for the family. But Jesus had another mission; he was quite literally on a mission from God. Which, of course, none of his former neighbors could comprehend. They just knew that Joseph's son had returned from somewhere and was suddenly walking up to read from the sacred scrolls.

And then there's that passage. You can picture him slowly unrolling the giant scroll of parchment searching for the section he had in mind. Scanning it until he finds the few lines he was looking for from the prophet Isaiah. The ones that announce the arrival of a messiah. And then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, as Luke reminds us reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Now *we* know and read this as a prophecy about Jesus. It couldn't be any clearer to us or to the initial readers of Luke's gospel. We're not shocked to hear Jesus proclaim, "Today this scripture

has been fulfilled in your hearing” after he hands back the scroll and sits down. But to those sitting in that synagogue, this was pure heresy. Jesus, in his short time away from Nazareth had become the ultimate know-it-all; one who had the audacity to claim that he had been specially anointed by God; one who even had a Messiah-complex. It’s no wonder that after coffee hour they would drive him out and threaten to throw him off a cliff.

One thing you can say about Jesus: he does not play to the crowd. He doesn’t tell people what they want to hear. He speaks the truth regardless of the consequences. He never alters his message depending upon which group he’s speaking to – Temple elders, the poor and downtrodden, his disciples, Pontius Pilate. They all receive the same message: he has come to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. In other words, he’d make a lousy politician. It’s also why he’s strung up on a cross to die.

We don’t often focus upon Jesus’ courage. We figure he was the Son of God; that this was why he was sent into the world. But it takes courage to tell the truth in the face of hostility and opposition. And the human side of Jesus must have struggled just to stand up in the synagogue on that day, let alone tell the truth about his identity. He knew it wasn’t going to go over well; but he also knew it was a message that had to be told regardless of the response.

And this begs the question, how do we demonstrate courage in our daily lives? How do we witness to the truth in the face of hostility? Sometimes what we must do is clear; at others times it’s not.

I had a strange experience at a party recently. I was talking to someone who, when he learned what I did for a living, told me he used to be an Episcopalian. He evidently left the Episcopal Church in 2003 after the consecration in New Hampshire of Gene Robinson as the first *openly* gay bishop. He said to me, “Yeah, I left the church when they started putting all those queers in charge.” Which took me aback because I’m not used to being confronted with such bold-faced bigotry. And I was left with a choice. Do I say something? Ignore it? Pretend I must have misheard him and walk away?

I’m not sure I did the right thing but I looked at him and said, “You mean gay people?” He muttered that, yes, that’s what he meant. I told him I completely disagreed with his assessment and then walked away. To the bar.

I don’t remember his name and I don’t really care to. But it does make you think about how you respond to similar situations. It also brings to mind this wonderful passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians about unity. “Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” In the light of Martin Luther King, Jr’s birthday this past week you could certainly add to this: For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body: Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, man or woman, black or white, gay or straight.

This is a passage that speaks both to our own interconnectedness as the Body of Christ that is the Church and also to God's justice in the face of discrimination. As members of Christ's body we are all called to respect the dignity of every human being, regardless of our differences. That's Jesus' radical message of inclusion that must be spoken again and again. And it all starts in that synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus reaches for the sacred scroll.

Jesus can get away with being a know-it-all because he, in fact, does know it all. Minus the attitude, of course, which is refreshing. And while no human being can ever, in fact, "know it all," Jesus still has much to teach us all about love and compassion; truth and justice.