return to religion-online

The Offense (Lk. 4:21-30)

by John Stendahl

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Jesus' behavior surprises me. Not his challenge of the narrow expectations in his hometown -- an attack on parochialism, nationalism or ethnocentrism fits what we know of him. But I'm surprised by the offensive way he picks this fight.

Hearing his stirring words in the synagogue, his old neighbors approve of him, are proud of him and wonder at the grace of his speech. But then Jesus, who had seemed so gracious, suddenly goes on the attack, putting imagined words in their mouths. He doesn't wait for these folks to reveal their self-centered worldview, but instead ascribes to them thoughts they have not yet expressed or perhaps even formed: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!"'

If Luke wanted us to feel the conflict and the issue here, wouldn't it have made more sense for him to let the pride and selfishness of Nazareth be seen in its own expression and *then* be answered with Jesus' better words and nobler vision? The story doesn't go that way. Instead Jesus appears as the instigator of the conflict, describing himself as a prophet and his listeners as the sorry compatriots who fail to heed. He lectures them from the familiar stories of scripture, implying that they are fools as well as presumptuous in their expectation (still unexpressed) that he should bless them as he has blessed strangers.

Not surprisingly, his words make them angry. They become like the killers of the prophets of old. They come close to casting him off the cliff. He has successfully provoked them to be what he called them. The analogy may be overstated, but I am reminded of the way some in my generation, when they were young adults, would goad police officers as "fascists" and "pigs" and then see those taunts realized with police rage and brutality.

Jesus is arguably not so unkind or arrogant as that, but there seems nonetheless a similar quality of adolescent rudeness here, a confrontational style that appears almost instinctive, unbidden by the behavior or words of elders. Suddenly, for parent reason, Jesus refuses to be the good boy, the dutiful son of the village, full of grace. He picks a fight. He gives offense.

His behavior seems uncalled for, like the argument or resentment of a teenager in a bad mood.

Of course, at this point Jesus is a person of maturity, 30 years old at least, and his apparent ill behavior can be exegeted within the canons of that adulthood. Yet it may be worth entertaining the notion that an adolescent moment is described not for us to dismiss but to understand. We are given no stories about Jesus from late childhood to his adulthood, but maybe this one does speak a bit about adolescence. After all, the issues and behaviors of teenage years often reemerge when adults come back to the homes they have outgrown.

So Jesus is back in Nazareth. But he knows something bigger now, something grander and more urgent. He knows too well the small compass of his own people's understanding, and how they assume that their own little lives are at the center of the wide world. They don't see the world he knows, the urgency and reality of God's dominion elsewhere. So when he tells them about it, they seem to domesticate it, make it something safe and cute. "Gee, what gracious words! And imagine little Jesus, Joseph's boy, speaking so wonderfully!" They are making it trivial, and focusing on him rather than his message. They don't get it.

This adolescent impatience with the domestic and familiar is not to be despised. Many of us, especially in northern latitudes, are aware of another form of irritability, the low-grade "cabin fever" of the winter months. Like the teenager, we grow sick of our own home, tired of the known and expected, yearning to bust out and move and live again. Late winter irritability can be a sign of life and hope in us, a proleptic impatience for spring, though it can also bear the bad manners of a surly youth.

And is it not also right that those who see a bigger world should be impatient with life seen narrow and unchanged? Is it not natural that those who have grasped a larger future bristle to cast off the comfortable bonds of the old? It's a stirring of the nest, to use the wonderful image of Deuteronomy 32, although in this case it appears more the work of the young themselves than of the wise and proactive parent. And if it is God's talons that tear at the walls of the nest, God tears also at the hearts of

of parents who lose their children to an adulthood and life beyond their own expectation or control.

As we visit with Jesus in Nazareth -- or maybe as Jesus visits us in our own settlement -- ought we perhaps to understand his impatience and perhaps even to feel it ourselves, this irritation with old suppositions and preoccupations? We inhabit a strange culture in which self-absorption and solipsism are mass-marketed, a culture in which our churches participate, compete and cater to please. Its assumptions may sit so deep and unspoken in us that it takes a voice of adolescent anger to put them into words. We shall perish if we cannot see a larger world and understand what we are doing to this globe and to strangers beyond the compass of our lives.

Do we then feel the restlessness, this cabin fever of God's stirring? Can we at least witness it without getting too scared or taking offense?