

5 surgeons are discussing who are the best patients to operate on. The first surgeon says, "I like to see accountants on my operating table, because when you open them up, everything inside is numbered." The second responds, "Yeah, but you should try electricians! Everything inside them is color coded." The third surgeon says, "No, I really think librarians are the best; everything inside them is in alphabetical order." The fourth surgeon chimes in: "You know, I like construction workers....those guys always understand when you have a few parts left over at the end, and when the job takes longer than you said it would." But the fifth surgeon shut them all up when he observed: "You're all wrong. Politicians are the easiest to operate on. There's no guts, no heart, no brains and no spine, and the head and the butt are interchangeable."

OK, fascinating passage, but even more fascinating with a little background. We need to understand what came just before this for a fuller appreciation. Luke had given us a genealogy of Jesus, which begins with "Jesus was the son (as was thought) of Joseph." Then it recounts Jesus' Jewish ancestors all the way back into prehistory where Jesus becomes "Son of Adam." Then in a glorious leap, the lineage ends with Jesus as the "Son of God."

This genealogy acknowledges Jesus belongs to the Jews, to the human family as a whole, and to God. But the way it is structured with the telltale parenthesis, "Jesus was the son (as was thought) of Joseph," focuses the tension that unfolds in this story. People will stay on the first level of Jesus' JEWISH identity and be unable or reluctant to acknowledge His universally human and divine identities. And of course the people most prone to this will be the people of His own hometown.

So we find Jesus in His hometown synagogue – where He has just read from the prophecy of Isaiah about one who is anointed with the Spirit and destined to bring about a better world. But He tells them this is no longer a prophecy – it has been fulfilled. The quickly drawn implication is that Jesus is the fulfillment. He has borrowed Isaiah to flesh out what the voice from heaven said to Him when He was at prayer after His baptism. "You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased." The mission associated with His identity as the Beloved Son has been clarified.

But the exact language can lead in another direction. The prophecy is fulfilled in THEIR hearing, meaning the people of Nazareth. If they have the capacity to receive Jesus and His message, the prophecy will be fulfilled. A better world will come about. But if they do not have the capacity to receive Jesus and His message, the prophecy will not be fulfilled. Their capacity to hear is essential to the fulfillment of the prophecy. Their first response is encouraging for they seem to welcome these challenging words of Jesus.

Now when Mark tells this story the hometown people reject Jesus because they know Him too well and cannot take His wisdom seriously, but according to Luke, THESE hometown folks CLAIM Him and MARVEL that one of their OWN is so eloquent and privileged. However, the reason for their pleasure is the assumption that He is JOSEPH's son. As Joseph's son, the benefits of which He speaks – the vision of divine favor and human liberation culled from Isaiah – will be bestowed on the village of Joseph. Those who are speaking favorably of Jesus are smacking their lips. They will ride Jesus into a better life. Jesus senses this is the source of their praise and approval. So He challenges them with 2 pieces of Jewish tradition that He knows are not popular with them. Jesus reminds them that despite all the poor widows in Israel, Elijah goes to a foreign widow at Zarephath in Sidon. And in a time when there many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha, none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian, another foreigner.

Jesus is making the point that they were not chosen by God to form a closed society and become the sole beneficiaries of divine blessings. They were chosen to bring the benefits of the one God to ALL people. The focus is not on themselves, but on what they can do for others. Even Elijah and Elisha, 2 prophets who staunchly defended God's covenant with Israel knew this. Jesus' words suggest the Nazarenes must undergo the same consciousness shift that transformed Jesus with His Baptism – where He was told that He was the Beloved Son. To be the beloved one of God means to be sent to others.

When they thought Jesus would bring them untold blessings, they spoke favorably of Him. When they understand He is asking them to bring blessings to others, they are enraged. It is a short trip from approval to condemnation. They are so angry they try to kill Jesus. This prefigures what happens with the Jerusalem elite. The chief priests and scribes will crucify Jesus, but we know it will not be the last word. In the resurrection, Jesus will walk through the midst of them. Physical force cannot kill this spiritual reality. (adapted from John Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 32-34)

OK, second, so what? This story is a challenge to us down to our very day. We would like to have God for us, but not for everyone else. Why do we get so upset about people coming to this country illegally? Most of our ancestors came here illegally – that's what WOP means – without papers. But once our ancestors settled in, they didn't much care for other waves of immigrants that came later than they did. They didn't want to make room for the Italians, the Irish, the Chinese, the people from Eastern Europe – and drove the Native Americans off THEIR land and onto reservations. Currently we're dealing with waves of folks from all over the world who have been displaced, are in danger in their own countries, and desperate for food. We got ours – but we are often not very willing to share it with others. We want it all for ourselves. And some folks – even church-going folks – are mad enough to kill me with words (probably preferring something more lethal) any time I mention this. I'm just preaching the gospel. Their problem is with Jesus, not me, for it is Jesus who said we must WELCOME the stranger. He made no qualifications about their legal status, just what OUR response is supposed to be – welcome.

The human mind plays many games, and one of them is the pleasure-displeasure continuum. We could also use a computer image – the mind runs a pleasure-displeasure program – and it runs it fast, so fast we do not notice the program itself. All we know is we are carried away by the program. A certain word or event pleases us; another word or event displeases us. We smile and we scowl, swinging back and forth. Better said, since pleasing and displeasing are full-throttle responses, we gush and growl. We are really into pleasure and displeasure. This vacillation may confuse and tire us, but we accept these alternating emotional inner states as normal.

This is one way of understanding what Jesus ran into when He returned to His hometown. When Jesus said things that pleased the Nazarenes, He was praised. What they like is the idea that the promises of the messianic age will be theirs. This supports and blesses their self-centered focus. It also validates the proverbial wisdom they have used to assure themselves of divine favor. They are God's people. The Messiah will come to them and, naturally, be for them. The doctor's cure begins at home. When they interpret Jesus' speech in this way, 'gracious words' are coming from His mouth.

When Jesus says things that displease the Nazarenes, He is attacked. What triggers the displeasure is Jesus' words that suggest these blessings that they thought were theirs alone would also be given to the Gentiles, the foreigners, the ones we don't like. The depth at which this message was heard is hard to imagine. It touched on the emotional energy of racial hatred and survival. The Nazarenes exploded in rage and attempted murder. (Ibid, p. 34-35)

Third, it is not just the citizens of Nazareth that operate by the pleasure-displeasure principle. We all do. Watch how we vote. We sit on the pleasing-displeasing teeter-totter of our egos. We go up and we go down depending on whether we feel enhanced or threatened by what is happening. If we are personally doing well, then we don't want anything to change, even if we know there are others who desperately need help, and that that help could come about through changes in the system that wouldn't be as beneficial for us. NO WAY we say.

Everything that protects and promotes us creates pleasure and everything else is viewed neutrally or hostilely. If we think we are going to get a tax break, we like the politician. If we think our taxes will be raised, it's a bad politician. This is regardless of whether we can well afford to pay more taxes or not. If someone moves to make the tax code more favorable for those on the bottom of society, we're fearful that something will be taken away from us. But this dynamic is more easily seen in others than it is in ourselves. We see other people behind bars, but we look out from our own prisons without noticing the bars.

So inner attention – PRAYER -- is the way to be free from this mechanical pleasing-displeasing behavior. We must learn to become aware of the pleasure-displeasure program WHILE IT IS STILL RUNNING. We need to ask God what HE wants in a situation – not what is going to benefit us – for we are SUPPOSED to be servants of others, not trying to become the dominant ones.

This deeper awareness will allow us to modify the fierceness of our reactions and eventually to experience times when we break free of its hold. This is a long-term process, and never happens in us if we do not pray or do not pray with an open heart.

A quicker but more difficult way is to join the good no matter where it is happening. The good moves through life-serving people who cooperate with a more compassionate, inclusive and loving stance toward others, especially those who struggle with poverty, violence, addiction and homelessness. Every program serving the poor is forever in need of people willing to help, and it will change our minds and hearts about so many issues in our world.

When we stop grumbling about welfare queens or people gaming the system or getting a break on immigration then we will know that we have begun to take on more of the heart of the Beloved One. When we realize that we can be joyful whenever or wherever the good is happening to others, then we have begun to become more compassionate. We will rejoice that hungers are being filled, that folks are being housed and healed and welcomed – and we will be more like the Beloved One, more like Christ. Amen. (adapted from IBID., p 35-36)