

Thursday evening, I went to a reading of a speech by the 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglas. Douglas gave this speech on July 5, 1852. His speech was called “What to the slave is the 4th of July?” Frederick Douglas is often called a prophet of freedom so it is fitting that this reading was held at the Roger Williams National Memorial in Providence. Roger Williams was another prophet of freedom such that in 1965, Congress established this Memorial in honor of Roger William’s contribution to principles of freedom in the United States. Williams advocated religious freedom and toleration, ideas that are inscribed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We in Rhode Island can claim him as our own, but Williams started out as a minister in Massachusetts. He was not embraced by the Massachusetts community. The Salem authorities did not like William’s preaching. The Massachusetts General Court did not like his words either. They banished Roger Williams from Massachusetts and used this language to describe him: strong willed, obstinate, and rogue-headed. They found him “a man of diverse, new and dangerous opinions.”

In today’s Gospel, members of Jesus’ own community in his hometown of Nazareth have similar misgivings about a young man, their own Jesus, who is preaching in their synagogue. Jesus is having a really bad day in his hometown.

Up to this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has been traveling about outside of his hometown of Nazareth. You may remember last Sunday’s Gospel took place in Capernaum, where crowds pressed to see Jesus, the healer and prophet. Jesus was approached by a synagogue leader in Capernaum. The man, Jairus, came to Jesus with great faith that Jesus could heal his 12-year old daughter. Jesus raises Jairus’ child from the dead. In that same Gospel, the faith-filled woman with the hemorrhage walks up to Jesus, touches his robe and is immediately healed. Mark reports powerful acts of healing and powerfully faithful people in Capernaum.

But now, Jesus and his disciples are in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up and where his family lives. At first, the people are amazed by Jesus. But Mark shows us that the mood turns. The people, Jesus’ people, his kin and community get annoyed by this hometown young man preaching. Who does he think he is? And there is a hint of a slur in their murmuring - he is just a carpenter. In other words, in first-century Palestine, Jesus and his family did not have powerful social and economic status. Moreover, this hometown crowd speaks of Jesus condescendingly

as “son of Mary.” This is another slur. In first-century Palestine, the father’s name of lineage would be used when speaking about a son. In short, the people are rather offensively asking, “Who is this carpenter of unclear parentage, preaching as if he has God’s wisdom?” Quite the opposite of the amazed, faithful, and passionate crowd that embraced Jesus in Capernaum.

Mark tells us, without that belief in Nazareth, Jesus could do no deed of power. And the Gospel leaves us with a terribly poignant saying to ponder. In fact, this is the only saying by Jesus that we find in all four Gospels: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” [No honor for prophets in their hometown, among their kin, and in their house.]

Jesus is recognized as a prophet by strangers outside of Nazareth. Strangers that he immediately embraces as kin. “Daughter,” Jesus says to the woman with the hemorrhage, “Your faith has made you well.” Those who see Jesus only as the hometown carpenter, son of Mary, miss something essential about Jesus. Perhaps they think they already know everything about Jesus. He couldn’t possibly be something more than that. Perhaps the community had already marginalized Jesus’ family. It is clear from Mark’s telling, the believers gathered in that synagogue could not see Jesus as prophet or hear Jesus’ teaching. Were they blocked by their earlier impressions? Why could they not get past their preconceived ideas about Jesus and his family? What closed them off from opening their hearts and minds to Jesus’ gifts? We can only imagine.

There is a freedom theme to ponder here in this Gospel. We celebrated July 4th on Wednesday. We all have a sense of what freedom means to us living in the United States and what the 4th of July means to us. Maybe you have family who served or serve in the military. Maybe you also will mark July 26th, as another day in which to ponder freedom – Liberian Independence Day.

The freedom theme is this: Our assumptions or our preconceived notions can separate us from others, limiting our freedom to become who God calls us to be. They can limit our freedom to see God’s image and calling in another. Our assumptions about people can blind us, just like the people in Jesus’ own hometown were blinded to Jesus’ prophetic identity.

Maybe this Gospel is giving us some freedom. Freedom to try out new ways of seeing others. Freedom to reflect on what keeps us from seeing the image of God in those on whom we have already imposed our own version of who they are, and who they should be. Maybe we can understand this Gospel as a beckoning to listen more openly to those in our “hometowns.”

The fact that this saying is the only saying by Jesus that is found in all four Gospels speaks, I think, to how universally hard it is to actually see and listen to the person in our midst. Especially if that person says something new and maybe even “dangerous” sounding.

This week I came across readings that speak to the difficulty of getting past assumptions that limit how we see others. One theologian - John Philip Newell - is actually in Rhode Island this weekend giving retreats at two different Episcopal churches (*Sounds of the Eternal, A Celtic Psalter*, 2002). The other theologian is the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Both theologians encourage us Christians to open ourselves to the “mystery” within each person. A mystery that comes from that part of ourselves created in the image and likeness of God. Archbishop Williams writes: “I stand before holy ground when I encounter another person.” “Every person is related to God, before they are related to anyone else... the reverence I owe to every human person is connected to the reverence I owe to God. This means that whenever I face another human being, I face a mystery” (*Being Disciples – The Essentials of Christian Life*, 2016).

We draw hope from prophetic witnesses such as Frederick Douglas and from Roger Williams, a prophet who was without honor in his hometown. It is Jesus, prophet of freedom who experienced such rejection and who leads us into the holy ground of encountering another beyond all names and assumptions. In Christ, we can witness the presence of Christ, the mystery in each other. In Christ, drawing on the words of the 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart “the soul is naked of all things that bear names.”