

Faithful, unimportant work (Luke 4:21-30)

Jesus refuses at every turn to do something important, the things his neighbors thought he should do when he grew up.

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Like all great theological conversations, this one took place in the car. My son, about four years old, asked me, “Mama, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

It was a question he was used to hearing as a preschooler, and he tempered his answers to his audience. He wanted to be a fireman when he went to the station down the block, a gardener when the maintenance crew came by, a basketball player as we passed the teens at the park. I was used to hearing this question too, although my answer didn’t change as often as his. Over the preceding years I had explained to countless relatives, committees, and bishops that I really wanted to be ordained.

Driving down the road that day a few years into my first call, I answered my son: “When I grow up I think I’ll still be a pastor.”

From the backseat came an exasperated sigh. “No Mom, I meant, What *important* job do you want?” He added helpfully, “Something like a dog washer. Or a milkshake maker.”

Jesus was right. No prophet is accepted in his own hometown. Or even in her own car.

Jesus started off well enough in last Sunday's reading, promising to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy by restoring sight to the blind, releasing the captive, proclaiming the year of God's favor, and all the rest. At first the people speak well of him, but then Jesus refuses to temper his answers to their expectations. Instead he reminds his neighbors of all the mighty deeds God has done in all the wrong places on behalf of all the wrong people. A foreign widow was the only one aided during a famine. An enemy commander was the only leper healed during a time of occupation and war. And this is really just the tip of the iceberg.

Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is his ministry in miniature. His job will be misunderstood, downplayed, and disrespected throughout Luke's Gospel. Jesus is born to an unwed mother and laid in a lowly manger. He wanders around the rural backwater of Galilee. His followers include unlettered fisherman, hungry peasants, and the occasional prostitute or tax collector. His miracles are just as likely to occur on the wrong side of the tracks as the right. He's always insulting the very scribes and Pharisees that could help his prospects. It's no wonder that Jesus attracts the attention of Herod and the Romans, dying a lonely and ignominious death on a cross. Even the people of Nazareth want to throw him off a cliff by the end of his sermon this Sabbath day.

Jesus simply refuses at every turn to do something important, the things his neighbors thought the son of Joseph should do when he grew up.

For the firefighter, the gardener, the basketball player, and the pastor, what does this mean?

My tradition holds that we are part of the priesthood of all believers, that whether or not we are ordained we are called to do important, godly work. Martin Luther praises the vocations of princes as well as shoemakers, tailors as well as maids, insisting that all serve God when they help and serve their neighbor. Putting out fires, planting trees, and playing ball can glorify God, even if the work we do benefits the unworthy or the enemy. Jesus is not afraid to thwart expectations to do the work of the kingdom.

Preschoolers and people of Nazareth may value occupations differently, but Jesus' bold speech and unconventional career make a way for preacher, dog washer, and all. My pastoral mentor worked miracles in the confirmation class through the medium of ice cream; perhaps when I grow up I will be a godly milkshake maker, too. Jesus followers are not guaranteed acceptance. Instead we are invited to join

Jesus beyond our boundaries, fulfilling the scriptures in all sorts of surprising and important ways.