

Have you ever felt rage? I'm not talking about everyday run-of-the-mill anger. I'm talking about that emotion that seems to take over every cell in your body, it makes your heart pound, your blood race, and your brain seem to explode so that you have very little control over your thoughts, words, or actions. It's sort of like passion, only worse, because rage can be violent and destructive for no reason at all.

Is there anything that can stir such an emotion in you? Perhaps acts of injustice against vulnerable people? Or environmental injustice that destroys species or places of beauty? Maybe when you see someone hurt a person as a way to get back at someone else who hurt them. Sadly, there's lots of brokenness in the world, lots of hurting and broken hearts and when a person finds themselves confronted with such brokenness and it can make them feel sad and frightened and powerless all at the same time, sometimes that combination can result in the emotion called rage. The emotion itself can show us that something deeply important is being challenged or hurt, but because of its intensity, rage can cause great damage and destruction that lasts long after the emotion itself has subsided.

Yet rage is part of life, something we can't ever really get away from, even when we read the Gospel lesson for today. There it is, in the middle of a place as sacred as a synagogue, and it seems to have appeared out of nowhere. At first, it seemed all was going well for Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth on the Sabbath. There he was in the synagogue he grew up in, reading from the scroll of Isaiah and sitting in a place of authority. And we heard everyone in the synagogue not only appeared to be proud of him, they were amazed at his words and the grace those words embodied. Then Jesus said some stuff that doesn't seem to be too offensive, at least to our modern ears, challenging maybe, but surely not the stuff that spawns rage. But that is what happened, we heard all the people were full of rage – the word in the original Greek language this Gospel was written in can be translated “fiery wrath”. That's pretty intense. The people of the synagogue let the intense emotion take over, they were out of control and ran Jesus out of the synagogue, out of the village and we heard they attempted to kill him – to destroy him by throwing him off a cliff and be rid of him forever. So, what happened in those few words to cause such a change for the people in Jesus' hometown synagogue?

That has been the question that has engaged scholars and commentators for hundreds if not thousands of years. And while it might be difficult for us to understand today, the suggested answers seem to be found in the stories of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible.

The trouble seemed to start when the people in the synagogue said something about Jesus being Joseph's son. Which can take us down a lot of pathways, as there are some who worry this phrase is a direct challenge to Jesus' divinity. Others say this is not so much a challenge to a theological belief or doctrine as it is a statement tying Jesus to Nazareth. Sort of like being a graduate of a high school, college or university can be a tie to that institution and place. People often do feel loyalty to their alma matters, in fact the finance departments of those institutions are often counting on such loyalty. By saying Jesus was Joseph's son the people of Nazareth might have been saying, this is one of theirs, and just like them, Nazareth was Jesus' fatherland, and they, like colleges and universities, may have been counting on some loyalty that would help their small village.

Such a possibility certainly makes sense when we see how Jesus replied to the comment about being Joseph's son, when he quoted a proverb and then said he assumed they wanted him to do some of the same miracles he did in a different town. You see, Jesus may have been saying his presence among them was not an opportunity to build a bigger synagogue that would welcome people from all over, bringing their financial resources with them that would certainly do some good to the local economy, so they could see and meet the famous miracle worker and preacher. And by even thinking of this possibility the people in the synagogue that day failed to see what and who really was among them: the Messiah, the Son of God who came to bring freedom from oppression so that they all could be free to be closer to God and live the dream God has for bringing healing and hope for all people into the brokenness of this world.

But the people of Nazareth, perhaps, were not quite so eager to be free from their understanding and knowledge of the past and the promises of prophets that the Messiah was going to be someone special just for them: for God's chosen people. The Messiah was going to bring both reward and punishment: reward to God's people and punishment to everyone else.

Jesus challenged this conception by speaking of stories of prophets that showed there was more to what the people in the synagogue thought they knew. The story of the prophet Elijah who was rejected by his hometown, and then sent by God to a Gentile town where God instructed Elijah to help a widow and her son, rescuing them from starvation during a famine. Jesus also mentioned the time the prophet Elisha healed a powerful Gentile military leader. These stories show a God who is a God of love for all people, not just some people. These prophets of the Old Testament did not

fit the stereotype of being anti-Gentile. Instead, they showed they were willing to follow God wherever God called them and to use their abilities to help whomever God asked them to help.

It is quite possible that the people in Jesus' hometown were trying to put and keep Jesus in his place, the place they thought he should occupy. He should be what they wanted him to be where they wanted him. Perhaps they thought he owed it to them. Perhaps they thought that is how the scriptures were supposed to be understood. Perhaps they thought they knew what was best for the man who grew up among them, and what was best for Jesus was best for them.

Such mindsets are not so very ancient. They can be found in churches and homes in our modern 21st century in villages and towns and cities all over the world. People who mean well, but who fail to see the immenseness of God's love in Jesus because they cannot let go of the love that is for them and thus assume that means Jesus wants what they want, because he loves them. When someone says things like "my God" or "my Jesus", that is often a clue that they are putting their own agendas, their own priorities, and their own modern and personal values onto God and Jesus so that there is little Gospel of good news or great joy in what they have to say, but a lot of personal opinion. That's part of being human. Even Albert Schweitzer said that one had to be careful when looking for the historical Jesus because such a search usually resulted in finding a Jesus that ends up being a reflection of ourselves instead of an embodiment of the love of God in our midst. Sometimes one of the biggest challenges of being a Christian is simply letting go of our assumptions and expectations and letting God be God and Jesus be Jesus.

When confronted with the reality that Jesus isn't what they thought he should be, that is when the rage blossomed in the people in the synagogue. But here is some good news: Jesus won't stay put. Jesus will always be Jesus. Jesus is much too big and too wild in the way the Holy Spirit is big and wild to stay in the place we want to regulate him to. Jesus didn't stay in Nazareth. He didn't stay in one place for very long when he was preaching and healing and teaching. And just when people thought they had finally put Jesus in a place where he couldn't leave, he didn't stay put there either. Not even a tomb could keep Jesus down. You see, Jesus' place is with all people and he really did come to bring freedom to all people. The trouble is, we sometimes fail to see what kind of freedom.

It's the kind of freedom in today's beautiful reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It's easy to miss this freedom because we really love the first part of this reading, which is all about love. Paul says we can have everything our hearts desire: spiritual gifts, knowledge, faith, even the courage to sacrifice for our faith; but Paul also says all this is worthless without love. Why? Not because of all the good qualities of

love, but because all those things: spiritual gifts and abilities, prophecies, even knowledge will all end. They are not the stuff of forever. But love, that is different. Even though this reading is often featured at lots of weddings, the love Paul is talking about here isn't just romantic love. He is talking about the Love of God embodied in Jesus. The love that somehow managed to walk through that raging crowd in Nazareth, the Love that freed the oppressed by restoring them to health, and the love that burst out of the tomb and frees us from sin. That Love is the only thing that can endure the changes that bring about the loss of what we thought we knew, what we thought we had, what we thought we could do, what we thought was certain, the way things have always been. God's love is the only thing strong enough to nurture us so that we can have the courage to look beyond what we thought we knew and see what is, or at least what is now. This is the Love that can look into the brokenness of the world and see the pain and the suffering and offer forgiveness and healing and hope. This is the Love that says endings are sad and painful, and there is life on the other side of pain. Life anyone of us can experience if we walk through the pain, just like Jesus did, learning how to let it become the part of our life where empathy and wisdom can reside. Wisdom that has learned to recognize emotions like rage for what they are: nothing but noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

There may still be plenty of things that can cause us to feel emotions like rage, the world is still broken and hurting. And sometimes we can feel stuck and powerless in those broken places. But the good news is there is God's life-giving love that can help us move through them to the other side, because Jesus has. And as followers of Jesus, we can follow that trail of love, it's a journey by which we might even discover the joyful delight in the life that springs from such love for all people and all places.