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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 4:21-30

Jesus' rejection at Nazareth is, perhaps, a reminder that doing what is good, beautiful, true, and just is no path to popularity. From opinion polls to approval ratings and from television viewing to Nielsen rankings, we are continually reminded nowadays that popularity means everything. Popularity means more than actual quality, and often, when someone or something is popular, that person or thing isn't necessarily good.

One relative of mine whom I'm particularly proud to claim is my Dad's first cousin, the distinguished physicist and Manhattan Project veteran, Dr. Carl Bailey. I'm led to believe that he probably submitted one of the most heavily redacted doctoral dissertations in the history of the University of Minnesota, due to the amount of subject matter in it that was classified. By the time I was a student at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, he was Professor Emeritus of Physics there, and I liked to go bend his ear whenever I could. I admired him for his thoughtfulness and insight, and was probably a bit star-struck because he was the closest thing my Dad's side of the family had to a celebrity!

In 2001, Concordia College finally honored him with the Alumni Achievement Award (a bit overdue, in my opinion, in case you can't tell). In his acceptance speech, he emphasized that, in whatever

we do, we must ensure that it is good. Now, to Dr. Bailey's remarks, one could respond "Duh!" But then, when one considers all the other adjectives that could be used to describe a persons output, his words couldn't be more profound.

Thus, anything we do could be popular. It could be functional. It could be expedient. It could be successful. But none of these qualities would necessarily make it good. For something to be good, it needs integrity, truth, beauty, and moral soundness. This is why it is so distressing to see the unconscious association of popularity with goodness. Everyone is guilty of this in one way or another, though, especially when it comes to how we feel about a person.

But just because he or she is popular doesn't mean he or she is good.

So, the best we can hope is for the popular person to be a good person. Think, in particular, of people in positions of management, or of people in public office -- their effectiveness depends partly on popularity. However, we must not confuse popularity with respect. We could go so far as to say that it is necessary for the respected person to be a good person, as indicated by the person's courage, ability to make difficult decisions, and example of integrity in all of his or her doings.

If we evaluated people on those criteria, perhaps popularity wouldn't matter as much!

In the grander scheme of things, it is helpful to have some background in philosophy to understand better what it means for someone or something to be good. Please allow me at this time to offer a one-minute tour through the thought of the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato is famous for putting forth the idea that goodness, beauty, truth, justice, and so on came from forms that man can access through philosophical contemplation. In other words, the thinkers of the world can grasp abstract concepts that may be readily identifiable but difficult to describe. For example, how do you describe goodness? How do you describe beauty? How do you describe truth? How do you describe justice?

More difficult yet is describing these things apart from popular examples...

As Christians, we look to God as the ultimate Good, and we could say that Plato's "forms" belong to God. Indeed, God is goodness, beauty, truth, and justice, or, more familiarly, God is love. And also as Christians, we regard God's Son, Jesus Christ, as bearing all of God's attributes in human form; thus, when we are looking for the good, we can look to Christ.

But a quick look at today's Gospel text reveals one of many situations in which people fail to realize the good that's before their very eyes. Even though there were no rails at the time, we can still say that Jesus was ran out of town on one...metaphorically, at least! By suggesting that, like Elijah and Elisha, his ministry will be to persons other than those in the audience, he essen-

tially provides that audience with the rope to hang him on. And if you back up a bit, you'll notice that he enters Nazareth with some fame already, even getting an opportunity to do the popular thing.

He knows they want something they won't get, going so far as to quote what may have been their own words: "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum" (Luke 4:23c). He was anticipating requests from the crowd for awesome and mind-blowing deeds. But he won't give them any.

Instead of doing what is popular, he does what is good.

Luke, chapter 4 recalls the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and from reading this chapter, we might get the impression that his ministry is off to an awful start! But, remembering again that Jesus sought what was good so much more than he sought popularity, we can begin to see what he was up to. Here was someone who took every expectation placed upon him and turned it around one hundred and eighty degrees. There would be no conquering nations on a white stallion for him; instead, he offered himself as a humble servant and suffered an apparent defeat on the cross. Doing what is good, in this case, meant giving people what they needed instead of what they wanted. And to have the principle and the backbone to do that -- in spite of the consequences -- can only mean that Jesus is the ultimate Good...just like his heavenly Father.

Back in the Seventies, the musical Jesus Christ Superstar presented Jesus (unconventionally) as a victim of his own popularity. Drawing from contemporary notions of celebrity, Jesus comes across as a world-weary "superstar" who can't seem to get any peace. We know that Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice took great creative liberties in presenting the Jesus story, so we shouldn't be surprised by its inaccuracies. But it's still worth reiterating that Jesus attracted notoriety more than celebrity, and most of all, popularity would be the last thing he'd seek.

You can't seek the Kingdom and popularity at the same time!

Virtually all of us know that it's harder to do what is good than to do what is popular. And many of us have surely faced the consequences of making unpopular decisions. But in order for us to live lives of integrity, it is imperative that we ask ourselves Dr. Bailey's question: "Is it good?" Is it good in the way Plato would think of good? Is it good in a way that reflects God's ultimate Good? Is it sound, true, beautiful, and moral? If we ask only if people will like us or hate us, we weasel our way out as cowards, and humanity doesn't need any more of those!

And should we ever find ourselves run out of town on a rail, we'll at least know that we're not the first ones. In many ways, Jesus broke that barrier for us, and in a remarkable act of sneakiness, he prevailed. Surely, the One who died for our sins can live with us and in us through unpopular decisions, tough times, bad weather, and even stupid choices. Humanity needs courage and leader-

ship more than popularity. This is all the more urgent in an age in which the Real Housewives are apparently more important than one's own neighbor.

People who are popular aren't always good. Things that are popular aren't always good. Decisions that are popular aren't always good. You get the point.

Fortunately, we have a Lord who takes all the world's junk upon himself and gives us a glimpse of the ultimate Good in his love and forgiveness. Remember that it was his unpopularity that led him to the cross...and it was his unpopularity that opened to us the doors of eternal life. No one will take that away from us, even when we're being run out of town on a rail.

And that, dear friends in Christ, is what frees us to ask before we do anything, "Is it good?"

Amen.