

“Who Do You Think You Are?”

Jennifer Riddle

From the dawn of human civilization, we have organized society into different strata. Like divisions of layers of rock, we have divided ourselves up based on levels of skill, outward appearance, and fitness to survive. Over time, this propensity to stratify has created hierarchies which label individuals as powerful...or not.

We are all affected by this tendency today. Even in our country’s founding documents’ declaration that all “men” are created equal, we see the inequality. Whether by age, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, skin color, socioeconomic status, or educational attainment, we are divided and stratified. Many unconsciously make decisions about the value and authority of others based on these categories.

When we meet Jesus in today’s passage, he has spent significant time traveling the countryside, gathering large crowds, and telling stories in parables. He’s beginning to go viral, with news of his teaching spreading far and wide. Jesus has just returned to his hometown when he’s immediately met with resistance. He’s teaching in the synagogue when the folks gathered there begin to question his authority. Jesus is encountering something that many of us have experienced when returning home.

If you’ve moved away from your hometown and return occasionally to see family and friends, you often encounter expectations that you will be who you always were. And sometimes you don’t notice the change yourself until you’re asked to play a role that no longer fits. Those expectations can cause friction and limit the deepening of relationships with those who only know a previous version of ourselves. Unless work is done to welcome growth and change, we will remain versions of ourselves long past, and folks who knew us “when” might miss out on insights and levels of intimacy not yet experienced.

The story that seemed to define Jesus to his hometown was his relationships and the status of his family members. The folks in Nazareth struggled to see the carpenter’s son as anything more than his family’s vocation. He had no right to go beyond his expected station in life. They couldn’t muster the imagination to believe that Jesus was more than his social location, that he carried wisdom beyond understanding despite his humble origins. It was almost as if the folks from Jesus’ hometown grew scales over their eyes and hearts, creating an inability to understand the depth of his prophetic voice. Who does this guy think he is, telling us these things? Where does he get his authority? Who authorized him to speak this way?

Greta Thunberg was a 15-year-old student in Sweden when she began the school strikes that were later labeled “Fridays for Future.” It was that same year when she addressed the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Many then and now wonder how Greta earned the right to speak about, as she puts it, “the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced.” Greta is looked down

upon because of her age, lack of education, and her diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Despite the many who question her, her passion about the existential crisis of climate change is making a difference to those who choose to listen. I wonder who else society disregards that we ought to listen to?

I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian congregation, where women's voices were subordinate to men. Though women made up the lion's share of active and vital church leadership, women could not be pastors, elders, or deacons. The highest leadership role a woman could have was Sunday School superintendent. When our independent church was looking for a pastor during my high school years, those on the search committee who had teens were asked to invite their children to join the committee. It was an opportunity for us to learn how committees operated and have a nominal voice in selecting the new pastor.

My family were thoroughgoing egalitarians, and I was taught that women could do anything. I was told that any career field was open to me. It was on this committee that I learned that that wasn't true, at least in the eyes of my church.

As we received resumes for the senior pastor's position, we looked them over as a committee. We sorted them by education and affiliation, clearing away the candidates who didn't align to the values of the congregation. The resumes of a few women somehow made it to our conference table. Those weren't even passed around the room for review. They were simply put to the side.

I never said anything in that room of adults and teens, but this practice secretly rankled me. My father was on the committee with me, and I asked him about it. He was deferential to my question, but quickly compartmentalized the practice, saying only that this church doesn't allow women to preach, so they can't be a pastor here. I don't know if he realized how different that message was than the one he and my mom had been instilling in me at home.

In many ways I'm thankful that I didn't receive my call to ministry until much later. I think my search committee experience would have crushed any nascent desire for vocational ministry. But it did create a lot of baggage that I've had to overcome to follow God's call in my late twenties. In addition to some saying, "who do you think you are?" I added my own inner voice to that mix. It's taken a significant amount of study, assurance from mentors, and experience of God's gifting in my life to overcome that voice. Though I will probably never stop hearing the message from patriarchal systems that my call is of less value than a man's, I can look to Jesus' response when his value was diminished.

I love how Dr. Gafney translated the beginning of verse 57 here: "And they were offended over him." Listening to this, I can imagine the folks who watched Jesus grow up proverbially clutching their pearls. I can envision my aunt and uncle doing the same over my preaching here today. Jesus goes on to call out the pearl clutchers, recalling that the prophets were also dishonored in their hometowns and even by their families. This isn't a new phenomenon, and he isn't

surprised. I am no longer surprised by the patriarchy and meritocracy but, like Jesus, I am disappointed.

The direct consequence of the unbelief of the people in Jesus' hometown was a lack of what Gafney terms as "deeds of power." Jesus didn't work any miracles there. He didn't heal anyone or feed multitudes. Despite Jesus' inherent gifts and graces, the outpouring of love he came to provide to all was suppressed. In a similar fashion, when a marginalized voice shares their experience with an audience that rejects them, a valuable opportunity to learn is lost. We lose out on the opportunity to experience abundant blessing in ways that might just blow the lids off our paradigms. By disregarding their voice, we miss out on something that God's abundant community ought to include. We settle for something less than God's desire for our diverse world.

When we listen to voices on the margins of our society, we are doing the work that Jesus came to do. He showed up to hang out with the marginalized, to listen to them, to bring their voices to the center of the conversation. When he was able to do that, amazing things happened. People were healed and fed. Systems of power and control were turned on their heads. When we truly listen, it changes us, so we can work together to make change in the world.

I ask us all today to ponder the voices that we reject. What marginalized person have you heard that you've reacted to by clutching your pearls? Who has spoken and your gut reaction was "who do you think you are?" Take some time to ponder that reaction. What about them do you want to reject? Then, if it's possible, try listening again. You may just discover something in what they say that will open entire worlds of possibility in you and for our whole world.

I think those of us who've been marginalized in some way can take a cue from Jesus here as well. He never stuck around to convince his detractors that he was valuable, and that his message was important. He didn't waste his time on those who would never listen. That's why I eventually left the overtly patriarchal faith system I grew up in. I was done screaming into a hurricane, only to be knocked down. It's a small miracle that I was able to retain my faith in the process. Fortunately, the faith that was borne of that struggle is much broader and more open than I ever could have conceived of around that search committee conference table.

Jesus gives us the right to walk away from folks that won't listen because of who we are because he did it. You don't need to explain your worth to those who don't believe you have any authority to speak. By whatever authority I have from this pulpit today, I want you to hear this—you are worthy. You are gifted. What you have to say is important. So don't waste your time trying to convince folks who will never listen to you. Instead, go forth and be blessed. Find your people and create flourishing there with all the fullness of life you have to offer.

And may we all, both privileged and marginalized together, remember that our call as Christ followers is to welcome the last and least to the best seat at the table. In all your conversations and interactions this week, may you offer seats to those on the sidelines of our society, that we may all be blessed by their witness. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. Share a story of a time you felt marginalized.
2. Discuss Matthew 13:58. Do you think Jesus didn't do miracles in his hometown to punish the people for their unbelief or he simply didn't want to waste his time?
3. How can we center the voices of those in the margins of our society?