

Immigration Reform and the Challenges of Generosity (Luke 4:22-30)

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Immigration Reform and the Challenges of Generosity (Luke 4:22-30)

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Charity doesn't leave us unchanged, which is just one reason why it's hard to make ourselves do it.

To be more specific: when we extend generosity and justice to others, it alters our relationship to them. Especially when those "others" are foreign to us. Hospitality has ways of making the people who receive it come inside and stick around, whether we really want them to or not.

We see this on display in [Luke 4:22-30](#), which tells the second half of a story about Jesus' statements to a group assembled in his hometown synagogue, in Nazareth.

The story began, in [Luke 4:16-21](#), with Jesus unveiling his mission statement: he says he intends to be God's instrument for releasing people from oppression of all kinds -- spiritual, economic, political, physical, and social. This is the first narrated episode of Jesus' public ministry in Luke's Gospel, and so it lays a foundation for everything that follows. Summoning from ancient Israel's scriptures grand themes about God-given justice and abundance, Jesus identifies himself as one determined to play a part in God's intentions to free humanity from its sufferings.

A Sudden Turn of Events

As the story moves into its second half, the crowd receives Jesus' "inaugural address" as very good news, for everyone appears happy to hear it.

But then comes a jarring transition, and the episode turns combative.

Just a few breaths after uttering such compassionate words, Jesus picks a fight where it seems none is waiting for him. He accuses his hometown community of gearing up to oppose him; or he predicts they will soon demand favoritism or prominence from him once he brings his ministry to other communities. Then, to pile on, he cites precedents for the idea of a God whose mercy refuses to remain bounded, recalling times when two of Israel's greatest prophets brought God's restoration also to outsiders -- to [a Phoenician family](#) and [a Syrian military commander](#).

Charity might begin at home for Jesus, since his promises surely extend to the people of familiar Nazareth. But his charity won't remain limited to that place. The blessings of God face outward, always intent to

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benefit “those people” as much as “us,” no matter how we intend to draw those dividing lines.

Just as Jesus suddenly transitioned into a provocateur, the crowd reacts with inexplicable aggression. Their rage and dismay would be comical for its excess (think my beloved 49ers’ coach [Jim Harbaugh arguing with referees](#)) were it not so violent. How should we understand what fuels their sudden anger?

Jesus’ words to the crowd-turned-mob indicate they resist the notion that others will receive blessings equal to those promised to them. Of course, the antagonistic mob does not comprise every person who resides in Nazareth. Furthermore, and to stand against many longstanding misinterpretations of this passage, the mob does not represent “Israel” or “Judaism” as a collective whole. Maybe their resistance teaches readers something about ourselves; the crowd is not unrecognizably selfish. Why then might they oppose the prospect of Jesus’ improving the lives of outsiders who also suffer hardship?

Maybe the reason is because benevolence isn’t as pleasant as we like to think. Benevolence shown to me is great. Benevolence shown to you may have difficult consequences for me, especially if it unites us or leaves you with new advantages. Perhaps Jesus’ intentions to improve people’s lives far beyond Nazareth’s boundaries mean that his friends and neighbors will lose a sense of privilege in connection to their celebrity native son. What if too many “outsiders” get embraced by this “kingdom of God” he’s announcing? If others are really *included*, made to share in the same freedoms, things could really change. If Jesus’ charity -- widespread charity -- means this crowd has to share a new “normal”, the results could easily appear too costly for Nazareth.

The crowd isn’t entirely unusual if it is trying to protect its advantages. Their actions lead me to wonder: when does the prospect of freedom and justice extended to others endanger my own privileges and power?

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