

- My first appointment after seminary was in a large church, in a small town, in a state adjacent to this one. Borrowing from Paul, I had the job that Paul might have classified as the less respectable, or inferior, member of the staff, with apologies to Albert Moseley, I was the Associate Minister. Now, there are varieties of Associate Ministers. There are associates in places like Duke Chapel, who participate in great liturgical festivities, and there are associates in small towns who participate in liturgical festivities when the senior minister is on vacation. Well, my situation wasn't quite that bad. The Senior Minister I was paired up with actually listened to my opinions on a regular basis. And one year, as we were preparing for Lent, I suggested we invite the sons of the church back to preach for us during each of our six midweek Lenten services. There were no daughters, of course. And by using ourselves as bookends on Ash Wednesday and then during Holy Week, Monday, Thursday, we had just enough people from that congregation still living, mind you, who had chosen the ministry as a career that we could fill out the middle weeks of the Lenten season. I have never heard Luke 4:24 quoted in so many consecutive worship services as I did during that particular Lent. My own home church hasn't invited me back to preach in over five years, and I'm convinced it's because they don't want to hear me stand in the pulpit and say, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. That's like a public service announcement for a bad sermon. We're telling the congregation up front, you are not going to like this sermon. But we try to make it their fault. If I hadn't grown up here, why of course you'd like it, but since I did, you won't. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our home congregations are the most forgiving of all when we come back to preach. They'll overlook a great deal that they would never let someone appointed by the mission get away with. They'll forgive our arrogance, our impudence, and our immaturity. And if we happen to stumble upon a particularly profound idea, why they'll talk about it for years, reminding everyone within earshot that I was her junior high basketball coach, or he used to deliver my paper. Even Jesus was accepted in his hometown, at least at first. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Who knew, Joseph's son, what a wonderful accomplishment for a community to help raise up a child, and have that child turn out all right. Have that child turn out just like us. Same customs, same values, same political allegiances, same haircut, haircut's crucial. Same opinions, same prejudices. We've done all right with Joseph's son, yes indeed, he's one of us. The spirit of the Lord is upon me, read Jesus. I taught his fifth grade Sunday school class, someone might whisper. Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, announced Jesus. Hey, he used to date my sister, did you know that? Everything has gone well up to this point. And then Jesus starts talking about all these foreigners. Sick foreigners, hungry foreigners, well we've got our own hungry people right here at home, and sickness, well, just take a look around. We've got physical ailments, emotional ailments, social ailments, mental ailments, and we're well on our way to political ailments. Who needs a Syrian to take care of? Even a righteous Syrian. Who needs another widow to feed along with her hungry child, even a deserving widow, even an innocent child, wasn't Joseph a Republican? What happened to this boy. The community invests so much in its children, you know. We rate our schools, we test our curriculum so they can receive the best possible education. We monitor our water, our air, our paint, to keep the children from being unduly poisoned by the poisons we're pouring into the environment. We introduce them to sports so they can learn about teamwork, we enroll them in dance, and music, and art to expose them to the cultural

excellence, we raise them to envision a world without limits, where they can be whatever they want to be. Especially doctors, and lawyers, and CEOs. We send them to colleges that always rate among the top ten in US News and World Report because, because we love them. We want what's best for them. We want them to be happy because we love them. Parents and communities take great pride in their children, not just because they want to have bragging rights. When the plaque goes up at the entrance to town announcing that as the birthplace of Jimmy Carter, or John Glenn, or Babe Didrikson Zaharias, you all know who that is, right? When that sign goes up with her name on it, or anyone's name who could put that town on the map, there's more at stake here than look at us, we're famous now. At a deeper level, the town is saying, look who we produced. Look what we're capable of when we're at our very best. And so it is incumbent upon the children to do their very best, to become president, to fly to the moon, to win Olympic gold medals. We want to lob them right into greatness, and right into happiness. Jesus, never one to wait for others to bring it up, introduces the topic of his life's work, before anyone has even asked the question. He mentions Capernaum, because they all know he's been there and in a masterful defense move, Jesus quotes for the home team a few extra verses of scripture than just the assigned lection from Isaiah. He recounts for them two stories about God's saving activity among non-Jewish people. First, the story of Elijah feeding the widow and her son at Zarephath, and then the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian. Before anyone can even ask, what? Jesus has in effect said, I told you so. When the people of Nazareth quoted that proverb, doctor, cure yourself, they meant stay here and take care of your family and friends. The people who raised you, the people who want what's best for you, and when Jesus referenced that proverb, he knew that's what they meant. He's from around there, remember. He's also, at that very moment, doing what the proverb demands. He's reading scripture in his home synagogue, he's proclaiming the word of God for his family and friends, he's offering them a cure, or trying to. But part of his proclamation includes the observation, you just don't get it do you. Their own faith tradition illustrated time and time again how God's love has no geographical boundaries, God's love shows no ethnic favoritism, God's love creates no age limits. Jesus is only telling the home crowd what they already know. He's only repeating what he learned growing up in that synagogue with them, week after week after week. They taught Jesus about Naaman. They taught Jesus about the Zarephath widow, and Jesus went to Capernaum. When Hurricane Hugo slammed into South Carolina 11 years ago, I was living 200 miles inland doing that associate thing that I mentioned earlier, but our community still received hurricane force winds. We had trees blocking the roads, weeks without power, basements filled with water, that usual post hurricane havoc. But within the week, I had left that town and headed off to Charleston where the eye of the storm had passed over, headed to Charleston with a van load of food, a pocket full of cash, and a chainsaw. A news reporter saw the church van with its hometown emblazoned on the side, and he ran over with his cameraman in tow to ask me, what are you doing here? Didn't you all have it pretty bad up your way, too? Cameras are rolling, a small crowd is beginning to gather, and I, rising to the occasion, pounded on the Bible. Didn't Jesus offer salvation to Capernaum even before all of Nazareth was saved, I asked. Didn't Paul take the gospel to the Gentiles even before all of Israel believed? Oh, the crowd murmured. The truth was, my best friend lived in Charleston, and I wanted to be down there helping her. I was tired of mopping out basements in the upstate of South Carolina. And somehow, I don't think that confession would have made the evening news. But do you see how we must always validate our desire? Not to stay home and do the work that needs to be done here. When the Duke Wesley Fellowship sends international mission teams to Jamaica or to Palestine, the question is always asked, couldn't you use that money more effectively right here at home? Why, look how

much it cost to buy the plane tickets for 15 students from here to Palestine. Well, it cost about \$15,000 I guess. Maybe it cost more. And then you heap on top of that, building supplies, food, and lodging, a cash layout begins to go even higher, and when it's all said and done, why, we have money left over. Money left over to spend here at home, or perhaps to save for next year's trip. Money is not the real issue. The issue is why are you helping those people instead of helping these people? It's as if good news for the poor has to mean Or release for the captives has to mean captivity for the oppressors. Why can't we all be rich and free? Is there some limit on God's grace, pushing us into a scarcity of resources? Economic theory theology? Can we get that class at Fuqua? Probably not. But you know the old story about the pump in the desert. The pump sits there in the desert, with a bucket of water beside it, and a sign instructing people not to drink the water, but to pour it into the pump, priming the pump for an unlimited flow of water. Sooner or later, somebody's going to come along and drink that bucket of water, without pouring it into the pump, because he just can't believe there'd be a well out there in the middle of the desert. He doesn't want to go thirsty. Forget the people who will need water tomorrow. We just can't believe that God has enough grace to go around. We just can't believe that college students would take the time to tutor children right here in the Durham public schools, when they could be on a plane to Jamaica to tutor the children there instead. But you know what, they do both. Somehow, God manages to spread that grace around so that everybody has enough. Jesus goes to Capernaum because the people in Nazareth have done such a good job bringing him up. They taught him all about freedom for the oppressed, and good news for the poor. They taught him all about compassion for the outcast, and hospitality for the stranger. They taught him the story of God's saving grace. When the story, when the gospel interrupts our carefully orchestrated lives and the courses that we have plotted for our lovely children, why, it can be scary. It can be a bit threatening for us. Often our first response is self-recrimination. Where did we go wrong? Who forgot to tell him that we hate the Syrians? Who forgot to show her how to walk the path of the straight and narrow, without noticing all the derelicts lying in the ditches. And then we recall that, well maybe we did mention to our children something about compassion. We taught them that rule, you know, even before kindergarten, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Can't really blame the child for taking things a bit too seriously. Well, that's the problem with the gospel then, isn't it. Some people want to take it so literally. Maybe we should just sing a song now, a psalm about a fruitful harvest, because there's nothing very threatening about bringing in the sheaves, is there? Trouble is, it's too late now. Jesus has spoken the truth, right here at home. Right in the midst of his family and friends, we are those people. It was a good sermon. It was faithful to the text, it was an exegetically sound, and creative in its approach to the material, all those things they look for across the quad, in a preaching class. When you hear a sermon that good, you only have two choices. Either you agree with the preacher, or you kill the preacher. In Nazareth, they opted to kill the preacher. They were unsuccessful, on this attempt. But given our familiarity with the rest of the story we know it's just a matter of time. In the meantime, we learn that the power of Jesus is beyond our control. Ignoring him won't change the message. Killing him won't stop God's grace. Following him, however, makes all the difference in the world. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.