

In another time and place, I heard a woman rage against a friend. Both women wanted the same thing, to adopt a child. The friend of the woman telling the story was able to adopt with less aggravation, less work, less expense, and in considerably less time—two years less. The reason: privileged access. She was related to someone on the inside.

To deliver your first sermon to your home congregation is a privilege for both the preacher and the congregation. Jesus reads a familiar text from the prophet Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives. When he finishes reading, Jesus declares “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That is it, the whole sermon, according to Luke.

The congregation warmly, enthusiastically responds, perhaps because it is the shortest sermon they’ve ever heard. The local rabbi is eloquent and loquacious. Heads nod approval as Jesus’ neighbors take pride in this hometown boy made good.

As they recover from the shock of such a short sermon, a light dawns in the mind of one pensive congregant: “If Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in our hearing, why has nothing happened here?”

The postscript to the sermon gets Jesus in trouble with *his* neighbors. Countless widows in Israel in the time of Elijah went hungry, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except a widow in a coastal town in Lebanon. Many lepers roamed the hills of Israel during the time of Elisha, yet not one of them was cleansed. An enemy combatant, a military commander from Syria was the only one healed.

Adulation turns to rage. Jesus’ neighbors are no longer singing, “Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice.”

Lost people, outsiders, arouse God’s particular tenderness, says Jesus. People whose bodies and minds don’t work properly. People who one way or another fall foul of the purity rules, whether it’s their own doing or not. People who are not people like us, whoever “we” happen to be; people who are not the right kind of people, however that is defined.

In theory Jesus has come to help the lost sheep of Israel—that’s what he says—but in practice, over and over again, he gives his whole attention to whoever he meets, including a multitude of foreigners and members of the occupying army. The lack of limit in what he asks of people, the limitlessness of what he wants for people, washes away the differences between insiders and outsiders.

How can an unlimited love be applied in a world of limits? To begin with, as Jesus goes about the province, he seems to be trying to do it physically. What do you want me to do for you, he asks the people with whom he speaks, and very often the answer is, heal me; make me better from the disease that this time and place in human history cannot cure.

And Jesus does what he is asked to do. Impossibilities occur. Blind eyes suddenly see. Severed nerve cells reconnect. Legs straighten, infections recede, pain fades, horrified minds quieten. Off you go, says Jesus, go live, be about your business, be the mended version of yourself.

Yet, Jesus too knows limits. Healing people exhausts him. Day after day ends with him helplessly asking his friends to take him away, carry him off in a boat just so he can sleep. The vast total of the world's suffering is left almost unaltered, only the tiniest inroads made into it, only an infinitesimal fraction of it eased. The cruelty of the cruel world reproduces itself far faster than his slow hands can move.

Jesus tells his neighbors these limited resources are not limited to insiders, but given to foreigners leaving the privileged to fend for themselves. Rage erupts, murderous rage, rage not against the dying of the light, but rage against sharing the light with the enemy. Maybe Jesus is trying to teach his neighbors that he can't mend the world's sorrows, though he says yes to every request, by healing damaged bodies *alone*.

His business is with the human heart in the metaphorical sense, not with the clenching muscle in our chests. His business is with the diseases that infect every age, that no advance in medicine will ever cure. He challenges his neighbor's sense of entitlement, their privileges and prejudices.

Chaim Potok tells the story of two boys, friends, sons of rabbis, one Orthodox, one Hasidic. The son of the Hasidic rabbi was brilliant. In his early teens he read Freud. He reads quickly and remembers everything he reads. His analytical skills are superior. Both boys understand they will inherit their father's responsibilities for their respective communities.

As their friendship grows the son of the Orthodox rabbi becomes aware of a strange fact in his friend's relationship with his father. They never speak to each other except for the hour they spend studying Talmud. They live in the same apartment, eat at the same table at the same time, but never is a word spoken between them. This behavior is at best puzzling, at worst abusive.

The Orthodox rabbi tells his son he has only heard of such a practice, but has no explanation. The brilliant son of the Hasidic rabbi chooses not to follow in his father's footsteps, but to pursue a career as a psychologist. He goes to Columbia University to study and with this action breaks the code of silence.

The Hasidic rabbi explains to his son's friend: At a very early age, I became aware that my son was a special gift from God, that God had both blessed and cursed me with a very talented child. I knew that because he was so gifted, he would have a hard time understanding the realities faced by the people entrusted to his care.

He would be brilliant, but not sensitive to the needs of others. His mind would be well developed, but his heart would be hard. Despite all his gifts, he would be useless as a rabbi. Therefore, I raised him in silence in order to carve out a place in his soul for hurting, suffering people. Now he is a rabbi to the world, and God knows the world needs good rabbis.

If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, *I am nothing*.

Until Jesus' neighbors have a place carved out in their souls for hurting, suffering, disadvantaged people, whoever they may be, their privileged access to God is worthless.