

don't say anything that won't get you invited back." If Jesus had a wife, she might have said, "Just don't say anything that will get you killed!"

Jesus had to know that this was not going to be well received. Why did he do it? Now we get to what it means to be *People of the book*. Jesus used the Scripture to challenge their culture.

In his book, *Skilled Helping Around the World*, Gerard Egan, Professor Emeritus from Loyola University of Chicago, gives this scholarly definition of culture. "Culture," he says, "is the way we do things here."⁵ My guess is that you can understand that. Culture represents those collective beliefs and shared values; it represents the assumptions and rules of the group; it represents the ways that we see ourselves, and what we believe about others; it provides a mental map for the world; "It's the way things are done around here." Egan adds, "Since cultures . . . provide lenses through which people see the world, they are breeding grounds for blind spots."⁶ In his sermon, Jesus challenged their cultural blind spots.

But I still want to ask, "Why did he do it?" He knew these people well enough to know what they believed; he knew them well enough to know how they would respond. Why did he do it?

There is a lot about this text that we don't know. But I have a suspicion. I suspect that Jesus risked offending his friends and neighbors, risked his own reputation, risked violence, and even risked death because he loved them so much.

What does it mean to be *People of the book*? Listen again to Brueggemann, "The task of re-texting is to let the text

itself be the resource for offering an alternative imagination, energy, and identity for the community."⁷ It means allowing our assumptions, beliefs, values, and our very identity to be continually confronted, challenged, and changed. And that is a hard thing to do. Just ask the people of Nazareth.

There is one more thing that we know about this story.

6. We know that Jesus was not able to do many miracles there.

When we are unwilling to reexamine our beliefs, we get stuck. When we get stuck, the Holy Spirit's work is limited. When the Holy Spirit is limited, we stop growing. How do we know when we have stopped growing? We become defensive and dogmatic, sometimes to the point of violence.

So Walter Brueggemann prays for us, "Re-text us away from our shallow loves . . . Re-text us away from our thin angers . . . Re-text us away from our lean hopes . . . Re-text us to be your liberated partners in joy and obedience, in risk and gratitude."

That's what it means to be *People of the book*. Is anyone willing to risk it?

¹ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, p. xii.

² Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 8.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth*, p. 62.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*, p. 14.

⁵ Gerard Egan, *Skilled Helping Around the World*, p. 8.

⁶ Egan, p. 22.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*, p. 14.



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

Let Us Share First With You.



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

Let Us Share First With You.

The Pulpit Ministry



January 28, 2007

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Re-Texting Our Culture and
Our Lives

Luke 4:16, 20-30

Rev. Dr. Kenneth A. Corr, Pastor
200 E. Parkway N.
Memphis, Tennessee 38112

Last Sunday, the preacher said, “*We are people of the book.*” Ray Hatton told me that those words reminded him of the preaching that he heard growing up in east Texas. If you were raised in an evangelical, Bible-centered church, that phrase has a familiar ring to it. “*We are people of the book.*”

But what does that mean? I want to suggest this morning that it means more than displaying a leather-bound, red-letter, large print, coffee table edition; it means more than memorizing the books of the Bible and a few key passages; it means more than believing in a doctrine of infallibility and inspiration; it means more than a willingness to passionately defend its truths against all naysayers and nonbelievers.

Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard and a Baptist preacher, wrote a book some years ago that is interestingly entitled, The Good Book. He says that the book resulted out of a conviction “that intelligent people seemed to know less and less about the Bible and that religious people revered it and would defend it to the death but seldom read it with any industry or imagination.”¹ What does it mean to be *People of the book* if we don’t have the energy to read it with interest? Maybe Thomas Merton has a point when he says that some readers might find it easier to involve themselves in television commercials than the Bible.²

Ray Hatton has placed a quote by Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar and teacher, on the front of the worship guide. It is a prayer written for Christian worship. In the second sentence, he says, “So now we bid you, re-text us by your Spirit.”³ Brueggemann

explains, “The task of re-texting is to let the text itself be the resource for offering an alternative imagination, energy, and identity for the community.”⁴ I believe that is what it means to be *People of the book*.

What does that mean? Let me tell a story.

Since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the children of Israel called themselves, *People of the book*.

- They believed that God spoke to them through the printed words on the page.
- They prided themselves in their biblical knowledge.
- They gave Scripture reading a prominent place in their worship.
- Worship centered around reading and listening to the book.

This was the tradition in which Jesus was raised. My guess is that it was not a lot different from the way that Ray Hatton was raised in east Texas, or the way that Richard was raised in south Mississippi, or the way that Carol was raised in west Tennessee, or the way that I was raised in east Alabama, or the way that most of you were raised.

When this story begins, Jesus had been away from home for a while and when he came home, he attended worship and he was invited to read the Scripture and give comment. We would call it a sermon.

There is a lot about this text that we don’t know, but here is what we do know:

1. We know that Jesus’ reputation as a healer and miracle worker had reached Nazareth.

He was coming home a local celebrity. Nazareth had not produced many celebrities. In fact, he may have been the first.

For a homeboy to do well was a big deal.

2. We know that they were surprised by his celebrity status.

“Is not this Joseph’s son?” they asked. The gospel of *Mark* even quotes the people as saying, “Where did this man get all of this?” Apparently, there was nothing extraordinary about Jesus’ early years that had anticipated this kind of supernatural power. Jesus’ miraculous abilities were a total surprise to his hometown friends.

3. We know that they came to the synagogue that day expecting to see a miracle or two.

Jesus said to the people, “Doubtless you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” They were curious if the reports were as they had heard.

4. We know that Jesus knew these people well.

Remember, this is where he grew up. He knew their beliefs, their prejudices, their longings and desires. He was not preaching to strangers. He was looking into the faces of the people that had helped to raise him.

5. We know that what he said enraged them to the point of violence.

Before the sermon was over, they were ready to kill their own hometown boy. Imagine that! A few years ago, I was invited back to preach for the new building dedication at the Williams Trace Baptist Church in Sugar Land, Texas, where we had served for thirteen years. I was struggling with what to preach. What do you say to the people that you know and love? I wanted to be insightful, but witty; prophetic, but interesting. In her own inimitable way, Denise said, “Just