

January 31, 2010
Epiphany IV
The Rev. Kathy Crary

St James Episcopal Church
annual meeting Sunday

John McCutcheon isn't the only one who has been around here that likes baseball. My family didn't live in a city large enough to have a major league team, so we watched on television. I remember watching the Kansas City Athletics. From 1901-1954 they were the Philadelphia Athletics. From 1955-1967 they were the Kansas City Athletics. Then the team moved to Oakland for the 1968 season.

In that stretch of time I was 4 years old and then the team moved when I was 17. We watched on TV if they aired the game, listening on the radio and sometimes hearing the game that way. You see, we'd moved from Kansas to Utah when I was 8 years old. Finding the broadcasts could be hard. There weren't many teams nearby. This predated the Colorado Rockies, the Arizona Diamondbacks and others when the leagues expanded. That made Kansas City one of the closest clubs to Salt Lake City, so we watched or heard more games than you would think.

When you watched certain pitchers or batters, you'd learn how they would stand, how they would pitch or watch to see if there was some discernible sign that meant they were going to bunt. The longer you watch a team and the players on that team, the more you pick up on idiosyncratic behaviors to give you a key what was coming. When players are falling short of their potential or a player on the opposite team seems to be acting out, someone in the bleacher seats will stand up and holler, "Throw the bum out!"

Today, Jesus' hometown fans holler, "Throw the bum out." He isn't performing according to their expectations and they didn't like his sermon.

He has pushed a hot button, like a stranger who didn't know them, the stranger in our midst I talked about in last week's sermon.

Jesus talks about not being welcomed into his own home town. They are talking nice till Jesus questions their faith and brings into question their exclusive understanding of the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah.

What is startling is their seemingly-sudden rush to judgment. Why did they jump? Did you see anything there that would bring you to your feet and say, "Throw him out!"?

What Jesus recounted were stories about life being hard, when epic famines ruled the land, and when disease ravaged the bodies of so many. The Jews knew these stories and probably had read that prophets were sent to cure and to heal in the midst of famine and plague. But to whom were they sent? To a widow and a Syrian!

Dad-burn-it, what is that about? Jesus said God's given prophets were sent to a woman and a foreigner, both great carriers of that dreaded label, UNCLEAN. Women are identified by their connection to a man, and a widow will lack that status. And foreigners are bad enough but how much more so if they are not Jews?

So how do you take the criticism, friends in Nazareth? You look to throw the bum over the cliff. You are ready to do the obvious; you are going to shoot the messenger. You are outraged because this silly carpenter's son has read you the riot act and suddenly your nose is most severely out of joint.

Jesus gets out of the crowd somehow, either because he had a way to disguise himself under cover of their outrage OR he had the authority to stride through them and like the parting of the Red Sea, they backed off and let him walk out of Nazareth physically unscathed.

When life is changing rapidly around us, we have the uneasy feeling of not being on flat, secure, familiar ground. That uneven ground makes us susceptible to strains, sprains, cuts and bruises. Emotionally, we are susceptible to the wounded ego, the redirected dreams, reshaped tradition and some measure of emotional disorientation.

The good folk of Nazareth might be seeing the face of Jesus and the future of faith, recast into a new form, where the foreigner, the widow and a host of other outsiders are welcomed and beloved of God.

For our consideration and pondering, two things:

First, the voice to speak a new truth takes courage. Earlier this week, at the readings for the Wednesday Eucharist which honored a great leader and saint from the Orthodox tradition, John Chrysostom, we heard the words of Jeremiah, arguing with God that he was too young to be prophet. In a synchronistic surprise, we have read those words as today's Old Testament reading. Prophets didn't foretell the future, they were charged with illuminating what is wrong or broken or unfaithful with the present and calling the community to heal these wrongs, bind up the brokenness and return to love of God and neighbor. But Jeremiah and the great prophets, old and new, have to know God and step out with boldness and courage.

At the heart of these interactions between prophet and people is conflict. The history and faith of our Jewish and Christian ancestors is awash with conflict, starting in the garden, continuing through the ministry of Jesus and arriving with us. The presence of faith does not guarantee the absence of conflict. How we reach out, mend, heal and recover from conflict is more the issue.

It boils down to our expectation of the pitcher on the mound. We expect this individual to hurl a spherical past a batter, belt high and

untouched every time. In Nazareth, they don't believe Jesus has done this and they cry, "Throw the bum off the cliff!" Instead of giving them what they wanted to hear, he told them the truth about God's great welcoming. We would do well to hear his voice and follow his example in this time and place.