

Suffice it to say, last weekend was a smidge rough for my family collective, at least when it came to the dreaded topic of...football. It seems enough to simply say this, my brother-in-law is a die hard, all in, born in raised in Upstate New York, tried and true member of the Bills Mafia. Yes, woefully, my brother-in-law is a Buffalo Bills fan, which is basically synonymous with playoff heartbreak at this point. The details of the game aren't important. It's enough to say that they lost in spectacularly devastating fashion after an incredible game and his reaction was nothing short of emotional to the point that poor, little Sebastian said to my sister, "I just want them to win so he won't be sad."

I had forgotten that the Bills' sadness extended beyond my family unit until we were out walking Scully the other day and ran into our neighbor Jay still fully decked out in his Bills beanie. He just didn't have any words, simply echoing the reality that the Bills seem to lose in ways that no other teams manage and it breaks your heart every time. But then he went on to make this comment, "They gotta get away from Kansas City. They have to get away from Arrowhead and get the Chiefs up to Orchard Park and then it'll be a different story." You see, the Bills biggest playoff nemesis lately has been the Kansas City Chiefs, consistently having to travel to Kansas City to play in a stadium that is so loud the television announcers practically have

to shout to make sure the broadcast can be heard. The noise of Arrowhead is deafening, and Jay was pointing out if you get the Chiefs off of their home turf, and force them to play on the Bills home field in the freezing cold, snow covered confines of Highmark Stadium, things would be different, because the Chiefs wouldn't be able to handle what the weather and Bills fans would throw at them.

It's a common theme amongst sports fans. The importance of home field advantage. The Tampa Bay Bucs got to play the Super Bowl last year on their home field because that was where the game was scheduled and it absolutely made a difference. The LA Rams might get the same opportunity this year. Across basketball, hockey, and baseball, sports with series as part of their playoff format, you want home court/ice/field advantage so if there's a game seven you get to play it in front of your crowd, your fans. There's nothing more anticlimactic that winning a championship in front of the visiting team's fans. It just doesn't feel the same. The energy is different. Teams have actually built their stadiums in some instances around the concept of home field advantage. Lumen Field where the Seattle Seahawks play was built with the concept of amplifying and echoing sound to the point that the Seattle fans, their 12th man, were deafening. Red Sox fans know that forcing teams to play in Fenway with the Green Monster looming in left

field is a huge benefit. Back in the Red Wings hay day no one wanted to play at Joe Louis Arena because they ran the risk of having octopus thrown at them when the Red Wings won. And no that isn't a metaphor. We threw literal octopi on the ice in celebration. Home field advantage is a key component of sports, and it seems was thought to hopefully be a key component of Nazarene living in Jesus' day, except, when it comes to Jesus, life tends to be more about the exception than the rule, and that is displayed nowhere better than in our gospel this morning.

We intentionally hear last week's gospel again this week, paired with the gospel for this week, because to break this story up into two sections diminishes the full weight and magnitude of what is happening here. You can't contemplate why the people who have known Jesus attempt to throw him off of a cliff if you don't take into consideration what he has said to them to initiate the conversation in the first place. So, we start at the beginning, quite literally. The beginning of our gospel, but also the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

In Luke's gospel, this is the equivalent of Jesus' coming out party. He has been baptized and tempted in the wilderness. He has started teaching in various synagogues and maybe doing a few healings here and there, but this, this moment in Nazareth is truly the start. Jesus' point blank declaration that

something within the kingdom of God is about to change. He's really just the hometown kid coming home for church. He's been out and about for a little while and when he comes home, logically he goes to synagogue for worship. He basically serves as lector for the day, and chooses this particular passage from Isaiah, a bold, messianic proclamation, declaring that the one anointed by God, the Messiah, will come to turn the world upside down and bring about a new reign of justice and equity in the world. As lector, he would also be the preacher for the day, and his sermon, for lack of a better term, is simple. Today, this scripture has been fulfilled. Essentially, umm, y'all, this passage is about me. I'm the Messiah.

Initially everyone is awed. This is Joseph's son! We've known him since he was a boy and now look at him! The Messiah. There seems little question about *believing* what Jesus is saying here. But then...well, Jesus kind of screws things up for himself almost. He can sense the underlying thought circulating through his audience. If he's the Messiah, think about what it will mean for *us*? I mean this is where he's from! He's known us his whole life! We helped raise him! Think of the things he'll do here! And Jesus just immediately shuts it down. He reminds them of when Elijah and Elisha both were called to share their gifts in places not their own, *Gentile*

places at that. Suddenly those images of home field advantage get thrown out the window and this congregation gets ready to throw Jesus off of a cliff.

We might think this is harsh and a deep overreaction, but think about what this had to have been like for the people of Nazareth. They've just heard Jesus say that he has come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. For them, visions of all of these things happening for and to them had to have been overwhelming. Their sick healed, their oppression ceased, their lives completely changed. They would have been anticipating preferential treatment and priority of place in the kingdom of that Jesus has come to usher in because he was one of theirs, and suddenly Jesus tells them that not only are they wrong, they're *really* wrong. His message isn't just for them, it's for all of Israel. His message isn't just for Israel, but for the Gentiles too. Nazareth is going to be treated like any other town, regardless of population, and that is what turns a congregation into a mob with the quickest path to the edge of the cliff well charted.

Even taking that into consideration, we are inclined to jump to hasty judgment of the people of Nazareth, wondering how in the world they could have such an extreme reaction to such a simple message of inclusivity. They want to kill Jesus because he says they aren't going to get all the goodies to

themselves?! But if we're honest with ourselves, if we take a step back and examine how we operate in the world and within the kingdom of God, I'm not sure we're so far from that cliff side ourselves.

We like to think that our faith lives, our church attendance, our whatever when it comes to God should put us first in line for any number of things. We should be the ones taken care of, we should be the ones heard first, we should be the ones who receive the absolute outpouring of God's grace and love and everyone else needs to earn their way to it. We hear the call of God's justice for our black and brown siblings, for our LGBTQ siblings and we immediately want to say, well we have problems too, we have our own forms of oppression we experience, why can't we deal with *that* first. Worse yet, sometimes we hear those calls to justice for the poor, the oppressed, the captive, the ones on the margins and we think they must change before being included in God's kingdom, or that they simply have no place in God's kingdom because they aren't what we picture the population of the kingdom looking like. Who wants to sully the picture perfect, white washed image we have of the kingdom with outsiders, with people who are different from us, with *them*?

If this gospel were happening today, Jesus would come with a message for us that he has come to provide grace and care to our transgender

siblings, to those who live so far below the poverty line they can't even see the line, those in our prison systems, those who have suffered brutal violence at the hands of those in power, those who have no home, no citizenship, no safe space. For everyone whom in the darkest corners of our hearts we would claim are less deserving of God's love than us, that is who Jesus would tell us he has come to deliver. And if we heard that message today? I think we would be pretty quick to find the nearest cliff.

The beautiful truth of the gospel is that there is no home field advantage. No one, regardless of denomination, race, gender, social status can claim exclusive rights to God's grace and love. In fact, the second we think we have found our niche for it, God flips it around and reminds us that there are others who need love and grace too, and we're probably the ones to show it to them. The year of the Lord's favor proclaims a year of justice, righteousness, equity, inclusivity, diversity, healing, and loving acceptance. It isn't just for us. It comes to the margins that we so often choose to ignore and beckons us to open our eyes and see our siblings, all of our siblings where they are for who they are. None of us get to claim that God loves us most, that we are most deserving of God's grace, even if we really, really wish we could. It is high time we relinquish our desire for home field advantage and see the kingdom, *all* of God's kingdom as our home. **AMEN!**