

Popularity -- do you care about being popular? How much do you care about popularity? For some people, popularity is not that big of a deal. For many others, though – for many people of all ages (elementary, middle school, high school, and college students; young adults; people in their 30's, 50's, 70's, and 90's) – for many of us, popularity is a very big deal. Popularity is something many of us care very much about.

To be unpopular is no picnic. Unpopularity puts us at odds with others, isolates us, leaves us out of sync with those around us. The road of unpopularity can be a mighty lonely, rocky road to travel.

To be popular, though, is to have others think well of you, like you, respect you. And it's pretty normal and reasonable for us to want the affection and approval of others. The question is, how much do we want popularity? How urgent is our quest to be popular? What are we willing to give up, or to compromise, for the sake of being well-regarded by others?

Let's agree today -- popularity, in itself, is not a bad, negative, evil thing. But let's agree, also -- the hunger for popularity, that pursuit of being popular, can definitely lead one to trouble, can warp and damage the identity that God gives us.

Why all this talk today about popularity? The Holy Gospel for today is a narrative about popularity. We see Jesus wildly popular. And then we see Jesus suddenly, dangerously unpopular.

Let's talk about popularity in this Christian context. Before we dive in to the story of Jesus accepted and then rejected in his hometown, let me take a little survey.

- In our society, in our American culture today, is Jesus becoming more and more popular?
- In our day and age, is following Jesus likely to make you more popular?
- Is going to church faithfully going to make you more popular?
- Is accepting what Jesus says as truth, and living as if God's Word is the highest authority in your life, likely to make you a popular person in today's society?

That's the reality we're living in, isn't it? So I ask you again: Christian, how much do you care about popularity?

Let's talk about what happened to Jesus. Our Gospel Lesson, from Luke chapter 4, comes right near the beginning of Christ's public ministry. Jesus was baptized by John. He spent forty days in the wilderness. And then, Luke tells us, Jesus started moving around, visiting the various cities and towns near where he grew up in Galilee. And Jesus was extremely well-received. People were very impressed by his words and actions. Luke writes in verses 14-15, just before our lesson for today, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all." Popularity!

Then Jesus stops in to his hometown, Nazareth. He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day; and, as all the men in that congregation are entitled to do, he takes a turn reading from the Scriptures. He opens the scroll to Isaiah, chapter 61, and reads these words, which everyone knows speak about the coming Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He rolls up the scroll and sits down, the standard teaching position in those days. Every eye is now fixed on him. IN this dramatic moment, Jesus says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The first reaction of everyone is favorable, encouraging. "All spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." Popularity!

So what does he do? Strive for more popularity? Shift his message so that everybody likes him even more? He does not. Jesus knows these people. He recognizes their deepest spiritual needs. He sees their sins and failings. So he doesn't butter them up, flatter them, or compromise his message even a little. Instead, Jesus makes the not-so-subtle point that God is more likely to share his grace with Gentiles and outsiders than with his Jewish neighbors from Nazareth, unless they repent.

And, with that, Jesus' popularity craters. The people of Nazareth are insulted, enraged. They actually try to kill him. But it's not yet his time; and the Son of God is able to walk right through the crowd to safety.

It's a sad story about the Lord's popularity rising and falling. And this remains the story, throughout the remainder of Jesus' life. People are thrilled with his teachings and miracles. But when they really grasp what Jesus is saying, about God's view of their lives, they balk. They resist. They end up rejecting Jesus. They end up crucifying him, don't they?

That was then. What about now? Is Jesus popular today? Well, we love him. But even we struggle sometimes to fully accept his lordship, don't we? It's a daily battle just to stay loyal to Christ in every part of our lives. You and I need to

repent. You and I need to seek God's grace. You and I need the Spirit of God to make us more faithful, more devoted to Jesus and his ways.

Is Jesus popular today? Well, the society we live in, sadly, is affording Jesus less and less popularity. Many of our friends may be Jesus-followers; but many more of our neighbors, and ever-increasing numbers of North Carolinians and Americans, are not. We love our church, but church is not so popular out there these days. Accepting God's Word as authoritative truth may work for us, but that's not a very popular stance in our world.

Popularity. For Christians like us, let's be realistic today about popularity in the eyes of the world.

But let's also rejoice today that, thanks to the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, we are popular with the only One who matters, in the end. We are forgiven by the Lamb of God! Our sins are washed clean by his holy, precious blood! We are saved by God's gracious love, and the promise of eternal life in heaven is ours! We are never alone in this world, no matter how difficult and unpopular our Christian living may be! We are empowered by God's Holy Spirit every day! We are in this together every day! We are part of a family of faith here at Hope, and part of a world-wide Christian community every day! We stand today with Christ, and he stands with us forever!

With all due humility, let me just say, that's all the popularity I really need. How many of you agree?

*Prayer*