

## PROPER NINE, PENTECOST 7, JULY 7, 2024

We all have origin stories and what I mean by that is we all have stories about our ancestors and the places we've come from. These stories define us in many ways. They define our ethnicity, culture and oftentimes even our belief system. We're all immigrants, unless you're a Native American, so where our ancestors came from is part of our DNA more than we realize. How many of us grew up in a household that held on to so many of the traditions our ancestors had embraced and passed down to us. Most of the time it centers around food and how and which holidays are celebrated. All of the holidays we celebrate have come to our country from our immigrant ancestors and continue to this day as new celebrations like Kwanza and Diwali have been added.

But sometimes, our origin stories also dictate who we can be or who we can hang out with and what other ethnic groups we are to dislike. So, sometimes our origin stories can become oppressive, stifling, and try to suffocate who we are. This is not unlike today's Gospel story when Jesus went back to his hometown.

You would have thought that Nazareth would have welcomed home Jesus with open arms. After all, his ministry and his healings have become known throughout the territory and his popularity is growing fast. He's the hometown boy made good. At first things appear to be going well for him. Jesus is met with curiosity but also astonishment and that's when the tide turns and the whispering starts.

"Isn't he the carpenter? Isn't he Mary's son?" As author Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: "the only reason to identify someone by his mother in Jesus's day was to question his legitimacy and to highlight the fact that no one knew for certain who his father was. In other words, to refer to Jesus as "the son of Mary" and not, "the son of Joseph" was a calculated act, a weaponized use of Jesus's origin story to shame him into silence. In a social system where one's status was fixed at birth, it was not considered possible for someone like Jesus — a mere carpenter of questionable parentage — to amount to anything. For the hometown crowd he had no business rising above his dicey beginnings, no cultural permission to outgrow his origin story: "We know exactly where you come from, boy! Don't get too big for your britches! Remember your place!"

Because of their distrust, disdain, and possible hatred of Jesus he could not to any good. When someone closes themselves off and refuses to see something any differently it is difficult to convince them otherwise.

There's a story of a woman who lived in a small town in East Texas who ran a bar and some also said a brothel. One day she had an epiphany, a road to Damascus experience that changed her entire life. She came to know Jesus and as she developed a relationship with him she sold her bar and eventually went off to seminary. At the end of seminary her bishop sent her to the church in her hometown—the one attended by her family, and many of her former clients. She pleaded not to go there as, "Those people know me."

For a brief time, things went well. People seemed pleased to see the hometown girl reformed and doing well. Then she began to extend her ministry, to befriend people from her old life in the name of Jesus.

That's when the murmuring began. "Uh hum. You see. We know what kind of bar she ran. Who is she to preach to us?" The anonymous letters began to arrive, and the

messages of disapproval and hatred. After two years of harsh judgment and cruel treatment, the bishop moved her to a different church. She had failed; unable to do much of anything in her hometown. Somehow, she shook the dust off and moved on.

She found herself in a church in the roughest part of San Antonio. Word got around—social workers, teachers, police, neighborhood folk, church members—knew her as a person women could trust—“working women”, abused women, women in trouble with the law, women in fear for their children, women needing to flee under cover of darkness. They all made their way to her.

Night after night, calls beckoned her to an emergency room, a shelter, the holding cell of the county jail. She went to hear a story, to soothe a soul, to offer God’s peace, to embrace small frightened children, to raise bail, to witness to the power and strength of God to bring fresh starts to failed lives. The women believed her because her life bore the mark of failure redeemed. In this new church, she found support; people even insisted on accompanying her on her nightly sojourns. Eventually they opened a woman’s shelter due to her ministry with all these women.

Her story is an age old story that many of us are familiar with. It is hard for your hometown to see you other than the way you were growing up. Jesus ran into the same problem when he returned to Nazareth with his disciples. At first, the people were amazed at how wise and articulate he was. But then, as Jesus kept preaching about this new Kingdom of God, the people started turning against him. The gospels all tell us that Jesus could not do anything there – he failed.

And we don’t like to hear that. Failure is not an option is our mantra. Yet, sometimes failure is just what we need to make ourselves stronger, to perhaps put things into a new perspective or to start over. Perhaps failure can open us to hear something new from God. It is hard for us to realize but before the resurrection, even the cross represented failure. On the cross, Jesus hung in complete helpless, hopeless, and humiliating failure.

But what does Jesus do in this story? How does he respond to failure? The very next thing we read is that he sends out the disciples in pairs to carry on his ministry. This is a huge step and important strategy in the spread of the gospel. Jesus responds to adversity by moving forward with a pivotal new stage. He doesn’t follow the time-honored strategy of building on success; instead, Jesus builds on failure.

For us, the great temptation of failure is to do nothing. With difficulty and hardship before us, with the possibility of failure very real, we tend to not want to stick our necks out. The natural inclination is to “circle the wagons” and pull back. We avoid risk like the plague. Better to stay with what we know then venture into a new reality and a new truth.

This weekend as we celebrate the origins of our nation we have to also recognize how many times we have refused to acknowledge the failures we have committed as a country. From slavery to Jim Crow Laws, from the trail of tears of our Native Americans to placing them on reservations, from the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882 to the incarceration of Japanese during WWII, from the importation of Mexican workers during WWII to farm our lands to migrant camps and deportation, from the suppression of women’s voices to the passing of the Voting act of 1920 to the current restriction of women having control of their own bodies our country needs to recognize it’s blessedness and it’s brokenness. Can we untangle truth from untruth in ways that

will help us move forward with grace? Can we receive the prophets who are speaking words of love, freedom, compassion, and hospitality in our midst, and move into a new reality and truth instead of retreating into our own fears and doubts? It is this fear that makes people believe that somehow God has abandoned us and our country. If you believe this than your version of God is far too small, too restrictive, too stingy and a god made in your own image of prejudices and fears.

However, these are questions not only to ask ourselves as individuals and as communities, but also as the church. Whose voices have we sidelined across history? Whose perspectives do we still deem unworthy? Where has our love of tradition hardened us against new perspectives? How has our fear of the new made us obsolete and lifeless?

The scandal of Jesus incarnation is precisely that Jesus doesn't stay in his lane. The hometown boy tells us truths we'd rather not hear but our limits won't confine him for long. He will continue to call us out to see and experience him anew.

The same is true of God. God doesn't limit God's self to our small and stingy notions of the sacred. God exceeds, abounds, transgresses and transcends any idea of God we have. Perhaps "*Remember who you are and where you come from,*" is God's best reminder to us of who we really are. We are God's children and we come from God's own heart and are blessed with God's infinite love for all of us. That's an origin story we can never outgrow. That's an origin story we need to embrace now with our whole being. Amen.