

PROPER NINE, PENTECOST FIVE, YEAR B, JULY 4, 2021

One of my favorite HGTV shows is Hometown which is about a couple who take old homes and remodel them while maintaining a lot of its original character. They are trying to restore and transform a lot of their hometown's run down houses to create new and exciting places for families to live.

Hometowns are great places. They can shape our lives, allow us to dream, give us our identity and oftentimes allow us to grow and mature and discover the world and who we are in that world.

Where is your hometown? Was it in the city, country, town, suburb? Do you remember the house in which you were raised, the street on which you played or the neighbors you grew up with? My youngest sister and her family still live in the house I grew up in. Do you remember that one grouchy neighbor who was always yelling at you because of something you did? Do you remember the people who thought you were wonderful or the ones who thought you would never amount to anything?

Hometowns are also wonderful places, to be from. Many times they are tough places to return to because the people who remained in the neighborhood remember who you were and are reluctant to accept who you have become. Old friends insist that we fit into the old roles we once played in the past. Oftentimes others have a difficult time accepting how we have changed and grown.

This is the scene we have in today's Gospel when Jesus returns to Nazareth his hometown. He is a local hero and at first everything seems to be going well as he begins to teach in the tradition of the rabbis. The townspeople receive his words with astonishment and curiosity. His wisdom impressed them as they knew he was not a schooled rabbi, but the authority and profound depth of his thoughts was undeniable. However, their astonishment quickly evaporated when they remembered who this guy really was. Someone in the crowd starts asking questions: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here among us?"

The author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor points out that the only reason to identify someone by his mother in Jesus' day is to question his legitimacy and to highlight that no one knows for sure who his father is. To refer to Jesus as the son of Mary is a calculated act to weaponize the legitimacy of his birth and therefore humiliate him into silence. In a social system where one's status is fixed at birth, it's not possible for someone like Jesus — a mere carpenter of questionable parentage — to amount to anything.

At this point, the story tells us, the mood in the synagogue shifts. Appreciation now morphs into accusation, curiosity becomes contempt, and the people "take offense." They decide that Jesus is presuming too much and exceeding his bounds. He has no business rising above his dicey beginnings, no business speaking with authority or becoming a leader. They know where he came from and they want him to remember his place. Jesus was the victim of what all too often is a law of human relationships: familiarity breeds contempt. They will not consider that an equal has any wisdom to share with them, let alone have the audacity to speak for God.

The gospel writer tells us Jesus was amazed by the people's lack of faith. The people shut the door of their hearts and minds to the reality of God. They used every

defense, every excuse, every criticism to diminish, demoralize, disparage the activity of God in someone's life because he challenged their understanding of God and God's ways.

So here we have Jesus' own faith community that fails to recognize the truth of who he is. What does this mean for us, the church? How, when, and where do we miss out on the sacred because we expect God to stay within the expectations and boundaries we have determined? How often do we demand that God act in ways that protects our status quo?

The uncomfortable fact is, Jesus offends his beloved community in this story. I have no doubt that Jesus offends many in the church today too. When was the last time he touched whatever it is you call holy — your progressivism, your conservatism, your theology, your denomination, your Biblical literacy, your prayer life, your politics, and asked you to look beyond the tame and domesticated Jesus we have created and really find him? When was the last time Jesus made you angry by stepping out of the carefully constructed safe box you've placed him in and you decided that is not what Jesus said or meant? So often, we make Jesus into something He is not by adjusting our image of Him in order to suit our needs. Because we have things in our life that we do not want to change, ideas we do not want to revise, priorities we do not want challenged, control we do not want to give up, so we redefine Jesus to make Him fit with where we are.

The truth is whenever the gospel is preached with a bold conviction opposition will arise because the gospel challenges our values. This story illustrates how Jesus offends so many, because this is the Jesus that threatens our familiar comfortable control.

It's just like the HGTV show Hometown that tears down the old and rotted sections that are no longer viable for the house so a new home can be created. We need to rid ourselves of those things that hamper us, those things that are the antithesis of the true gospel message that keeps rotting away what God calls us to do. We need to create a new framework so God's inclusive voice can be heard.

There's a story that happened in the early 60's that I believe illustrates my point and is still quite relevant today. This story is about the founder of Koinonia, Clarence Jordan, who founded an interracial community that was based on Jesus' teachings in Sumter County, Georgia.

One day Jordan and several other members of the Koinonia community including an African American decided it was the right time to enter a white Baptist church that was holding a mass meeting of local churches to which the public was invited.

The group entered the sanctuary, walked past the usher but when the usher realized that a black man had walked past him, he went up to Jordan in a rage and demanded to know who the man was. Jordan and the group kept walking and sat down. The usher came after them and grabbed Jordan by the wrist and told him that "he can't come in here and told them they all had to leave. When he threatened to drag the man out of the pew the group decided to leave.

Out on the steps of the church the usher proclaimed, This is our church. We control it, we paid for it and the federal government didn't put one dime into the building. With that another member of the Koinonia group turned and asked, "Don't you and the members of your church ever stop to consider the will of Jesus in your policy? The usher retorted "That's neither here nor there".

It is no wonder that Jesus marveled at their unbelief. He is still marveling at our own. Let us not shut our eyes and ears and let us look for God in everyone and the possibilities that presents us. The call of the Gospel is not a call to stand still. It is a call to choose movement over inertia, change over security, growth over decay. God is fluid and in perpetual motion challenging us at every turn to listen to God's inclusive voice. It can happen if we look with faith and love and commit ourselves to the Jesus that makes us uncomfortable with all our hearts, minds and souls and an open mind so that God may do a mighty work in us. Amen.