

Home Away from Home

Luke 4:22-30

Hometowns are supposed to be friendly places to visit. On the rare occasion I return to Falmouth, Maine, or Bangor, or my actual birthplace in Milo, anyone who even recalls the Hayes name, let alone my personal presence there, is typically quite surprised to meet me, offering a hospitable greeting, cordial and friendly (“Oh, I remember you! You were that preacher’s kid, the short, chubby, annoying runt who had three brothers and no friends!).

These once-upon-a-time “hometowns” are not places all that familiar to me at this stage in life, but at the same time, I trust the people there are not inclined to throw me off a cliff, either. Generally, it’s only those who have known me more recently who consider that a reasonable option.

Honestly, being rejected by one’s native kinfolk and neighbors has to be a strange, if not terrible, feeling of loss and disappointment—a tough thing to reckon with in life (the stories are very sad, if not tragic, when such situations arise). If the primal characters of your life, the people who knew you when—who helped rear you through childhood—whose kids you went to school with and with whom you hung around—if they don’t want you near them anymore—if they were angry enough to run you out of town—some even driven to end your life—then this, friends, is not a good thing. This is not the place you want to return to for any reunions or reason. Even in death, you’d be better off in an anonymous grave a thousand miles away than to have a hometown tombstone that may be subject to endless indignities and eternal punishment.

For this reason, it’s mystifying why Jesus held onto the moniker that associated him with his hometown of Nazareth. Given the circumstances, it

doesn't make sense. If this story from Luke has any truth to it, then we might presume Jesus would have updated his passport with another form of personal identification—if not out of his own desire, then certainly because the references back home might not serve him well. Instead of Jesus of Nazareth, he could have been “Jesus of Capernaum,” since it was a welcoming and affirming community of devotees and the launching point for his ministry. Or, for marketing purposes, he might have branded himself as “Jesus of Galilee” to appeal to regional interest, or “Jesus of Bethlehem” if he wanted to make a big patriotic splash with an obvious messianic allusion to the city of David. Luke and Matthew would have backed him up. But no, throughout the Gospels he stuck with his proper reference to a place that apparently renounced him once he left their little hilltop village.

I suppose that's natural. Once a Nazorean, always a Nazorean. Even though most of my life has been lived elsewhere, I'm still referred to as a “Mainiac.” Believe me, I'm not the only one; there are a few other Mainiacs here in this congregation as well. There's a real Mainiac in the church office and a few of them in the choir. In fact, I've probably come across more Mainiacs in Noank than just about anywhere I've lived. For some reason, this quirky little town is full of them! Mainiacs everywhere! Go figure.

But then, there is something about your roots that you can never deny or ever dismiss. That is, our sensibilities in life are often determined by the places from which we originate, likely more than from just about anywhere else. Jesus might have been able to find a home away from home, never returning to live in the place he knew best, but he was always of Nazareth.

Nazareth defined him in ways that no other place could. Why? Because, true to human nature, primary experiences in life leave their

imprint upon the psyche of each and every person. You or I will often find impressions of it in our respective dreams—sensual images from our early life that exist in our subconscious which offer an air of familiarity or provide texture to a particular emotional context related to the dream. Along with that are the relational patterns and emotional characteristics of our personalities that frequently reflect the primary experiences of life. They are the first impressions we receive of the world when we come into it and they stay with us in one form or another throughout the length of our days. We are always psychologically and spiritually rooted somewhere in some way.

However, hometowns also have a way of messing with our heads, in a manner of speaking. It's not uncommon for people to feel as if they are reverting to a previous state in life when they return to a hometown. Young adults will feel like they're treated like children when they go home to their parents' house, and they, in turn, will behave more like children when they return, at least in comparison to their adult lives elsewhere. Likewise, adult siblings who get along easily when apart resort to youthful rivalries and upsets when they return to their places of origin. This is natural in part because our settings suggest to us certain behaviors and outlooks that were associated with them—not just for us, but for all parties. These relational patterns are deeply conditioned within people and often are the sources of great conflict later in life, particularly with role reversals.

We all do this to a certain extent. As adults, a return to our childhood homes and hometowns will generate a flood of memories and emotions, running the gamut from warm, generous feelings of sentimentality all the way to a haunted, if not anxious, reluctance to being there. The truth is, our hometowns are not what they were for us once upon a time. People change,

places change. We can't easily return to the place we were when we were in that place.

I wonder if this is behind the drama the story of Jesus and Nazareth as Luke presents it. As much as Jesus might remain identified with his family home, as an adult who left home—as one who made a home away from home, perhaps even perceived as a prodigal by some, he was unable to return to Nazareth with ease. His mother and siblings would still view him as eldest son and brother—the one who was supposed to be the head of the household at this point in his life. Perhaps that's why throughout the gospels, Jesus' family was frequently tracking him down and wanting him to return home. He wasn't the same person they once knew. His interests weren't the same and his sense of self had changed. He didn't fulfill his familial duties, nor did he treat them like family.

Beyond that, Jesus' kinfolk and neighbors wouldn't appreciate his choice of vocation nor his departure from Nazareth. Firstborns typically weren't accorded options beyond the familial household. Oh, yes, he made a name for himself elsewhere healing people and casting out demons, but then, if he was their native son, why wouldn't they be the first ones he'd help? They were the people who knew him best—the ones whose problems and conditions he was most familiar with. Yet, according to our story today, Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue and acted like he didn't even know them. “Is this not Joseph's son?”

We might wonder why Jesus didn't seem to handle this situation better—with a little less confrontation and a bit more diplomacy. Could he not have been excited to showcase his divinely inspired campaign for Israel's renewal to a hometown audience? Couldn't he have healed a few folks, multiplied a handful of loaves and fishes for the hometown folks,

perhaps cast out a couple of demons for the common good? It's the least he could have done for those who had been integral to his life from birth. They should have been first in line to receive his blessings.

However, that's not the way it went—not the way the story is told. Instead, Jesus responded to their appreciation of the Jubilee text he earlier quoted, with this rather harsh comment:

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Physician, heal thyself.” And you will say, “Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did in Capernaum.”

That's not an unreasonable expectation, is it? That wasn't asking too much of him, was it? But that's not how he saw it. “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown...”, following this up with a couple of well-known anecdotes about Elijah assisting the widow at Zarapheth instead of the widows in Israel, and Elisha, who cleansed a Syrian, rather than healing lepers in his own land. The implication was clear: Jesus wasn't about to bless his hometown folks to satisfy their expectations.

If Mary, his mother, had hoped her firstborn son would make a good impression among her fellow worshippers, she was sorely mistaken. All I know is if it had been my mother, she would have been mortified by this rude and explicit disrespect for his hometown and their angry reaction to his insult. What do you mean the Holy One of Israel whom you learned of here in this very synagogue, who inspired you to this impressive ministry, not to mention we who nurtured you in the faith of your people and the traditions of your ancestors, are not deserving of God's blessings that you are offering? Who do you think you are, Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, to treat us in this manner? Who are you to say these things to us? Needless to say, for this native son, things did not go well in Nazareth that day.

It's said that disrespect is a coward's way of losing an argument. We see this all the time, where a person is offended, slighted, or starts to feel as if another is gaining the upper hand, then differences of opinion morph into personal attacks, name-calling, and other viscerally-driven reactions. Showing disrespect is a potent way to belittle an opponent, to put them in their place, and to dismiss their value and importance. When egos are bruised and feelings are hurt, then it doesn't take much to blow things up, but it takes a great deal of effort to repair the damage. One could easily surmise that Jesus was disrespecting his own kinfolk and neighbors. Who was he to do this? If so, this is hardly flattering to his reputation or, one would think, helpful to his birth family.

Perhaps I'm being an apologist, but I don't think that is the point of this story. People may have felt disrespected, but I think this story is more about Jesus' separation from those who could not see the larger picture or appreciate the prophetic demands God was placing upon them. For Jesus, the history of Israel didn't get more personal than with the people of his hometown. The reaction he received from those closest to him at the beginning of his ministry reflected the wider rejection of him later in the story. That's Luke's point. Jesus' ministry and message regarding the Jubilee wasn't offering blessings to all of Israel until Israel could be just and merciful with their own people (for more on that, read last week's sermon). Just as Nazareth could not accept Jesus' sharp critique from their native son, nor could Israel as a whole accept the same from one of their prophets—he, whose followers viewed as their messiah. Just like patriotic nations, hometowns are “not-for-prophet” settings.

Frankly, Jesus' message about God's demands upon them would not have sunk in because they would have only seen the Jesus they knew from

birth. He was too close to them for them to take him seriously. His prophetic authority was blunted by their endless memories of what he was like as a small town boy. That's what happens with divinely-inspired prophets—the ones who are not accepted by their own people. The authority behind their insights seem like personal grumblings and complaints of someone whose world has gotten too large and complex for small town life. “We knew him when” ends up being a distraction blunting the prophetic force of truth.

That said, it wouldn't surprise me if Jesus grieved the hardness of heart in his own hometown more than with any other experience, form, or place of rejection. It's deeply distressing to lose relationships that once were cherished above all, simply because they still perceive you as you were in the past. Maybe he could have found another home away from home, as many do, and it's clear that he did, as his band of followers became his new family, as he often inferred. I suppose to a certain extent, it's natural to create new families of one form or another once we leave the proverbial fold, as it were. We cannot remain chained to the past—defined forever by the ones who nurtured us into this life. Relationships and roles invariably change over time. The primal impressions shape much of who we are, but they don't account for what we become over time.

For that reason alone, it's possible no one would have ever heard of Jesus had he decided to remain or return to his parents' home. For the sake of destiny, he had to leave home. Otherwise, he would have simply remained “Jesus of Nazareth” had he retained his lifelong focus on the personal lives and relationships of one small village in Galilee. He wouldn't have represented God's own greater yearnings for a redeemed and reconciled world, beginning with his own people. Hometowns don't receive

change very well. They prefer to keep things as we remember them, regardless of how right or just or peaceful it is. For those who remain behind, if things were made perfect, as they often say, it wouldn't be like home.

So what this story tells us is, Nazareth's greatest gift to the world came the day they had to separate themselves from the one who could best save them—the moment they rejected their native son. It was a painful separation, but a necessary one. In the gracious mercies of life, what they lost the rest of the world gained, especially those beyond the borders and boundaries of a small town. What they discovered, to be sure, was that in the end, for Jesus and for the rest of the world, a home away from home was, indeed, all for the best.

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