

“A Piece of Home”
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July 4, 2021

Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up, now has about 77,000 people; at the time of Jesus, scholars suppose that this little village that had also raised Mary had as little as 400 people.

I’ve never lived in a town *that* small. But Leonia seems sufficiently small to give me a sense of what small town life is like. It did not take long living here before I began to notice who is eccentric, who makes things happen, who is a loudmouth, who is a bridge between our many different cultures, who *not* to share my secrets with. And, it seems that most people will show up when they find a neighbor is in need.

As a parent, I notice that we all notice each other’s children. It takes a village, after all. And so we see the giftedness, and the vulnerabilities, of the different kids in our orbit. We try to encourage them when we see them struggle, and we cheer them on when we see them thrive.

I asked the nursery school director at my former church-- who had held this job over 40 years, and saw many return as adults with their own children, whether the personalities they showed as preschoolers matched the adults they would become. Without hesitation, she said, “yes.”

That may be so, but I have seen in my own life, and certainly in my ministry, how much people *can* change. I have seen one kid who was utterly shy, who could not even stutter one word without turning red or crying, become the elected leader and spokesperson for his youth group. I have seen a kid who wanted nothing to do with church or religion growing up end up going to seminary. And so, I hesitate to have a fixed idea of who someone is, because I do not want to limit who they might become.

Are you the person whom the people from your hometown thought you would become? What have you done that has confirmed what they thought of you? What have you done that would surprise them?

When Jesus came back to his hometown, and taught in the synagogue, those who had stuck around Nazareth all those years watched him, weighing what they saw in front of them against the child they knew, in all his giftedness and vulnerabilities. Maybe they remembered:

-They had been told he was the Messiah, as angels were rumored to have announced at his birth, probably causing quite a stir and probably some pride for Jesus’ hometown with hopes that he would bring their redemption.

-As part of a family that descended from such people as David, the beloved king, Ruth, who was revered among Hebrews as the outsider who became the insider, a model in the religious tradition of steadfast love, Jesus shows some impressive lineage.

-With immediate family members such as Elizabeth and Zechariah, his aunt and uncle, and his cousin, John the Baptist, who preceded him as a prophet, and Mary-- his young mom, devout and idealistic, willing to take on the turning over of the world, Jesus showed himself to be part of something big which God was doing in the world.

However, Jesus' hometown folks also knew things about Jesus that marked his vulnerability.:

-They knew of his **questionable birth**; notice, the people say "Is this not the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" You probably didn't realize Jesus had so many siblings. But notice who they don't mention? Joseph, the dad! So when they ask "Isn't this Mary's son" it could also be a dig, that Jesus' father isn't truly known, or that they knew Mary became pregnant before she was married to Joseph.

-At Jesus' birth, because **Herod** feared a Messiah born among the Hebrews, he ordered all the known male Hebrew babies in the vicinity of Bethlehem. While Bethlehem was about 90 miles from Bethlehem, up to a week's walk, there were surely other families who had connections to Bethlehem and experienced loss due to expectations around this coming "Messiah."

-His **family reputation** also probably counted against Jesus. As admirable as it was to be descended from King David and Ruth, Jesus also had in his genealogy Rahab, a prostitute, who had helped Joshua and his army enter into Canaan, and Bathsheba, And don't forget: his cousin, John the Baptist, had already been executed by a Herod of another generation. Surely some feared what could happen to Jesus, or to them, for associating with Jesus.

-Either Jesus had followed in Joseph's footsteps as a carpenter, or they assumed he had, but apparently, they thought that **carpenters could not be prophets**.

What the people of Nazareth may not have realized, in all their observations and assumptions, are these:

-How the waters of baptism shaped him

-What his time in the wilderness-- 30 days, in which he stood up to the devil himself-- did to him

-I am sure there are more external experiences and influences that shaped Jesus that neither we, nor the people of Nazareth, had even heard about.

-What had always been in him that had not yet unfolded.

They couldn't understand who Jesus had become; they couldn't see him beyond the child they knew him to be; and so, they could not believe.

Nonetheless, Jesus did not need their belief for him to become and do what God had called him to do. He was amazed at their disbelief, the scripture says, but right away it says he went about teaching in the villages, and preparing the disciples for healing and casting out demons. "If they will not welcome you," he warned them, "shake the dust off your feet" and move on.

We could say, on this day that celebrates this country's independence, that we know who and what the United States of America is. There are certainly the founding documents that lay out the values upon which our foundation was laid. We have our histories and our myths, and these say something about who we are-- or wish we could be. We have other things, as timeless as

Jewish American Emma Lazarus' poem, inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty asserts, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" We have the preaching and teaching of Sojourner Truth, a black woman suffragist and abolitionist, who spoke to the resilience and determination of the women and black people who had been left out in the founding documents of this country, as she proclaimed "We have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again, and now I am here."

If we are to believe in America, however, it is important as well that we acknowledge its vulnerabilities. Nancy Taylor, the pastor of Old South Church in Boston-- the church of the patriots that gave us the original Boston Tea Party, shared this story when she was installed in 2005. It's probably apocryphal, but most origin stories, are, so... here's what she said: As you know, the Pilgrims ... were aiming for Virginia when they were blown off course into these northerly waters. Although they were not where they had hoped to be, and the climate was much colder than they liked, their need to drop anchor was urgent. As their journal entries attest, they were running dangerously low on an indispensable provision—beer. So if you look at it in a certain light, you can see that this whole endeavor—the 'New World,' the Colonies, the Declaration of Independence, American democracy—it all began as a beer run."¹

Many of us can appreciate a good beer run with a good laugh; I imagine some of you will go on one of those today. But there are other things involved in the founding of this country, and they are not to be looked at with laughter, but they *should* be seen. *The Christian Century* magazine recently ran an editorial titled, "Critical race theory is a gift to Christians." Critical Race Theory-- which is a buzz word for work that's been going on for many decades, and longer too, just without the fancy sounding name that has become a lightning rod in recent months-- understands racism not just as individuals discriminating against other individuals because of their race, but as something more systemic, because it is shaped by history that goes back to the founding of this country: from slavery, to housing discrimination, to mass incarceration. From the slaughter of Native Americans, to their forced removal, to the adoption of native children into white households or schools where they were denied their family ties, native language and rituals; therefore many of the struggles within racial minorities today result from the traumas that have been imposed upon them, which they survived-- if they were lucky-- generation after generation.

Put into Christian terms-- and groups like the Southern Baptist Convention are really grappling with what this means, since the denomination was founded upon upholding slavery-- we must confront the *sin* of Christian churches upholding and even creating many of the racist structures of this nation's history. And that's a hard thing for people to wrap their heads around. It's not individual-- you can't just repent of it on your own and it's over, because it's so much bigger than what any individual created or can end.

¹ J. Mary Luti recalls this story in her blog <https://sicutlocutusest.com/2021/07/>

But as the Christian Century editorial writes, “The good news about collective and institutional sin is that, like individual sin, it can be redeemed. By acknowledging systemic sin and working to change unjust structures—with the aid of tools like CRT—we realign ourselves with God’s work in the world” (June 28, 2021). To love our country means we need to be willing to see the wonderful ideals it was founded upon, as well as who was left out from those. To love our country also means to be willing to see and work toward who and what this country can become.

To love our country means we look at it with honesty and care-- even the parts we don’t want to see. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, speaks of some mysterious vulnerability-- what he calls “a thorn in the side of his flesh.” We don’t know what it is, but Paul is honest about it and even boasts of it-- for it is in acknowledging the weakness is there, he said, that Christ makes him stronger. Paul, as we know, had once been one who persecuted Christians-- sending them to prison and even worse; and yet, he became one of the most lasting voices in history that has told the story of Jesus.

The young poet Amanda Gorman, who shared her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the 2020 presidential inauguration spoke in a similar honesty, regarding this country. “What just is/Isn’t Just-ice.” She saw that we are “a nation that isn’t broken/but simply unfinished” and that “being American is more than a pride we inherit,/ it’s the past we step into /and how we repair it.”

God has not finished yet with who we are and who we are coming. That is true for our lives. That is true for our country. That is true for our world. And, friends, that is good news!