

“Familiarity Breeds Community”

When I left my hometown to go to college and then into the working world something unusual happened. People started trying to say my last name differently from how it was said by my family and in my hometown. Believe it or not, I grew up with my last name pronounced “la-COO-ter”. When I moved away people wanted to give my name a French pronunciation. It was new to me, but after a while it grew on me. So I started to say “luh-coo-TUHR”. But whenever I visited my hometown I was “la-COO-ter” again. When I moved back to Fredericksburg for a few years, the natives were annoyed and some even offended that I pronounced my name in the French manner. It seemed to them that I was putting on airs, or, as the saying goes, “Gettin’ above my raisin’.” I suppose it can happen to anyone who returns to their hometown to find people don’t like the changes they have made over the years.

Something like that is happening to Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus has been away from Nazareth for a while. The Gospels do not tell us how long. It could be a few months or it could be as much as fifteen years. Nazareth was a tiny place; more a hamlet than a town. I have read population estimates for Nazareth of as few as sixty people and as many as three hundred, but never more than that. This was a place where everyone knew everyone; and everyone in town knew Mary’s oldest boy.

When he returns to Nazareth he stands up in the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins to teach. While he is talking people begin to murmur (murmuring in the Bible is never a good thing). Mark initially tells us that the people are astounded, but he follows up by telling us that they took offense. Folks are saying, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” We do not know what Jesus was teaching, but it doesn’t seem to matter. The point is that Jesus, that boy who grew up here and whose parents, brothers, and sisters we know, has the gall to teach in the synagogue. As the old saying goes, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Their complaint is that this local boy acts like he has the authority to do this. The irony is that people in other hamlets, villages, and towns, have been astounded by Jesus’ teaching because he taught as one having authority unlike the scribes and elders.

Look at Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. He says that he knew a person who was caught up into “third heaven,” and has had profound mystical experiences. Most scholars believe he is talking about himself. But because he is well known to the people of Corinth he decides to tell the story as if it is someone else. We know from other writings of his that Paul is not a shy or humble person. Yet, he thinly disguises himself in this passage. His hope is that if they think it is the experience of someone else they will be more likely to believe it. In this case the importance of the message outweighs his ego.

For Jesus it means that he leaves his hometown because they will not listen to him. I am sure he was frustrated and maybe sad that his neighbors would not hear him the way those in other towns did. He had known them all his earthly life. These people helped raise him. He had eaten with them, gone to synagogue with them, celebrated with them, and mourned with them. He wanted them to know the Good News. Sadly, it seems their familiarity with him got in the way.

During lockdown many churches started putting their services online. What I heard from some people was that rather than watch the service produced by their local church, they opted for services produced by large churches. Their services had high quality video, they could hire professional singers and musicians, pay for high profile guest preachers, and more. I understand the attraction. Why wear homespun when you can wear silk? Some pundits believe that many churchgoers will stick with this pattern. However, they are missing something and that is the community.

Despite the best technology, a video worship service cannot compare to being with people in person. Entertainment value aside, there is something special about being with people you know. The singers, musicians, and ushers are part of our everyday life. These are the people with whom we celebrate, mourn, drink coffee, and share Holy Communion. They are our community of faith which we rely upon. The folks who produce the great worship experiences in DC, LA, New York, or Atlanta will not be there for us. I doubt they will send missionaries to us as Jesus sent out his disciples.

There are exceptions. Some of you may remember that a few years ago we welcomed a guest speaker from a religious organization. That speaker was here to encourage us to participate in the work of that group. However, he almost immediately started telling us that we did not worship God correctly. He challenged our acceptance of people from other faith traditions. When he left he gathered up his materials and shook the dust of this place off of his sandals as he went. In his case he could not accept our welcome or understand our message of love and community that this place lives. We welcomed him, but he could not welcome us.

In our case, familiarity does not breed contempt, but rather community. This is a community of love and care. It is a community that challenges itself and others to love and be loved. Time and again I hear from visitors how welcomed and respected they feel here. This is a house of Christian love. When someone like that guest shakes the dust of this place off of his sandals, he is dismissing the love of Christ for the judgments and partisanship of the world.

Let us keep on loving each other because of our differences not in spite of them. Let us keep on loving each other because that is what Christ does. Let us keep on listening for the prophetic voice among us, because no one knows where God's message will come from next. Let us continue to be the community of love that welcomes the stranger and the friend without condition. That is what Jesus teaches and it lives on in our hearts when we welcome him in.