

“Becoming Irrelevant”

Home is a tricky concept. It can be a place of comfort or a place of confinement. Even in the best of households there is a mixture of good memories and not so good. Home can be a place we flee to when things get rough. It can also be a place we flee from.

One of the marks of maturing is wanting to explore beyond the familiar ground of home. Yet, when we travel, we often feel homesick longing for the people we know, home cooking, familiar surroundings and routines. One example of exploration is going off to college. There we can reinvent ourselves. Few if any people know us there. We have the chance to experiment and find out who we are without the constraints of family and friends who have already decided who we are. It is a different world and one where we can spread our wings for better or for worse.

There is another thought about home that was expressed by Thomas Wolfe in the title of his novel “You Can’t Go Home Again.” Many people find it hard to go back to where they grew up. Their home has changed too much, or they have changed too much. That is what seems to have happened to Jesus.

Jesus had a home in Nazareth. People there knew him as the son of Mary and a carpenter. They also knew his brothers and sisters who still lived in Nazareth.¹ They knew who he was, and they had him pigeonholed. In today’s passage from Mark, he returns to Nazareth after some unspecified period. However, it is on the heels of a preaching, teaching, and healing throughout Galilee. The news of his ministry has reached his hometown, and they have questions.²

While he is teaching in the synagogue they start to murmur.³ Initially, they are astounded but then they start wondering “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?” At this point, the questioning could be genuine curiosity but then Mark adds. “And they took offense at him.”

That last line stings. It is also confusing. What is it that the townspeople could be offended by? He had traveled the region and was welcomed and heralded in each of the towns. The people of Nazareth are responding to Jesus more like the Pharisees than regular townspeople in the rest of the region. I do not think these Nazoreans were questioning Jesus’ theology and scriptural interpretation the way the Pharisees did. Could it be that the jealousy that the Pharisees felt was also being expressed by the townspeople? Can you imagine them saying things like “what makes him so special? Who does he think he is? Why wasn’t I given his abilities? I could do what he does if someone gave me the chance?”

Jealousy is a weird thing. It makes us think absurd thoughts about ourselves and others. It can take over our mind and spirit in such a way that we cannot see clearly. We look at others not just with envy; that is the thought that I wish I had what they have. But rather I want to take away from someone what they have. For example,

¹Note that in this passage from Mark Joseph is not mentioned as Jesus’ father or the one who taught him carpentry.

²Mark 6:1-13 NRSV

³Beware of murmuring it is never a good thing in the Bible or in church.

if I envy Emily Mason's skill on the piano, I admire it and wish that I had that skill too. But if I am jealous of her skill, I want to take it from her. If I cannot have it, then no one should. That is twisted thinking and destructive for the one who is jealous and the one who is the object of their jealousy. Jealousy so overwhelms the people of Nazareth that in Matthew's version of this scene the people of the village take Jesus to the brow of a hill to throw him off it. It makes no sense to want to kill a man who has done so much good except for that they cannot stand it that he was given a gift that they feel has been denied them. It is amazing what people will do when in the thrall of the green-eyed monster.

Since we are all susceptible to jealousy what is the solution to the plague? One answer is in St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians that we just heard.⁴ In it Paul describes someone who has been swept up into heaven; specifically, third heaven as heaven has several levels.⁵ This person experiences and hears things that are not permitted for a human to repeat. Paul says that he can boast about the person who had this mystical experience, but as for himself he can only boast about his weaknesses. He can only boast about his weaknesses otherwise he will be a fool. I am sure we have all seen someone whose boasting made them out to be nothing but a fool when all they wanted was to be seen as grand.

Perhaps that is even what Jesus feels about the response of the Nazoreans to his teaching in the synagogue. He had not realized that they might have thought he was getting "too big for his britches" or "above his raising" as the sayings go. Perhaps that is why Jesus takes a break from his ministry and sends the disciples out two-by-two with authority over unclean spirits.

Jesus is learning the importance of humility in his ministry. Paul, whom few would call humble, recognizes the importance of humility. I expect that in the passage from 2nd Corinthians Paul is preaching to himself as much as anyone. Paul says that the Lord told him that his power is made perfect in our weakness.

I read a lot, but I only mark a few books as ones that have changed my life. One of those books is *In the Name of Jesus* by Henri Nouwen. What struck me so powerfully in that book is how Nouwen describes the importance of becoming "irrelevant." That is, we need to get our ego and need for importance out of the way so that the Holy Spirit can work through us.

Becoming irrelevant is tough. We are told to strive for relevance. We give participation medals to everyone so that no one feels unimportant. But the truth is that if we can get so full of ourselves there is not room for the Holy Spirit to do her work. If we boast of our strengths, we do not realize how important it is to recognize our weaknesses. Until we recognize our frailties, we are like a bull in a china shop breaking everything and everyone we encounter.

We may need to seek out our home in order to return to a more realistic view of ourselves. It may be necessary to be reminded that we are not as grand as all that. It may be necessary to take off the mask we have made to learn true humility. If it can happen to Jesus and Paul, then learning humility is a good thing for us to work on too.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 NRSV

⁵ For more information on the levels of heaven see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_heavens accessed July 6, 2024