

Hometowns. What comes to mind for you when you hear this word? Maybe you're far away from your hometown or you haven't been back for a while. Maybe you're still living in your hometown. Perhaps thinking of your hometown gives you warm, nostalgic feelings or perhaps it's a little more complicated than that. No matter what, we can all agree that hometowns hold an important place in our psyches and are often tied up in our identities — our sense of who we are and what matters to us. Think about the traditions, maybe the annual festivals, the landmarks, the favorite gathering places of your hometown, or the local sports team.

For me, hometown was the “Maple City”, Geneseo, Illinois, a small town filled with maple trees and a sports mascot of the Maple Leafs. Much of my memories of this town where I spent my childhood are rather idyllic as I remember ice cream socials in the city park on summer nights, riding my bike all over town, or getting to be with my friends at church every Sunday. It was all pretty comfortable for me and for others like myself. I knew that I belonged.

One significant thing that happened in my hometown when I was about 5 years old was the arrival of a refugee family fleeing from their home in Laos, right at the end of the Vietnam War. Our church sponsored this family to come and live in little Geneseo, IL — a long way from their home, strangers in a strange land. This family moved into a house across the street from ours on Main Street, and we spent time sharing meals together, trying to understand each other with limited language to communicate, and helping them get settled into a new life. Did these folks, who were so clearly different from us, belong in our community? Did they belong in our church as non-Christians? Was it right for a church to get tangled up in a situation that was politically controversial? There were those who disagreed with the decision to sponsor this family, and people were not always welcoming of them in the community, but ultimately our church leaned into the way of hospitality, generosity, and justice in the way of Jesus.

Speaking of Jesus, our scripture today is set in none other than Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. If you were in worship last Sunday, you might realize that we pick up today where we left off, hearing Jesus teaching in his hometown synagogue and reading from the scroll of Isaiah, “The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me. The Spirit has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery

of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of God's favor.” Then Jesus simply tells them that the Scripture is fulfilled in their hearing. In this proclamation, Jesus boldly shares the nature of the reign and realm of God, and that his very life, his presence is the embodiment of this reign and realm. Jesus is, in essence, ushering in God’s reign and inviting his followers to join in this new vision of reality. Upon hearing this, those hometown folks in the synagogue with Jesus were impressed. You can almost imagine them exchanging approving looks or whispering among themselves how wonderful this was. Such good news of grace for them, coming from one of their very own, Joseph’s son. But Jesus doesn’t stop there and shares a harder word about who belongs and who this message of liberation is really for.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus lets the people of his hometown know that the good news is just as much for the outsiders as it is for the insiders. This controversial word was an unexpected and unwelcome revelation. Those who heard it got so angry that the formerly friendly neighbors turned into an ugly mob, ready to kill Jesus then and there. As Jesus is able to pass through the crowd and go on his way, we are left to realize who Jesus is and what his message of radical inclusivity means — and it puts him at odds with this religious community. This will not be an easy road ahead.

Just as my own hometown community and church were challenged to consider who really belonged when a Laotian refugee family came to live with us, we are faced with this question, this hard truth that excludes no one, all the time. On a daily basis, our human tendency is to seek self-preservation and to draw dividing lines between who is in and who is out. This has been a perpetual issue in churches. Thankfully this faith community of Hope and the MCC is one who has wrestled and made many strides in an effort to be intentional in communicating and embodying the wide and inclusive love of Jesus. But there is always more work to be done, by the grace of God.

Living in this spirit of the wide and inclusive love of Jesus goes against much of the ways of the world, but is God’s gracious invitation and promise of the “big picture” or the “largest frame”, as Richard Rohr puts it. This perspective of God pulls us out of our little hometown frames of reference and into the big frame. In this frame, there is room enough for you, for me, and for all to be at home, along with a call to live differently so that life can be shared with others. May we open ourselves again and again to this call of simplicity,

vulnerability, dialogue, and humility, where together we and all the world are held in the boundless, abundant love of God.