

**“Home Towns”**  
**Sermon on Sunday, July 4, 2021**

**Dear church,**

What is the name of your hometown, where you grew up? When was the last time you were there? And how has that town or neighborhood changed since you left? I am asking you those questions partly because I am going to return to my hometown tomorrow and partly because the gospel for this Sunday features Jesus returning to the place where he was raised, not receiving a very warm welcome there. Those places where we grew up, where we were shaped by our family of origin and the townspeople, the places that we once called home – they continue to live on in our souls. I am sure if you close your eyes for a moment, literally or even just in your mind, an image or two of your childhood and the particular place of your upbringing is conjured up easily.

And so, whether you were raised in Allentown like Bill and Lois Kesack, in Buffalo like Bernie Heinze, in Indiana, Pennsylvania like Amy Gillan, in Philadelphia like Diana Blum or in North Wales like Steve Moyer or Dave Rittenhouse, these places shaped you, whether you wanted it or not. We could probably say that there are two types of people: those who can't wait to leave their hometown and discover the world and those who like to stay close to home or keep coming back. I am not sure which the case was for Jesus. He was raised in Nazareth but he received a vocation that sent him on a mission to communities all across the Galilean lake, to people in far-away Jerusalem and even communities along the Eastern Mediterranean shore. By the time he returned home, he had built what we would call today a national reputation. He had made a name for himself.

Yet, people remembered the little boy that he once was, back when he helped his dad in the carpentry business. They remembered him with pimples as a teenager; they remembered him with dirt on his hands and his knees and with other imperfections. They didn't think he was that special and never even considered him an important person. Now, still fairly young, he comes back and people in Nazareth are not willing to buy into the hype building around him. Part of the reaction of the people in Nazareth is typical. We want our heroes and heroines to be perfect, and when we watch people grow up, they just never are perfect. Part of the rejection is likely jealousy. Who does he think he is! Wasn't he raised like everybody else? And yet another part may be the controversies surrounding the person. “We don't want to get involved in this Jesus controversy,” his hometown decided.

Case in point: 19<sup>th</sup> century German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, one of my all-time favorites. Heine had a wonderful, acerbic, irreverent, polemic sense of humor. He had a way with words. True, often at the expense of others. His hometown Dusseldorf, a pretty affluent city then and now, was not impressed with it. It took them a long time to even consider a statue for this famous child of the city, the author of the Lorelei poem. When the statue was finally commissioned, to be unveiled on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1897, it was declined yet again by the city fathers. And would you know where the statue of Heinrich Heine ended up? Here in the United States! The Lorelei Fountain, also known as the Heinrich Heine Memorial, is located on East 161st Street near the Bronx County Courthouse in New York City since 1899. Not in Dusseldorf where he was born.

Not in Paris where he was a refugee, fleeing Prussian authorities. In those days, the statue made sense in the Bronx among Jewish and German immigrants. But it was a sad story of hometown rejection and antisemitism that required as expensive export to these shores.

And so, this biblical hometown rejection story, which appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, is a very human story. So often, we fail to fully appreciate those who are closest to us. So often, we fail to see the blessings that are right under our noses. So often, we are more critical of people in our immediate vicinity. Why is that? Has it something to do with our own insecurities that we don't want somebody close to us to receive all the accolades? Are we afraid that elevating people close to us will automatically diminish us? Do people believe there is not enough spotlight for everyone?

I don't know. In any case, Mark tells us that Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith in Nazareth. In fact, he couldn't do much in his hometown and soon went on his way, bringing his teachings to nearby villages where he presumably was received with less scrutiny. As I reflected further upon this story, I was also wondering whether we sometimes get stuck on the image we have of a person. Once we form that image ("the carpenter's son") it can be difficult to notice that a person has changed, has grown, has been transformed, and is a different human being now. It has maybe as much to do with spiritual laziness as with anything else. This story ultimately teaches me to look at people with an open mind and not exclusively rely on what I always thought of them. It teaches me not to put people in a box. The carpenter's son was much more than a carpenter's son. In fact, he was called the Son of God. He could have done so much more in Nazareth, if people had only given him a chance. Then I wonder who the people are among us who could do more among us if only we gave them a fresh opportunity. Let us think about that. Let us pray about that! Amen.