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Church of the Holy Faith
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 9
Ez. 2:1-5; Ps 123;
1 Cor 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13
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Discomfort

Hometowns are fickle. When I return to Savannah, Georgia, where I grew up, I love driving by my high school. I love seeing the church I grew up in, which now has a Vietnamese congregation, and I love going to the beach I frequented weekly. A hometown can communicate comfort and security. Maybe the memories of your hometown are not comforting at all, though. A dear friend from Los Alamos, who has since moved, refuses to come back. The town holds too many memories of her son who died by suicide at age twenty-one. Hometowns can be life-giving and heartbreaking and everything in between.

In today's gospel, Jesus travels back to his hometown of Nazareth. He hasn't been there in a very long while. Mark's gospel recounts him leaving to be baptized, traveling south and west to the Jordan river. He spends forty days in the wilderness, and then travels up and around the villages and towns near the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum becomes the home base for his ministry, a location forty miles to the northwest of Nazareth. He preaches in synagogues, astonishing everyone. He heals the sick, banishes unclean spirits, forgives sins, and even brings a dead girl back to life. He appoints a group of working-class guys who, along with hundreds of admirers, follow him everywhere. Along the way he utters cryptic messages about the kingdom of God and near-blasphemous statements about his relationship to God. All the while ignoring his hometown roots.

We have no reason to believe Jesus wasn't expecting a warm reception when he did arrive in Nazareth. His reputation for miraculous healings has undoubtedly preceded him. Hospitality was an important and valued component of Jewish society and Jesus' amazement at the unbelief of the townspeople indicates he anticipated an affectionate homecoming. At first, many were astonished. Quickly, however, amazement turns negative. Note this is not the villainous Pharisees who question Jesus' credentials: these are his neighbors and friends. Our NRSV translation states "they took offense at him," but the Greek term is much stronger: it means they were scandalized by him, they considered him a stumbling block who enticed others to sin. I suspect Jesus' amazement at their rejection was tinged also with sadness and hurt.

But why? Why did the small, unwalled town with a population of less than three hundred Jews, consisting primarily of simplistic farmers and tradesmen, not welcome their local-boy-makes-good hero home? What stumbling blocks were in *their* way? What prevented them from accepting Jesus and his message of salvation? We heard just last week the stories of the synagogue leader Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman, both of whom placed all their faith and trust in Jesus without hesitation. What stood in the way of the faith of the Nazarenes? I can think of several obstacles: Resentment. Entitlement. Judgment. Prejudice. Insecurity. Fear. Denial. Pride. All of which, unfortunately, also impede our own relationship with Jesus. All of which, unfortunately, also impede our willingness to be disciples of Christ. What I'd like to focus on today, though, is an additional, and significant, stumbling block that obstructed the Nazarenes and also obstructs us: discomfort.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus taught in his hometown synagogue, but rest assured it was controversial and caused a great deal of discomfort. Rest assured he challenged the

establishment and the status quo. Rest assured he made claims about himself and his authority. In Luke's version of this encounter, Jesus' words are so offensive, they try to run him off a cliff.

The reaction of the Nazarenes reminds us that Jesus IS offensive. He invades our lives and rearranges our priorities. He demands a halt to spiritual backsliding. He came to unsettle, to startle us into new ways of seeing the world. He asks tough questions and infuses us with ridiculous ideas like loving, *loving*, our enemies, caring for the poor, and welcoming *everyone* into God's kingdom.

The easiest way to avoid discomfort is to denigrate the messenger, which is what the people of Nazareth did. Who does he think he is, this illegitimate carpenter with no formal teaching? Or another way, as we often do, is to sanitize the message in order to *reduce* the discomfort. Did he really say I need to forgive and ask for forgiveness? Did he really command I love my neighbor as myself? Did he really mean deny myself and take up my cross? Or were those just suggestions? How sad it would be if it were said of us, "He was amazed at their unbelief." If Jesus doesn't make us uncomfortable, then I suggest we are denying exactly who Jesus is.

There is a path forward. We don't need to denigrate the messenger or sanitize the message. It is easy to fall into the trap of safety, fear, and negativism, just as they did in Nazareth. Discomfort doesn't need to be a stumbling block in our relationship with Christ. We can live into the discomfort, embrace the discomfort, encourage one another in the discomfort, pray for strength in the discomfort, remaining confident of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. Yes, it is hard allowing Jesus to wreck havoc in the corners of our hearts. Letting God speak into the cozy little places of our lives, though, increases our capacity for faith, hope, and love. It connects us with grace and joy. It opens our minds and our hearts to possibilities, to change, to

fresh and new challenges, to proclamations of hope and transformation – something sorely needed today. Jesus asks us to believe nothing will be impossible with God, not in our lives, not in our towns, not in our churches, no matter how uncomfortable it may seem to be. In closing, I offer this Franciscan benediction: “May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.” Amen.