

## HOMECOMING

I went home last weekend. Of course, I'm not referring to the place that I truly consider my home, the place I share with Phillip and Chester—Chester being our dog. I mean the place where I grew up, Rochester, NY. We ordinarily go up to visit once a year, though Covid prevented us from doing so last year. I know that it is true for many people that returning to the place you grew up can evoke a whole range of feelings, some of them contradictory. In general, I always enjoy going back to Rochester, and I appreciate doing nostalgic tours of places that were important to me as a child, and recalling many of my early experiences. Although Rochester is notorious for less-than-ideal weather—more cloudy days than sunny—I seem to always recall the sunny, balmy days of growing up. Perhaps it's an act of denial, but it suits my purpose. Since my mother died fourteen years ago (with my father having passed away a number of years before that), I've had less reason to visit on a regular basis. Now I go to visit my older sister and brother and their families. But my feelings about my family are a little complicated.

Compared to the kinds of trauma many have suffered within their families; I have been extremely fortunate. My father's side of the family were generally blue-collar-working-class. I can only think of three cousins who ever left Rochester for any length of time, and only for a time. My mother's side spread out across the country. They tended to pursue higher education and professional positions. I seem to have taken after that side of the family, though I rarely saw them because of distance. Because my father developed a successful restaurant business, I grew up with a good deal of financial security and opportunity, and they were generous in supporting my educational ambitions. I became very self-reliant and goal oriented, though my goals shifted as time went on. And although there are many good memories, I always struggled with a sense of self-consciousness and a feeling that I was "different" than many of the people around me. Part of this was being a boy born relatively late in my parent's life, being school oriented in a family which was generally indifferent to education, not being much interested in sports in a family where all of the other boys were, and of course, gradually understanding myself as gay. Now when I go home, my family is quite enthusiastic in welcoming me and Phillip, but I still always feel somewhat dislocated and only partially visible. My politics other liberal leanings are quite different from most of my relatives, and I assiduously avoid the topic as much as I want to smash heads together. I find that their frame of reference limits much of what I might share about myself in terms of my profession and ministry, so I try to understand what is happening in their lives while also feeling a sadness that they can't understand so much of what is important to me. Still, I have found myself at times longing for a deeper recognition for who I am at my core.

This personal experience has undoubtedly shaped my interpretation of the passage from Mark in today's Gospel. Traditionally known as the "confession of Caesarea-Phillipi" it is often viewed as a test of the disciples as well as a read of the publicity that Jesus had accrued. At first, Peter appears to come up with the right answer. "You are the Messiah." But then it gets more complicated. As Jesus begins to teach them about the inevitable suffering the Messiah must undergo, Peter finds it too much to take. Jesus' rebuke is swift and harsh, probably reflecting the importance of the full understanding of what his messiahship was all about. You can't have one about the other. You can't have a true Messiah who

doesn't also suffer from the rejection of the world. Jesus continues to preach about the necessity of self-denial and taking up one's cross and losing one's life. But these extreme and difficult acts only make sense in terms of following in the footsteps of the Christ. Christians are not masochists, but we are identified with the suffering Christ and recognize Christ in the suffering of the world. I also believe that in asking these questions, Jesus was striving to fully embrace his own identity and a destiny which was certainly frightening. And I also believe that part of the cross of Jesus was the sadness and sense of isolation in the face of those who couldn't deeply recognize who he was in his essence and how God was acting through Jesus. To "recognize" Jesus did not mean merely to see him as something special, but to be able to link everything about his life and death to God's effort to transform the world.

Today is *Welcome Back* Sunday at St. Peter's, but I like to think of it as *Homecoming Sunday*. Our homecoming has actually been unfolding since earlier in the summer when so many of us were able to return to this space, albeit with an abundance of caution. Coming home to a familiar and familial place has all kinds of layers of meaning. It is a time to reflect on what we hope for in this community, this family: to be a place of spiritual aliveness and dedicated service. When we can see Christ—recognize Christ in one another, we come about as close as you can get to truly being *church*. We might also be aware of the possibility that not everyone may feel as much "at home" here as some, and that all groups must struggle with dynamics of exclusion as well as inclusion. But at our best, St. Peter's offers an opportunity for a deeply mutual recognition of one another as siblings in Christ. But not just siblings, but disciples who are each in our own way struggling to walk the walk of the Holy One. And "coming home" is not merely a return to some nostalgic place but is also an opportunity for continuing growth and transformation and metanoia—a change of heart.

Even if I have often felt like the *odd duck* in my family, I have been extremely fortunate to have known people all along the way who have recognized something in me and therefore recognized *me*, calling me out to live my life in truth. The greatest privilege of all is to realize that we are recognized by God as God's own, and even if we periodically require renovations or course corrections, we are fundamentally called to be at home in God.

Just about a week ago, as I sat at dinner with my brother's family, I was fortunate to learn things about a nephew and a great-niece that I had not known—things which made me feel proud. I also had the realization of how judgmental I had been of my family at times—probably much more judgmental than they have been of me. It was a moment of shame which quickly gave way to gratitude. When we can get to a place of recognizing that we are more alike with one another than our sense of specialness or our subtle sense of apartness sometimes prevents, we can be opened to a grace that eases the loneliness and creates belonging. My visit to Rochester was more of a homecoming than I had realized.

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