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Proper 7 Year A

There must be some cruel joke in the fact that this gospel passage is being read on Father's day. Setting man against father, straining familial relationships. Happy Father's Day Dad! Is what I would say if we were still talking, thanks Jesus!

I'm sure there is some truth in Jesus's words today. Is that a heretical comment? Aren't his words always the Truth? What I mean is that I'm sure it has happened, a child growing up to proclaim the gospel and thereby alienating her family members, I'm sure it has happened, in fact I've heard stories of such things, but Jesus' words today are a bit broader than the immediate family.

The family of course is where we learn most of our values, of how to be in the world. But that family unit itself is placed within a larger system, a community, a town, a state, a geographical region, a nation, and on and on. At each level there are stories and histories that shape us in ways we may be blind to. Yet too often those ways are in conflict with the Good News and Love that Jesus has come to proclaim. Yet these words bring us up short today, at least they do me, precisely because in them we are being asked to confront the things we may not wish to see in the world around us.

Jesus' point today is that following him means setting ourselves apart from the society that raised us; that may very well mean our families. It certainly means a society that has given pride of place to people who look a lot like me and has treated those that don't like criminals.

Because of that, Today I want to share with you my story about where I grew up; as a way for me to wrestle with what it means to be a white man in America, but also as a way to hopefully illuminate what Jesus means by his words today for myself and for all of us.

Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. This is North Eastern Pennsylvania. Until about the early 20th century anthracite coal was mined heavily in this region and was the main economic driver. The mines of course needed labor and many eastern European and Irish immigrants found their way to the region to work in the mines; I have not met many Lithuanian Catholics since moving away from this region. My family was the only "Pierce" listed in the phone book. When most of the mines closed by the mid-20th century, no new industry came in to fill the void. The area remains largely impoverished today.

I share that background because it's important. When I grew up there the area was predominately white. Many folks who lived there had family that had immigrated from Europe and stayed in the area. My family were the outsiders, again the phone book. Now I don't say that to imply some sense of understanding on what it means to be a minority in this country, it's just a way to illustrate how close knit this community and culture that I grew up in was. You see there was always this talk of the "other". If your parents were not from here then how could you understand us and our ways? There was always this sense that this culture in North Eastern PA

was unique, special, that it must be protected. It certainly was a lens through which to see the world.

Now I don't think I'm describing anything particularly unique. I'm sure most of us grew up in similar environments.

But as a kid growing up there, as a white kid nonetheless, this uniqueness, this sense of self-importance was conveyed in a number of ways. For one there was the language we, I would use to describe other people who were different, all the derogatory names you can think of I probably said them. And I said them unflinchingly because I heard others around me saying them. I heard adults, my teachers, my coaches, my friends, my sisters who are older, I heard their friends using this language; this dehumanizing, derogatory language of othering. This language that we used was not innocent, it instead framed our world view, placing us, the white folks, at the center, and those that had ancestors in the region closer to that center. Everyone else was outside that, different, other than us.

Now besides this racist language, the other language that many in this region were so fluent in was the language of religion. The towns in Schuylkill County were small then, most are smaller now, yet there were more churches in each town than you'd find here in Wilmington, NC. Mostly catholic churches; we grew up Methodist so the catholic thing was a stretch for my parents and frankly I was disturbed as a child by some of the imagery in these churches. But we found an evangelical church that worked for us and my family went regularly, we were involved and my brother and I were regular members of the youth group.

This language too also deeply shaped the values of the people in Schuylkill County and myself as well. But I'm not so sure it was always the way of Jesus we were being taught. To be in church regularly and involved in a church community was understood as proper moral behavior, to be understood as evidence that we were good people. It was the proper way to raise a family and be a part of the wider community. The church was part of the social fabric, not readily in a position to critique it.

I put these framing narratives side by side intentionally, but that's only because they were put side by side for me in childhood. Both the language of "other" and the myths and jokes used to support placing white folks like me at the center of the world coupled with a culture that deeply understood itself to be among God's good graces because of their proximity to religious institutions meant that it was very hard to understand the violence of a white-centric world view. It was very hard to see this and how it influenced our lives.

That is until the summer of 2008. My family left the region in 2004 and I began college in Florida in 2006. Yet before we left the demographics of the region were changing rapidly. New industry had begun to arrive; there were several companies in the area manufacturing mattresses. Many of the jobs were filled by new immigrants to the country from Mexico or Central America. There was animosity in the region at this and suddenly that racial language we all were using was now directed towards an actual group of people living within the same communities. Lost in all this though was the irony that many who grew up in the region had parents or grandparents

who themselves had immigrated to the hills of Schuylkill County for work in the coal mines. Yet suddenly these new immigrants were an abnormality.

In summer 2008 4 high school football players severely beat Luis Ramirez who died a few days later from his injuries. That culture that indiscriminately dehumanized others through its language through its jokes, language I used as a child, was laid bare in that moment. The illusion of innocence was shattered then for folks in that community and a reckoning was now underway. Folks could be heard in interviews and their quotes read in local papers stating that “we are not racists, we are good people in Shenandoah, in Frackville, in Pottsville” While others were quoted in the same paper wondering aloud why the Latinx community was growing in the area and lamenting the loss of their cultural heritage. After 2008 my eyes were open. I had to then and continue to do so today wrestle with what it meant to grow up in such a place, yet a place that is not so unique as to be confined to one small geographic region of Pennsylvania. This is America.

Jesus comes to separate us from those things that would have us live in any other way that is not love.

Jesus comes to show us the love of God in this world, Jesus quite literally is Love incarnate. We cannot separate that Love from statements like we hear in Matthew today. This is a love and way of being in the world that demands we cast off our allegiances to this world. That invites us to see the structures of sin all around us in our language, in our communities, and in our economies. The church too often has traded this love for the comforts of this world, uncomfortable perhaps with the demands of a Jesus who comes to us and says “I have not come to bring peace” and who is unapologetic when it comes to creating conflict and perhaps even division within families. For Jesus, that division is not intentional, however, given what he knew of our human tendencies for self-interest and tribalism he saw it as unavoidable. God’s love is everything that overcomes those tendencies. It is a love that the church today must get comfortable proclaiming. We in the church must not spend so much time worrying if we are good people or bad people. The reality is we are just people, people who have been socialized into a context and society that places some of our brothers and sisters above our other brothers and sisters. In the language of our faith, a society structured in sin. Jesus comes so that we might have life and have it abundantly, but he comes being open about that cost and what we will be leaving behind; not as some demand or transaction, but as an authentic response to following him.

One final thing I want to say today and then I’ll stop. That story today from Genesis shares some similarities with the story of the binding of Isaac we will hear next week. There is a moment in both stories where the sons of Abraham are so very close to death. Yet in both stories God intervenes and invites Hagar today and Abraham next week to see what is right before them; in Hagar’s case, a well, and in Abraham’s case a ram in the thicket. It is that act of seeing what was always there that brings new life to Abraham’s sons.

Sisters and brothers, I believe God is asking us to open our eyes to see the world as it truly is, to see what has always been here; it may not be comfortable to look, it rarely is easy for most of us to look at a wound, but I believe we are being asked to see our own wounds and the wounds of others. Because it is through our seeing that there will be new life for all of us. *Amen.*