

Making the hometown home again

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Sep. 18, 2009

In this column last month, I wrote about the idea that Jesus is not welcome in his hometown. Jesus expresses this sentiment in all four Gospels: Luke 4, Matthew 13, Mark 6, and John 4. It's a common reference made in theology school when someone is returning home for a couple weeks or a couple months before transitioning to some new career or mission adventure.

I know I spent a lot of time thinking about this passage a bit over a year ago. I think everyone who studies theology or scripture, and is trying to shed some light on God's prophetic message as an intermediary from God to God's people, has thoughts about this passage when returning to their hometown. A couple years ago, it became clear that my spouse and I were going to make the move back to my home region. She wanted to go to law school here, and I liked the idea of being in a smaller community near my parents. We looked for places to live all over the place, then settled into my hometown, the first suburb west of Madison, Wis., where the parks are great and schools are even better. It's definitely been an experience of moving back to the suburbs after a decade in Chicago and Oakland.

We've had a few "welcome to the suburbs" moments. The first probably came a month after we moved here, when we were at the park next to our house taking in some fireworks over the Fourth of July. Some kids at the park were launching their own fireworks in competition with the big show that everyone had come out to watch. In Chicago or Oakland -- or any major city around the world during a national holiday for that matter -- this is not uncommon. Between Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and every other shade of Americans celebrating their national holiday within months of each other, it seems that there were fireworks popping every weekend in Chicago. But the neighbors here were steamed at these kids for launching fireworks. Not just a little irritated, but "I'm calling the cops" mad at the kids. When the kids decided it was better to get out of there than deal with the bulk of the police force, they turned on their headlights so as not to hit any bystanders, and were threatened again with a call to the cops for having their headlights on.

As someone who hopes for the best when dealing with human conflict, this was a bit of a deflating experience.

Other than this and a couple other similar experiences, living in my hometown has been energizing. I appreciate how close everything is. A bad commute is 10 minutes. People are very friendly. They remember me from 20 years ago when I was playing kickball and playing on tire swings. There is lots of lakefront access. We love running through the nature preserve and biking 5 minutes to reach either the cornfields or the second biggest city in the state.

One challenge has been how to retain some of the values I picked up in living in big cities and bring them here. Poverty exists nearly everywhere, including my hometown. It's just not as easy to see here as in downtown Chicago or Oakland, where it's constantly in your face and there aren't too many ways to escape it.

I discovered that my hometown has a workforce development housing program that provides loans to low-income residents who want to buy a home or condo, and also encourages developers to include affordable housing units in their new developments. Long story short, on the recommendation of my city alder, the mayor

appointed me to the committee that oversees the program. (It sounds more prestigious than it actually is; our town has fewer than 20,000 people). It has been an opportunity to learn more about how city government works, all the constituents that they have to answer to, and how to make a worthy program work for both the city and the people it serves.

There are challenges: At least one alder would rather do without the affordable housing program. Some residents are concerned that it will bring lots of low-income residents to their neighborhood. (In reality, the people who utilize the down payment assistance program are spread throughout the city). Some developers have no interest in supporting affordable housing even if it gives them a break on paying city park taxes.

However, the biggest challenge for this work in my time on the committee has actually come from one of its biggest supporters, the hometown newspaper that has been instrumental in publicizing the program.

A problem we have run into is that some of the units that were designated as affordable a couple years ago are now listed higher than the current market rate. A family that wanted to move into one of these units couldn't because their income wasn't low enough to qualify. We decided it was best to release these units back to the developer so they could be sold at market price, which was lower than the listed "affordable" rate.

This decision got reported in my hometown paper as "City cancels affordable housing program."

The paper's editor, who was the author of the article, is a good guy and a supporter of this work, and his article was actually well-written, explaining the failure of this one part of the program. The trouble with the article was that you had to read it carefully -- even I had to re-read it -- to understand that the city was still paying attention to affordable housing.

The down payment assistance program is still going strong, and other developments that will include affordable housing are underway. But that was buried in the article, and some of us thought that made it misleading. A few of us wrote a letter to the editor to promote the other programs that have been successful for new residents of my hometown.

That got the editor steamed. How can these city committee members, the city administrator and a few alders not understand that he has been covering the program for four years? Of course there is still an affordable housing program in the city, but one part of it got canceled. He got fired up and questioned our knowledge.

In the end, good came from this challenge as it turned into an opportunity to clarify and publicize the program.

It really was my first experience of not being welcome here. I saw serving on this committee as one way for me to link some of the prophetic message of economic justice from my past, and sync it with the town I grew up in and am now residing in. I thought that the more challenging conversations would be with city officials who don't want low-income residents, or with developers who are so focused on the bottom line that creating affordable housing doesn't make sense at first.

It was a surprise that the first big challenge came from a supporter not an opponent. This became another lesson in a long line of lessons on how the inability to communicate clearly can become a primary obstacle toward implementing God's prophetic vision.

I thought playing the role of the intermediary would come between residents who don't want low-income people in their community, shortsighted alders, and bottom-line developers. However, as is typical when going home, playing an intermediary is more complex because of longstanding and deeper relationships. No matter how old the biblical texts get, there always seems to be a way to crack open new meaning in order to spread God's prophetic vision -- especially when applying it to the people back home.

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