

Jesus came from a small town. That helped him and frustrated him in ways not too different from small town life today. Jesus grew up in Nazareth. Friends and neighbors recognized him on the street. When he was young, he worshiped at the local synagogue and became a lector there. One day he left town and presented himself to John for baptism at the Jordan River; he spent 40 days in the desert; he started a career as a preacher and a healer. He already had a reputation when he went back to visit the synagogue at Nazareth.

Nazareth probably had values that helped Jesus throughout his life: Love your family; pray with the community every week; help your neighbor; take pride in your home town. He grew up outside the bustle of city life that can distract people from values that really matter.

But small town life has its frustrations, too. Everybody knows you, and everybody knows your business. People who sized you up as a child may not let you be someone else as an adult. If you are at odds with someone, it takes great effort to avoid them – you may not want to shop, worship or eat where you might run into someone you're trying not to see. And if something bad happens to you, if you commit a crime, it is hard to hide.

In Nazareth, people knew Jesus. They knew his father. They knew what kind of kid Jesus had been. They had already sized up what he could and could not do. So when they got news that he was healing people over in Capernaum, they wondered if this was the same guy. People said to one another, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" And they said to Jesus, "Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum."

But he did not. Nazareth stifled him. He said, "No prophet is accepted in his own native place." Then he told them a story of a severe famine, when Elijah worked a miracle, and rain fell on the property of a widow who was a foreigner. Jesus told another story of lepers in Israel, but the only one Elisha cured was a foreigner. In both cases, the prophet did not work a miracle for his own people.

When the people of Nazareth heard these stories, they got angry and drove Jesus out of his home town. They led him to the brow of a hill ready to throw him off the edge. If they had succeeded, he would have ended his career on the first day, and instead of crosses in our churches, we'd have pictures of cliffs because Jesus would have died in a very different way.

Small town life has a lot of beauty to it, but sometimes we all create frustrations. We presume some people will never amount to very much, and we try to avoid people we don't like. We get angry and withhold forgiveness. We get suspicious of people who don't come from here. We need to resist the temptation to exclude others, and open our hearts to the possibility that the very people we don't get along with may know something we should listen to.