

January 27, Epiphany 3C (Luke 4:14-21)

How would Norman Rockwell have painted Jesus' homecoming to Nazareth?

January 2, 2019

We love to romanticize the warmth and wholeness of home life. Home is where the heart is. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. Home is where you can scratch where it itches. Norman Rockwell, known in his heyday as America's "artist in chief," reinforced for many what our idyllic views of home should look and feel like. His depictions remind us of the love, joy, and safety many of us feel when we remember the places that shaped us—places that live on in us even when we're far from them, and even when they no longer exist.

Rockwell's paintings are seared into our memories. *Freedom from Want* depicts a smiling family gathered around a Thanksgiving table with a grandmotherly figure placing a huge turkey at the center of the feast. *Freedom from Fear* shows a mother tucking her little ones into bed while a doting father looks on. It's Americana at its best, evoking home as it used to be or as we hoped one day it would be.

But Rockwell did not live in the nostalgic world he painted. His biographer Deborah Solomon notes that he had anything but a peaceful and loving home life. Throughout his life he suffered sustained bouts of depression. He married three times. His son Tom developed an ulcer and dropped out of Princeton University at midterm, overwhelmed by the academic pressure. Tom also suffered from depression, as did Rockwell's second wife, who passed away in her sleep after three turbulent decades of marriage.

Rockwell seemed happiest with his third wife, Molly. But when he died in 1978, Molly did not ask any of his three sons to speak at his funeral. They hardly needed to be reminded that the world in which they lived was not the one shining forth from their father's work.

Rockwell eschewed organized activity and declined to go to church. Yet he used his God-given talent to paint idyllic worlds of home life, worlds he himself did not inhabit. With a discerning eye for pathos and a skillful hand in expressing it, he helped us envision human potential. His paintings call forth a world of peace and beauty in those places where they should naturally reside but often do not. More than mere depictions of small-town America, they are layered with hues of hope and daring of what home life at its best can be. The humongous prices people pay to own a Rockwell today are a sign of how desperate we are to possess the life depicted on those canvasses. They speak of a happier time when we were loved and accepted in home and community just as we are—even if it's only in our imagination.

I wish Rockwell had painted the scene in Luke 4 where Jesus returns home to Nazareth, then a village of about 400 people. Who better to capture the mood of this story which Luke places at the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry? Jesus is clearly happy to be home, but he is also determined to do the work of the one who sent him into the world. In preaching this kind of sermon at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is notifying all interested parties of the type of ministry he intends to have and the types of people who will be drawn to it or driven from it.

Rockwell's gift for detail and simplicity would allow him to capture the joy on Mary's face at her son's return. His skillful hand and restless heart could sketch what the hometown crowd finds so amazing or maddening about Jesus' sermon. They are undoubtedly impressed with what he has to say, for they recognize in his message the active grace of God. But it does not matter whether they ask in wonder or in disbelief whether this is truly Joseph's son. Jesus understands that the question is laden with privilege, in-group loyalty, an insider's edge, and the expectation of special favors. Knowing what God has sent him into the world to do, he sees no need to put off the inevitable.

Soon after taking his seat, he dashes their hopes for special favors and upends their desire for business as usual by aligning himself with Elijah and Elisha. The hometown crowd immediately turns against him—for they know that Elijah and Elisha took God's message to outsiders, to the left out and the looked over, to those who were not counted in the small circle of the chosen ones.

How would Rockwell have handled the fickleness of human emotions careening between home and community in Nazareth that day? How would he have captured

the face of a hometown boy staring down a hometown crowd as it turns dangerous and deadly? Those who thought they knew Jesus best simply cannot accept his claim that the gifts of God's grace are not bestowed because of nationality, tribal loyalty, or hometown connections. Mere words seem to fail Luke's descriptive powers.

What a gift Rockwell could have left us by capturing the contradictions and reversals of this homecoming scene. A Rockwell "Nazareth Homecoming" might not have rivaled Michelangelo's *David*, Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, or even Grünewald's crucifixion scene which hung above Karl Barth's desk. Yet copies of it might have adorned many American homes, lovingly placed alongside images of Jesus, Kennedy, and King. Why? Because that which we hope for and love about home—even when it is not our present reality—keeps alive in us the promise of the eschaton, when pain, rejection, and misunderstanding at the hands of those who should know us best shall be no more.