

**Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – July 8, 2018**  
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Over the last twenty-five years, Memphis has fallen in the rankings from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country. Now, mind you, this ranking measures only populations who live inside city limits. If you measure the populations of the metropolitan areas, Memphis only ranks 42<sup>nd</sup>. I guess that doesn't surprise us. We've all been to cities that are larger – with faster, more complicated freeways, and mass transit, and people everywhere it seems. And we've been to places that are smaller – places where you could walk along every single street in one day or perhaps one week. When we think in those terms, we understand that Memphis is a large city – with all of the cultural attractions and urban problems that come with such status. But to those of us who grew up here – well, Memphis is just a small town. A native Memphian probably knows at least one person from each of the Memphis high schools or from every neighborhood. And if you grew up Catholic in Memphis, then the chances are good that you know every other Catholic in town – or at least someone in their family. Don't believe me? Want to test this theory? Start a rumor. Long before email and blogs and twitters and all of the rest of this social media phenomenon made communication instantaneous, a rumor could travel from one end of Memphis to the other at approximately the speed of sound. Admittedly, the truth took longer – indeed, sometimes the truth was never even whispered about – but a rumor, well, that could travel at lightning speed even in a city this size.

It was to the truly small town of Nazareth that Jesus returned in the gospel today. Historians tell us that Nazareth in the first century was a small, agrarian village with a population of about 500 people. Not only did everyone know everybody else – they probably knew what grade you made in school that day or who visited your shop or what you were going to prepare for dinner. It may be easy to get lost in the hustle and bustle of Manhattan or Los Angeles. I suppose it is possible to be anonymous in Memphis. But no one could go to Nazareth and not be noticed. So when this hometown boy came back with his disciples, this rag-tag band of fishermen and tax collectors in tow – well, you can bet he was the talk of the town. And if Nazareth was anything like Memphis, then “Oh, doesn't Jesus look good!” were probably not the first words that crossed their lips. In other towns, Jesus could be the exciting newcomer, the celebrity – George Clooney or Chris Pratt. But in Nazareth, with all of his entourage, he was still just the kid next door putting on airs – a sort of Cybill Shepherd, East High Class of '68.

It is no wonder that Nazareth wasn't particularly impressed with Jesus. They knew him even before he took over Joseph's carpentry business. He

probably made a good yoke for oxen or maybe even a table or two, but to listen to him teach in the synagogue – well, he was no rabbi. So they took offense at him. Some translations state that they “stumbled over him;” in other words, they found him to be a stumbling block to their idea of faith. They perceived him in one way and in one way only and they were not about to be impressed with someone so ordinary, someone they thought they knew.

We have our own stumbling blocks to faith too, don't we? Things we can't explain or get around. In the modern world, that's science – and more recently, technology. How can we be impressed by miracles when now science has an explanation for almost everything? And so we put our faith in science – anything scientifically possible, technologically advanced – must be good. And some of it is. We rejoice that so many people are helped by the medical advancements that have been made. Diseases that used to kill people are now routinely cured. But science also makes possible some pretty evil things too – human embryos – immortal souls – are now frozen until they are implanted, or experimented upon, or deemed disposable. And scientific advancements have also made it possible to kill thousands, if not millions of people with nuclear or biological or chemical weapons.

Yes, science can be a stumbling block to faith, but so can government. We often put our faith in these purely human institutions – usually with the best of intentions. And for the most part, our government is fair – but when we assume that it is always right, that anything that is legal must also be good, must also be moral – well, then we have closed our eyes to the truth. It may be legal to build a wall against economic opportunity or to split up families based on their documented or undocumented status or to deny basic civil rights to those without an American birth certificate or passport – but that does not make it morally right. It may be legal to abort a child – even one in the process of being born – but that does not make it morally right. It may be legal to swindle people as long as the fine print in the SEC prospectus is technically correct, but that does not make it morally right. Yes, if we make science or government or corporations or political parties or the media or anything else into our moral consciences, then sooner or later we will make some pretty immoral choices. The solution, of course, is to look beyond the stumbling blocks, to look beyond our narrow perceptions and to seek the truth, to seek the presence of God. That's what the people of Nazareth couldn't do – God was standing there in their midst, but they couldn't or wouldn't accept him. They saw the Son of God as a stumbling block to their false notion of God. God is here in our midst too. Will we open our eyes to his beauty, our minds to his truth, our hearts to his love – or will we stumble over something or someone much less?