

Welcome home

Luke 15

March 6, 2016

“The United States of America.” It is a name we speak with pride, a name that reflects our sense of history and identity as the union of distinct and distinctive states, diverse in ethnic and religious origins, diverse in culture and in economic life, but united for a common purpose, united by a common set of values, united for the good of the whole.

“Russia.” When you are Russian, it is a name you speak with pride, a name derived from your roots among the Rus people of old Scandinavia. Russia, Mother Russia, the land that birthed you and nurtured you, the land rich in natural and human resources, the motherland you and all of her children. will stand by and defend.

“France.” La belle France, beautiful France, home of the Franks, land of love and of wine. When you are French, you are proud of your land. You are proud of your language. You are proud of your name.

“The Philippines.” Your land is named for King Philip II of Spain. Your land is named for an outsider, for a colonial overlord. Your own name is a cruel reminder of hundreds of years of domination and exploitation and subjugation by foreign powers, by Spain for nearly four centuries and by these United States for nearly half a century.

What pride is there when your home is not your home? When the land on which you live and by which you make your living belongs to someone else? When the parameters of your life are set by someone else? When the decisions that affect your well-being and your destiny are made by someone else?

Of course, the modern Philippines is an autonomous democracy. Or so it purports to be, but for many of the people, the people of the land, the poor people, little has changed. Political corruption is rampant and Filipino commentators describe their homeland as hopelessly locked still in a feudalistic system of governance and commerce left over from the colonial days. The system is designed to benefit the few, the elite, the rich, the overlords.

Jose “Pitok” Blanco was born in colonial Philippines, in 1932, to a family of fisherfolk. In time, he became a painter, renowned in his own country and abroad. In fact, he raised a family of painters. His wife and seven children all paint too in similar style and there is now in their native Angono a Blanco Family Museum displaying their artwork.

Jose Blanco painted in a folk style, realistically portraying the lives of the people and their intimate connection to the land. Like this painting of a band of farmers or fisherman, pausing from their work to share a meal.



You see the emblems of their work and their rural life: plain clothing, machetes, a cowboy hat and a coolie hat, a cow, a dog, a pile of straw, bowls and pots and a cloth rag.

And you see them. Look at them! They are an extraordinary group of men, extraordinary is their ordinariness and in their diversity: young and old, black-haired and grey-haired and bald, smooth faces and weathered faces, most serious in expression, but one seeming to laugh and another with a quizzical look on his face.

One of Blanco's most well-known paintings entitled, "Angono Town Fiesta," depicts a scene of more than a hundred festival-goers, all of them actual people of the town, including members of his family and himself. Maybe these men are real people, too, people Jose Blanco knew, not generic Filipinos, but real Filipinos, people of the land.

It's them, just them. No outsiders. No overlords. They share work, good work, work that is theirs while they do it, and they share food, good food, food that is theirs as they share it. In this place, in this moment, they are home.

But this meal is not just any meal. Blanco titled it, "A Last Feast." It is a last feast, a last supper, a meal shared between Jesus and his twelve disciples. If you count, there are thirteen men around the circle! Jose Blanco puts Jesus here among the farmers, here among the fishermen. Or maybe it is not Blanco who puts Jesus here. Maybe Jesus was here already!

Jesus is here among them, one of them, validating their life, validating their culture, validating them. Jesus is not an outsider, not an overlord, not a visitor, but one of them. In fact, take another look at the painting, and tell me, which one of the men is Jesus?

I thought immediately that Jesus must be the bald man on the right in the peach-colored shirt, attending to his work, light glistening off his forehead, the rest of them, but not all the rest, seeming to direct their attention to him.

Or could he be the man beside the bald man, the man with the most colorful outfit, the man face with a hidden face, the man bending over, bending to serve the rest?

Or could he be another, young or old, serious or smiling, in a collared shirt or shirtless?

What is remarkable about the painting is that you cannot tell, for sure, which is Jesus ... because he is one of them. "In Jesus Christ, you have come to us and shared our common lot." In Jesus Christ, you, Lord, have come to us and shared a feast.

It's time for a feast! That is the refrain of the three stories Jesus tells the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They -- religious elites, overlords, insiders, respectable citizens -- they are upset because Jesus is engaging the riffraff in conversation, and (gasp!) even eating with them!

Jesus is eating with them ... because it's time for a feast! When you go searching for a lost sheep and you find it and you bring it safely home, it's time for a feast! When you sweep the corners for a lost coin and you find it, it's time for a feast! When a lost son comes home, it's time for a feast!

But his older brother is not happy. When did his father ever throw him such a party? You know who the older brother is, don't you? He is the insider, the respectable citizen, the Pharisee, and maybe, he is me, and maybe, he is you.

But he's invited! The party is for him, too! When his little brother demanded an early distribution of his inheritance, he got his share, too. Everything, his father reminds him, everything I have is yours! But we have to celebrate. We have to be happy. It's time for a feast. Because the one who was lost has been found. The one who had no home has come home.

We have to celebrate. We have to be happy. It's time for a feast when we -- whoever we are and wherever we are on life's journey -- when we are welcomed home.

They are home. In this place, in this moment, they are home. They eat to celebrate their lives. They eat to celebrate their companionship. They eat to celebrate being home. They eat to celebrate being. The feast is a sign of God's bounty. The feast is a sign of God's grace. The feast is a sign that Jesus welcomes all of them, each of them.

You are home. In this place, in this moment, you are home. We will eat to celebrate our lives. We will eat to celebrate our companionship. We will to celebrate being home. We will eat to celebrate being. This feast is a sign of God's bounty. This feast is a sign of God's grace. This feast is a sign that Jesus welcomes all of us. This feast is a sign that Jesus welcomes you.

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