



When we moved to the Cleveland area several years ago, there was this local high school student who was about to make the hometown all the more well known as he went off to college and beyond. He was the star quarterback at the time, garnering all-conference honors for his senior year success. He switched positions on the field when he moved on to play for the Bearcats down at the University of Cincinnati. Soon enough, he would be considered one of the greatest impact players in all of professional football. Travis Kelce brought his fair share of immense notoriety to Heights High School, which mostly brings in students from both Cleveland and University Heights on the east side. And then, his stardom transformed to a whole 'nother level when he started dating one of the biggest stars in the entire music industry in Taylor Swift. The NFL has taken full advantage of his growing popularity by putting his face in numerous commercials, some of which you will continue to see if you tune in to any of the remaining playoff coverage for the sport.

Nevertheless, it is more than safe to say that Travis Kelce grew up in a relatively decent part of town. The question raised today in the Gospel is more so about the...not-so-decent part: the places in this world that sometimes we go out of our way to flat-out avoid, the places that we sneer at while talking about them, the parts of the world where we join the wondering in the Gospel, if any good can possibly come from those what we deem to be God-forsaken places.

So, I want to tell you about a woman who graduated from the same high school about 20 years before the famed football phenom, who emerged from the not-best-part of town. And the turning point for the teenage Judy Jackson had nothing to do with what happened on a football field or a basketball court, where the Tigers have shaped their fair share of relatively famous alumni. No, it happened off the grounds entirely when, during her sophomore year, one of her friends committed suicide. From that most tragic, but world-altering moment in her youthful age, Judy would insist that her life be dedicated to community service. Eventually, she became the first in her family to not only attend, but graduate from college, and went on to become a licensed social worker, her most essential career path that I personally so often take for granted, and that I cannot even begin to imagine, all at once.

Judy gravitated towards the most vulnerable youth in our county, including those abused, neglected, and dealing with various forms of mental health conditions. Her dedication would most certainly drive her into the not-so-best part of towns, places the rest of us wouldn't mind avoiding altogether. But, someone has to believe there is good in those places, too. Someone has to believe that it's worth going in and showing love and compassion and basic human respect to those that far too many are considered God-forsaken anymore. Someone has to believe God that the Gospel reaches absolutely everywhere.

After all, lest we forget, we cling to the God who insists on showing up in the not-so-best parts of town. It wasn't all that long ago that we heard a story about a baby's birth in not-so-pleasant of surroundings. Supposedly a lord of lords and king of kings, but emerges into our

world in a place that wasn't anywhere near the luxury he deserved. That baby grows up as a son of a carpenter, hangs out with fishermen and tax collectors, and stubbornly insists on going through the parts of town that the rest would do absolutely everything to avoid: as if Samaritans amongst numerous others considered the most God-forsaken of all, were just as worthy of love and compassion and basic human respect. Soon enough, that grace would transform to a whole 'nother level from an old rugged cross: the ultimate act of life-giving love not just for certain well-kept parts of the world, not just for the nice parts of town in better houses and beautiful cathedrals, but for all the world: for Nazareth, for certain parts of Cleveland we sneer about, for all of God's children. And not only that, but for the certain parts of our own life that we're not so proud of: our past with a fair share of mistakes made, the not-so-pleasant thoughts that run through our minds. We join the wondering of the Gospel for us, too: can any good truly come from us?

And through it all, God encourages us with all the hope possible to come and see. Can any good really come from *that* side of town? Come and see a woman who will do everything in her power to minimize families having to experience the loss of a child. Good can most certainly come from there and does, because God is just as much there as anywhere else. Can any good come from us with our fair share of mishaps and lack of trusting the boundless Gospel? God insists we come and see just how far this grace will reach in every part of this world, including to the very depths of our soul, because God is just as much there as in heaven itself. Come and see just how much breath-taking beauty can emerge from Nazareth and Calvary and the darkest of tombs. Come and see just how true the Gospel is: that there is absolutely no where beyond the reach of God's love in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And for that Greatest news of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.