

WHERE THERE ARE NO OUTSIDERS

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St. Hilda's, Sechelt

There are certain things we should do - should not even have to think about - that should come naturally with our humanity. As Proverbs says, "Do not rob the poor because they are poor or crush the afflicted at the gate"; Seek justice for the oppressed, give food to the hungry, visit prisoners, watch over strangers, orphans and widows. Be truly human and deeply humane.

To be truly human and deeply humane can be, and often is a struggle. Effort is involved. In this Season of Creation, when we celebrate the unbreakable string of the unity of all life, we honour that struggle and seek to meet its challenge that is so creatively put before us by the poet Mary Oliver in her work entitled "The Turtle":

(poem).

We are all tied together by an "unbreakable string" - both in terms of nature and human society. The turtle is incapable of alienating herself from that reality. The irony in the poem is that we human beings are all too easily alienated from what should be obvious to us: We are to live as if there are no outsiders, in conscious God-given awareness that we are tied to all that is by "an unbreakable string".

S.E. Hinton's 1976 novel, *The Outsiders* was a favourite teaching novel of mine. It chronicles two weeks in the life of a 14 year old boy, Ponyboy Curtis, and his struggles with right and wrong in a society in which he believes he is an outsider. His world is based on the exclusionary social hierarchies of two groups which define the teenage world: the Socs and the Greasers. This unjust "us" versus "them" social milieu results in the death of one of Ponyboy's friends. Eventually Ponyboy learns that there are no outsiders. Everyone feels pain and that artificial and alienating barriers have to be consciously refuted. We all share a common humanity.

A week or so ago, those alienating barriers were broken down dramatically for another young man. A crowd of strangers filled a northwest Calgary park to celebrate a boy's rainbow-themed birthday. 12 year old Brody Neville came out as gay this spring and lost many of his friends. Said his mother, "I was asking him what he wanted to do for his birthday and he was in tears and said since he came out as gay he lost all his friends, so he didn't even have people who could come."

She put out a call to the community to show him love and support. Dozens of friends, family, and strangers gathered at the Calgary park. When Brody arrived at the park he thought people were waiting for the ice cream truck. Then the realization came; they were there for him. He wrapped his arms around his mom and said, “thank you, everybody for this, this is the best day of my life.”

An attendee at the event remarked that “showing up here today and seeing how many people in solidarity love him...it brought my faith back in humanity during such a tumultuous time in society”.

On similar occasions, Jesus showed up. He embraced the outsiders. He heals the daughter of a Gentile woman because she pushes the limits of love. She’s a foreigner at the gates of mercy and a woman, which makes her even lower on the social scale of the time. Jesus approach to her - contrary to popular notions that he exhibits racism and classism toward her, uses his encounter with her as a brilliant teaching moment. Mark’s account tells us that he was impressed by her wit and boldness. He knew how this was going to unfold and his response dramatically illustrates that in the Kingdom of God there are no outsiders.

Another outsider is the deaf man whose transformation from alienation to new life is recorded in Mark 7: 31-37. He is also a foreigner at the gates of mercy, an outsider not only because he was alienated from the world of human conversation, but because of his nationality. Jesus breaks down those alienating barriers. The miracle astounds, just as the miracle unfolded at Brody’s birthday gathering does. As Brody remarked, “That’s the greatest present of all, support and people in it together with you.” Beloved community at its best. It should be natural to us - as deeply natural as the instincts of Mary Oliver’s turtle, to be compassionate healers in a wounded world.

American pastor Ken Wilson puts the challenge before us in his blog, “Solus Jesus: A Theology of Resistance” as he laments the role of the church in defining its “outsiders”:

“It’s the church that has developed and promulgated for centuries various forms of white supremacy, anti-semitism, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia (all of them, of a piece.)...We must just say “no” to these things in the church...Doing something about it matters and with the doing there’s some inconvenience, and anger, and frustration, for sure, but also some real joy.”

May we be a place, in following Jesus, that there are no “outsiders”.

Amen

