

Rejects in the center

Sunday's Coming Premium

November 11, 2015



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We all do it. At the supermarket we survey the peaches or bananas and choose the ones with no bruises, leaving the rest. Similarly, a craftsperson will examine several pieces of wood before deciding on the one to work with and setting aside the rest.

What's it like to be those that are rejected? What's it like to be the apple that's tossed away, the piece of wood that's useless, the stone that the builders set aside? Rejection keys into our profound feelings of unworthiness, of being useless, peripheral, no more than a passenger in a world full of drivers. It makes us feel stupid, ugly, and unlovable.

I worked in a community where a leader said to me, "You know, we're a bunch of misfits who somehow fit together." He'd discovered that if we worked constructively with this reality, we could become something beautiful. Inclusion isn't really the right word. It suggests there are those "in the center" whose lives are normal and privileged that should jolly well open the doors, welcome people in "from the periphery," and be kind and generous. The problem is that this approach is patronizing and paternalistic. The community leader wasn't regarding himself as normal and secure and above it all: he saw himself as one of the misfits. He was reframing the idea of a center and a periphery; the cost of that idea is that the periphery feels humiliated and the center feels smug.

The Church of England has church buildings all around the country that look like centers of power and authority. It has extended hospitality in a sometimes clumsy but mostly generous-hearted desire to welcome the misfit and the stranger. But it feels it's losing its grip on the country. Perhaps the critical mass of the sorted and normal no longer assumes that church is part of what it means to be sorted and normal—or perhaps the idea of a sorted and normal center was profoundly flawed all along.

While fewer people attend church services, more people are joining support groups for parents of Down syndrome children or relatives of those killed in road traffic accidents. These gatherings sometimes feel more engaged, alive, and focused than a lot of church services. What I saw at an evening meeting on dementia and faith felt like the renewal of the church. It felt as if the church was finding a new cornerstone—a cornerstone made up of stones that the builders had rejected.

The film *Pride* tells the true story of a group of lesbian and gay activists in 1984 London who realize that the way society, media, and government despise them is the way the same forces think about miners, who are in the midst of their titanic struggle with the Thatcher government. The activists decide to reach out to residents of a depressed mining village in South Wales. With patience, forgiveness, grace, courage, and resilience, prejudices on both sides are broken down and an amazing alliance grows. The two groups of stones that the builders have rejected decide to set aside bitterness and self-pity; eventually they realize they've become one another's cornerstone. A bunch of misfits somehow fit together. It's an icon of what church can be, what church should be.

The church is down in the dumps because it thinks it needs to be full of big and strong and powerful people. But Jesus was the stone the builders rejected, and in his ministry he surrounded himself with stones that the builders had rejected. Jesus - didn't found the church on the so-called center—the sorted, the normal, the benevolent, and the condescending. Jesus assumed the church would always need the work of the Holy Spirit—the work or miracle of subversion, of turning the world upside down. Nothing's changed except for a lot of intervening years when the church has forgotten who Jesus was and whose company he kept.

We're not talking about a bland and affirming insight that a lot of people who've been overlooked in life turn out to have important things to contribute. It's much more radical. The stone that the builders rejected didn't find a place in the wall by

being thoughtfully included like a last-minute addition to a family photo. The rejected stone became the cornerstone, the keystone—the stone that held up all the others, the crucial link, the vital connection.

That's what ministry's all about—not condescendingly making alienated strangers welcome, but seeking out the rejected because they are the energy and the life force that will transform us all. Every pastor, every missionary, every evangelist, and every disciple should have these words over their desks, on their windshields and screensavers, or in the photo section of their wallets—the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

If you're looking for the future church, look at what church and society have so blithely rejected. The life of the church is about constantly recognizing the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives.