

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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August 19, 2018

The Good News of God's Extravagant Grace

But now the Holy Spirit has revealed Christ's plan to make Gentile outsiders equal heirs, equal members of one body, equal recipients of God's promises.

The good news is for everyone whether Gentile or Jew, outside or insider.

– Ephesians 3

My birthday is in August – the beginning of August, right in the middle of summer. I quickly discovered that there were disadvantages to having a birthday when everyone was on holiday. My parents always remembered my birthday, but if we were camping, the quality of the cake could be somewhat inferior. As well, some of my presents arrived late, and some never got to me at all. It was hard to get my friends together for parties. In general, the celebrations for my brothers were, in my somewhat biased opinion, vastly superior! I still feel sorry for myself that I was born in August!

Recently I discovered another reason why it sucks to have a birthday in August. It turns out that the month of your birthday makes a big difference to whether you become a professional hockey player or not, and August is not the best month. Obviously I didn't become a professional hockey player. In fact, I was not very good at hockey. Before I got to Mites, there had been Mite A and Mite B. When I got to Mites, they created Mite C just for me. Mite C was so humiliating that I gave up on hockey. But it all may have been because my birthday was in the wrong month. It turns out that more elite hockey players are born in January than in any other month. In fact more than five times as many are born in January than in November. And the earlier in the year you are born, the better your chances of being really, really good. 40% of the best players are born between January and March, 30% between April and June, 20% between July and September, and 10% between October and December.

Now think about this for a minute. Natural athletes are likely born all through the year, and if they had equal opportunity to progress, you would think there would be a fairly even spread of pro hockey players from every month of the year. But there isn't. Why?

There is a very simple explanation. The age cutoff for minor hockey is January 1, so the kids that are born shortly after that date end up being on average somewhat more mature than the other kids in their age group. At the age of nine or ten, most minor hockey leagues start to stream their teams, picking the best players for the A and AA squads. At that age a few months of age makes a significant difference, so the older

kids are on average bigger, better coordinated and turn out to be slightly better hockey players than the other kids on their team. So they get picked for the A squad and the AA squad, and they get more ice time, better coaching, and travel to the cool tournaments where they play more skilled opponents. The little difference between a kid that is born in January or in August at age nine or ten ends up making a big difference down the road at the Junior A and professional level.

And it isn't just hockey. If you look at the month of birth of professional soccer players, professional baseball players, even college graduates, a large percentage of them were born in the months of the year that gave them an advantage in those early years. And because they got an advantage early on, they got more advantages.

The sociologist Robert Merton famously called this phenomenon the "Matthew Effect" after the verse in the Gospel of Matthew, in the parable of the talents which says: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." [Matthew 25:29] In the words of Malcolm Gladwell, "It is those who are successful, . . . who are most likely to be given the kinds of special opportunities that lead to further success. It's the rich who get the biggest tax breaks. It's the best students who get the best teaching and most attention. And it's the biggest nine- and ten-year-olds who get the most coaching and practice and become the future stars" in sports. [Gladwell, *The Outliers*, 30]

Life isn't fair. Some people get all the breaks. Other people get more than their share of hard knocks. In his book *The Outliers* Malcolm Gladwell punctures the popular perception that success is largely a matter of personal talent and hard work. It is partly that, but success also depends to a huge extent on being born in the right place, at the right time, and on the little things that might easily have happened differently.

No one is saying that talent and hard work don't count. Of course they do. But to a huge extent, success depends on luck: where you are born, when you are born, and the accidental things that happen to you along the way. In theology we call that "contingency." When things could easily have been otherwise, they are contingent. It's a fancy word for luck.

Because so much depends on luck, some talented, hard working people are successful, and some are not so successful. Some prosper, and some fall through the cracks. And because of the Matthew Effect, over generations inequalities become entrenched. Some become insiders, and others become outsiders, some are privileged, others are disadvantaged.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul, or the disciple writing in his name celebrates the good news that God isn't very impressed with our categories. In the ancient world, one of those divisions was that between Jews and Gentiles, but whether the division is one of race, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, or any other distinction, God isn't much impressed. God's grace is offered to all, without distinction. Where luck and inequality divide people and create hierarchies, God's grace unites and equalizes people.

Paul's message is that through Jesus, God was reaching beyond the chosen people, to Gentiles as well as Jews, to Romans as well as Syrians. This had always been God's plan, and in the fullness of time, that hidden plan was being revealed. That Jesus died for us before we had done anything to earn it, means that the benefits of his love cannot be restricted to any particular group, nor denied to any particular group.

In reaching out to the outsider, God's grace is always radically decentering our categories, always throwing us off balance. Even within the church, Paul resists any effort to become a new insider. He is the least of the people of God, he writes, because if he sets himself up as anything else, he undermines the grace he is trying to preach.

Sometimes we have to remind ourselves of this in our own practice. The church is, in part, an institution, and as an institution we are constantly tempted to define ourselves in terms of who is in and who is out, who is a member and who is not. But we are a community of faith more than we are an institution, and our relationships as a community are deeper than institutional relationships. So occasionally, we struggle with how much to emphasize membership. In order to vote on some issues in the church, you are supposed to be a member, but when that comes up some people get quite annoyed. I understand why they are annoyed. Simply because they have never completed paperwork or been confirmed into the membership of this congregation does not mean that they aren't important parts of the community who should have a say in our congregational future. Our membership categories can create the very kind of insider and outsider distinctions that Paul says God is actively at work tearing down. So we have to resist the effort to make them more important than they actually are.

Paul says his efforts on behalf of the outsiders have landed him in prison. People who derive their identity from being insiders are often threatened by this destabilizing gospel. Sometimes they react violently, lashing out in efforts to protect their privilege. But Paul is content to be in prison, if that is what it takes to break down these infernal distinctions. In fact, he says, his imprisonment is something to be proud of, not discouraged by. It is something to rejoice in, because it is the sign that something important is changing. People's initial reaction to new ideas is often to dismiss or

ridicule them, someone wise once said. When that doesn't work, they resist them, sometimes violently. Finally, they accept the new ideas as obvious. When we experience ridicule or resistance, we can rejoice that acceptance is not very far away.

So in that confidence, I too pray, for this congregation and all churches:

I pray that we may be given the inner strength to resist the temptation to derive our identity from being insiders rather than outsiders, to look down on others in order to feel better about ourselves.

I pray that Christ may more and more come to live in our hearts, so that we may not centre our identity on human categories, but learn to trust in God's grace.

I pray that we may put our roots deep, far deeper than the anxieties and insecurities of a world divided into hierarchies and distinctions. I pray that we may establish our lives on the solid foundation of the good news of God's extravagant grace.

I pray that we may draw strength from that good news so that we may experience and live that grace in all the aspects of our lives: in our families and relationships, in our workplaces and our schools, in our city and our province and our nation, so that our world may more and more become a world of grace, where distinctions and hierarchies are destabilized by the good news that we are all equally loved, equally cherished, equal members of the commonwealth of grace.

I pray that we all may be filled with the fullness of this grace, this day and every day.

Glory be to God, whose power at work within us

is able to accomplish more than we could possibly imagine!

Glory be that he is at work in the church, and that he is at work beyond the church!

Glory be that God's grace has been revealed in the chosen people of Israel.

Glory be that God's grace has been revealed for all people through Jesus Christ!

Glory be that God's grace is for all people, whenever they were born, and whatever the circumstances of their lives!

Glory be to God forever and ever! Amen!