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Friday Grind 'Special'

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I cry easily over pets, at movies.. And gratefully, I don't whisk them away—from embarrassment, or an expectation of apology. ("I'm sorry," we too easily say, when tears well up.)

I am grateful for the tears. They remind me that my heart is still alive and well.

One of my favorite stories for the heart is "The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse", by Charlie Mackesy.

The boy sits on a branch and asks the mole: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The answer: "Kind."

The boy asks the mole, "What do you think success is?"

The reply: "To love."

Sometimes we need stories more than food to stay alive. Stories to remind us, what really matters. Stories that invite and allow us, to see with our heart.

And if I were asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I would answer, "A soft and gentle heart."

In a world that feels upside down, I am so grateful for all the ways that hearts are still nurtured and nourished. Through friendship. Kind gestures. Places of sanctuary and healing. Acts of empathy and gentleness. Affirmations of dignity inclusion, and the power of grace.

Have you heard of the Church of the Exceptional? (A non-denominational, interracial ministry devoted to ministering to the physically and mentally handicapped in the area around Rutherford County, NC.) In 1974, then Governor Jimmy Carter and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale were invited to present a Guideposts award to the Congregation, where thousands had assembled in a municipal center in Georgia.

Before the speeches were delivered, the liturgy called for the lighting of the main altar candle.

A middle-aged woman with Down syndrome, walked slowly but proudly down the center aisle carrying a lighted taper. The pastor followed closely, to offer assistance. They reached the altar, but despite repeated efforts, the candle would not light. The crowd held their breath, and Carter recalls a sense of embarrassment that welled up inside. The pastor moved forward to help, but she shook her head, and continued to try.

Finally, the candle is lit, and the crowd erupts into applause. But the brightest thing in the huge auditorium was the woman's face, which glowed with happiness.

Jimmy Carter writes that he doubts whether anyone that night remembers his words. But every life was affected and touched by this woman's faith and determination.

In my mind I am still in that municipal center, watching as she lights one candle—undaunted and steadfast—this heartwarming glow spilling person to person throughout the gathering. And now into my study here in Port Ludlow, WA.

So. Yes, we need stories to remind us that grace and hope, and kindness and compassion, and courage and resiliency, are alive and well.

The catch, of course, is that these fountains of grace are not necessarily where we expect to find them.

Here's what I think: the woman is not just lighting a candle, but inviting all of us to a paradigm shift. A different way of seeing. A different way of being. A different way of loving.

The majority of us seem to have an aversion to anything "broken" (especially our own brokenness). Wedded to the notion that those who are different need to be marginalized or "fixed." Which means that we make premature judgments, naming whatever is wounded or shattered or

broken, as wrecked or ruined or threatening, and to be feared; and we miss, we do not see, the flame and the glow of the Glory of God that is within each, and every one of us.

What is it about labels that seduce us? Or do they comfort us?

There is no doubt that fitting life (and people) into boxes is easier.

We are certain we know.

We are certain we are correct.

And it does tidy things up a bit.

But here's the deal: it's too easy to fuel the fire of misunderstanding and intolerance and small-mindedness when I witness all of this through the lens of my own labels. I can literally imagine myself sitting on that platform, thinking, "Why in heaven's name are we letting this woman light the candle? Is there not an easier way? How did she get to be one of us?"

I do know that when we label, we exclude, rather than include.

I do know that when we label, we live with scotoma, selective blindness.

And scotoma shuts down our heart, our capacity to care, give, love or welcome.

"You Believe What?"

"What are They doing here?"

"What can I receive from Them?"

"Why should I help Them?"

For starters, Lord knows our world could use a little more tenderness right now.

So, back again to the Church of the Exceptional; the woman is my teacher.

Here's the deal: Heroes are ordinary souls who carry the weight of ordinary life. And heroism is born in every act of kindness and compassion and inclusion, no matter how small. Because in a world cynical and afraid, it takes courage to be kind and generous of spirit, and to fight for mercy and justice.

That in persistence, we can choose, steady, daily acts of gentleness and kindness and inclusion and healing. One step in front of another.

Feeling marginalized happens for so many

in our broken world. And we internally lug labels, feeling confined to a "box", different or even dismissed. And perhaps there, we can hear the invitation to bravery, to ask for help and get the care we may need.

The mission of the Gospel has not changed. But the stakes have. Because I live in a country that chooses to label, and "reject", certain people.

What I am learning is this: Perhaps the very people I exclude, are the ones who carry the light—the candle—that will allow me to see. That will allow me to see the Grace of God. And the expansive reach of God's acceptance. To every single one of us. Back to the Church of the Exceptional. The woman is my teacher.

A shout out for all the World Cup fans. It's kind of like must-watch TV. And to see the energy and exhilaration among the fans has been truly restorative. Watching the entire World Cup on July 19 was exciting.

Quote for our weekend...

"There's a light in this world, a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force when there is suffering, too much pain. Then suddenly the spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people who hear a call, and answer in extraordinary ways."

-From the film "Mother Teresa"