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# *The Youngsters Are Just Dying to Belong*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**
**Proper 16 – Year C**

You know that moment. We have all been there. It's been a long day. You're tired. You finally gotten the children down, read the last story. The house is quiet. You found your place, poured your glass of wine, found your newspaper. It's time—your time—and the rest of the evening is yours.

And then it happens.

"Daddy, can I have a glass of water?"

Here is my advice to you: Just say no.

Just say no because you know what is going to happen next. You're going to walk into that room, you're going to give her a glass of water, and you're going to have to read another story. Maybe two. The sixth or seventh of the evening. And when you finish that story, she's going to have to go to the bathroom. And three minutes in the bathroom with that bright light—you are reading another story. Maybe two. Maybe three! And at the end of that third story she's going to want another glass of water.

Just say no at the beginning. You know what's going to happen.

This is what we lawyers call a slippery slope. Once you step out onto it, you're going all the way down. And it's a metaphor that we employ all the time to explain human behavior.

You've heard it before. A journalist gets caught plagiarizing, making up interviews at a location he never attended, and the explanation invariably roots back to something that happened years before, when he couldn't find a quote and made it up instead. An employee commits massive amounts of fraud and you wonder, how in the world could this happen? And the explanation invariably roots in something that happened years before. Numbers that didn't match, a little correction that was made.

This metaphor can enrich our vision, enrich our ability to see what is happening around us. Yet it is often used to predict the future and in that case can make things cloudy, more difficult to see.

The examples are many but partial birth abortion or registering guns come to mind. Things where we have a difficult time addressing real issues because of slippery slope arguments.

They're not always wrong. Sometimes they're right, but how do we know? How do we decide? How do we know when this metaphor is helping us or hurting us?

Jesus gives us an example and an answer, I think. Because, you see, the leader of the synagogue—the one who wants to keep the rules of the Sabbath and prohibit any work—he's making the slippery slope argument, isn't he? He's rooting himself back into creation, back into the book of Exodus. He is on solid ground. God worked for six days; on the seventh he rested. So shall you to be present to God.

Rest. Solitude. Withdrawal.

This is the essence of the life of faith and once you chip away at it, once you deviate from it, even once, it is all in jeopardy. Allow a healing today and tomorrow someone will want an exception for selling something that heals. And someone else will want an exception for providing what the seller of healing potions needs.

You can see it happening.

The synagogue leader is on firm ground. But Jesus also argues from tradition.

Jesus goes not back to creation but to the Exodus. Jesus is going back to the book of Deuteronomy and he is arguing that the Sabbath is made for freedom, for release. Not just rest, but emancipation. Freedom. What is necessary for the community to even exist. And that's what he does for this woman. He simply touches her.

Eighteen years she has been bent over, bound, crippled, on the margin of that community. Eighteen years.

And yet just by touching her, telling her that she is healed, she is able to stand up. She is able to look at the world the way everyone else looks at the world. She is free.

And the crowd rejoices. The crowd stands and cheers because they all feel as if the community is stronger, more grounded, better, closer to God.

So what might this look like in our own lives? How do we take this lesson, this example, and apply it tomorrow or the next day?

The message I think is that to love others is to constantly, unrelentingly, be committed to bringing them into the community, finding a way for them to belong. Worrying about their suffering, their misery, their pain.

Whenever you see the face of suffering, we are called to engage it. We are called, if you will, to go down the slippery slope with intention, as if we are skiing it or sledding it. Not to step away, live by the rules, but to engage. To have an unrelenting commitment to alleviating suffering

But it's not easy.

Let me give you an example. I heard an interview recently with a Danish police officer. He was from this little town on the east coast of Denmark—Aarhus. I've never heard of it. But is apparently a very civil, clean, very "Danish" place.

It's the kind of place where a television station tried to run an experiment to test the people. They took wallets with money in them and left them lying around on the street to see what people would do, and they had to terminate the experiment because after a week everybody had simply returned the wallets. It's that kind of place.

But Thorleif, this police officer, was sitting around with his friends one day when a call came in. It was a call from a parent, frantic. Their child was missing. They had gotten up that morning and their son was simply gone. It was a black couple who was from Somalia. They were Muslims living in a Muslim neighborhood, and they had no idea what had happened to their son.

So Thorleif and his group immediately went to work as if it were a missing persons report. And what they gradually began to learn is that this boy wasn't alone. Gradually, over the next several days they received other calls—more frantic parents. "Our sons are missing. They are gone. We are frantic."

There were 27 in all who were simply gone within a month or so. And as they begin to investigate, they realized that they had gone to Syria. They had all been radicalized. They had gone off for the jihad. They we mujahideen. Warriors some, heroes others, simply looking to belong.

What they learned when they investigated the lives of these kids is that they had suffered some kind of humiliation. They have been called names. Their cars have been vandalized. They had been excluded and together they had begun listening to radical imams—not there in Denmark, but on the radio. They all went to the same mosque, but it wasn't the mosque that

was radicalizing them; it was their social networks that were radicalizing them.

So Thorleif called up the Imam at the mosque and invited him to coffee. And what he saw in that imam's face was the same thing that he heard in the voices of the parents: fear.

What he saw in that imam's face was the same thing he heard in the voice of the parents: confusion.

What he saw in that imam's face was the same thing he heard in the voice of the parents: "We have no idea what to do; please help us."

And then he heard the stories. There was one boy named Jamal. Thorleif had actually stopped him not long ago for a traffic violation, and when he approached the car, Jamal had been hostile. Thorleif didn't understand why, so he asked him, "Why are you so hostile? Why are you reacting this way?"

And Jamal said angrily, "Because I have been stopped nine times today and I've done nothing wrong. I am being discriminated against. I am Muslim. I am black. That's why I'm being stopped and I'm angry."

And then he went on. Now Jamal did not go to Syria. He was ready to go to Syria. There's a long story about what had generated his humiliation, but he was sitting in a friend's apartment one day preparing to go to Syria, to become mujahideen, to become a hero, to belong, and he received a phone call on his cell.

It was Thorleif. Thorleif wanted him to come down to the police station, or meet him somewhere else; he wanted to talk to him.

Jamal simply cursed at him, cursed at the country, cursed his circumstances, and said he was leaving. And as he began to hang up the cell phone, he heard the police officer say something. Thorleif said, "I'm sorry."

Jamal was shocked. "Sorry for what?"

Thorleif had investigated Jamal. It had been brutal. He had pulled him out of school, taking the passwords to his social media accounts, searched his house, kept him out of school for a week while they determined whether he was a radical, whether he was a jihadist, whether he was a terrorist. By the time he got back to school, cleared of the allegations, it was too late. Exams have been taken. He had to repeat the year.

Thorleif said simply, "I'm sorry."

And then they began—they put the word out: "If you want to come back from Syria, come see us. We will ensure that you belong, that you have a place to be."

Now this is 2012. It's early in the ISIS game. People don't really know what's going on, but France has staked its claim, shutting down mosques. England has staked its claim. David Cameron has declared anyone to go to Syria to be an enemy of the state to be treated as such.

Denmark is the fourth leading source of jihadist warriors. The fourth leading source of Western ground out of which jihadists are coming, but Thorleif takes a different approach.

The first guy that comes back has a bullet wound in his shoulder. They interview him, take him to the hospital, and find him a mentor—another black Muslim, someone who has been in Denmark but made it.

And they continue to do this. Within the next two weeks 18 of these kids called, from Syria or elsewhere in Europe, wanting to come home and they were all invited back. Six of those kids who had gone died in Syria and never came back. Eighteen are still there. But during that period of time when Thorleif and his group were welcoming people back, providing them a path to belonging, showing them that Denmark was their country, 330 kids called him. Not only the kids who had left, but the kids who are thinking about going. And by 2015, one boy left this town to go to Syria. One.

Now the program is not perfect; it is a real-life story. Some of those kids are just bad and you can't figure out how to make them want to belong.

The kid that left, Muhammad, Thorleif had been to his wedding. Thorfleif had done everything possible and the kid took his wife and he went anyway. And who knows what's going to happen if there's a terrorist attack in this town.

But we do know is that these kids wanted to belong. When they explain why they had gone to Syria it was always the same thing: "We wanted to be heroes. We wanted to belong."

They define mujahideen not just as being a warrior, but it's being involved in the promotion of the faith: working in a hospital, serving the poor. It's a much more expansive definition than we think about.

It's not an easy problem, but our calling I think is clear.

Just as there is no way that we are not taking a glass of water to that child knowing what's about to happen, so there is no way Jesus is not healing that woman knowing what it will mean to her, and there should be no way that we stop trying to find ways for people to belong.

Not being weak, not being naïve, but searching, unrelentingly committed to the alleviation of suffering.

At the end of this interview, the mentor for Jamal who is now by another name, gainfully employed, considering himself to be a Dane, the mentor says in a voice that just wrenches your heart, "These youngsters are dying to belong."

And so it is, I think, that we, following Christ, are called to an unrelenting commitment to trying, always trying, to find ways that people can belong.

It is because of that, I think, that the crowd stood up and cheered at the synagogue. It is that, I think, that makes the community real. It is that, I think, that gives us a calling and teaches us how to love.

Amen.

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The story about Thorleif and the Muslim boys can be found on the Invisibilia podcast.