

## “Every Skateboarder is Sacred”

Matthew 5:1-12 (Jesus’ teachings about how to be a blessing)

John 4:7-15 (The Samaritan Woman at the well and

Jesus become “unique” to each other.)

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I was introduced to this so-called “Children’s Book” in a basic French class at UCLA. It was a delightful class. The chair of the whole French department taught this basic course, and all that we did the entire quarter was to read through “Le Petite Prince.” Sometimes the professor would go into long explanations about the subtle meanings, in French, which I did not understand. However, that experience did lead me to read the book--in English.

In this book, which is now available in dozens of languages, A Little Prince<sup>i</sup> journeys from Asteroid #432 to several other planets, then, because it was highly recommended, he journeys to Earth. He lands in the desert of Africa and finds there an airplane Pilot who has been stranded there, fixing his plane. Gradually the Little Prince reveals some of his life story to the stranded Pilot. For example, he tells the Pilot about a flower on his tiny planet that is unique to him and that he misses that flower.

Over the months, the Pilot comforts the Little Prince, holding him in his arms when tears come, especially when the Prince thinks of the Flower so far away.

Once when they were both quite thirsty, they wandered through the desert looking for a well. The Prince points out that besides helping with their thirst, “Water may also be good for the heart.”

At daybreak they find a well. “Do you hear?” said the Little Prince. “We have wakened the well, and it is singing.”

The Little Prince, on the first anniversary of his landing on earth, gets ready to leave the Pilot and Earth, to return to his home, Asteroid #432, in hopes of finding his flower.

Now it is the Pilot’s turn to be sad, as he says goodbye to the Little Prince. It is the Little Prince’s turn to comfort the Pilot, and he does. The Prince explains to the Pilot, “Where I live everything is so small that I cannot show you where my star is to be found. It is better, like that. **My star will be just one of the stars, for you. And so you will love to watch all the stars in heaven. ..They will all be your friends...**”

Jesus journeys from Judea to Galilee. On his way he goes through Samaria. He travels with his disciples, but when Jesus sits down beside a well his disciples go to town for some food. It is hot, about noon, and Jesus is, like the Pilot and the Little Prince, when they look for a well, tired and thirsty, but he has no bucket or means of drawing some water for himself.

A Samaritan woman comes to the well for the purpose of drawing buckets of water to take back to her home in town. Jesus asks her to draw some water for him. She is quite surprised that he speaks to her at all, but we have recorded in this text thirteen exchanges between them, in fact one of the longest dialogues in the Gospel of John. Jesus, a man, was not supposed to initiate conversation with an *unknown* woman. And, he, a Jewish teacher was not to engage in public conversation with a *woman*. Plus, Jews

were not to invite contact with *Samaritans*, who were considered enemies. Obviously, Jesus is breaking many boundaries.

She thinks he wants her to get him some water, which is correct. However, Jesus proceeds to offer her *living water*. She mistakes what he means, thinking he is offering her what we have today in our homes, *running water*. That sounds fantastic to her--she would not need to go to the well so regularly!

However, as we know, Jesus is offering her water that is way more than physical. Do you remember, the Little Prince said water may also be good for the heart? Jesus is speaking of something quite similar when he speaks of *living water*. **Living water, which Jesus gives, is good for the soul.** Because of what occurs there, you could say that, just like the well the Pilot and the Little Prince found, this well that Jesus and the Samaritan woman were sharing *was singing, too*.

The encounter is not over when they part. From that day on, for Jesus, his mission is no longer only for the Jews—Jesus realizes that his mission on earth is for all people. All Samaritans, in fact, all non-Jews become included in Jesus' sacred "call" partly due to one Samaritan woman who has become unique for Jesus. The Samaritan woman runs back to her town saying, "Come, there is a man..." You know why? Because the Radical Rabbi Jesus had become sacred for her.

It is about 6 years now since our son Stephen died. When he was very young, maybe 4 years old, John's Brother's wife, who owned a skateboard shop in Bloomington, Indiana (of all places!) gave Stephen a skateboard. With that gift, we entered into the world of skateboarding, that is, as skateboarding existed on our corner of Dayton, Ohio, in the Mid West, where skateboarding was so scarce at the time that there were no signs that read "No Skateboarding."

Skateboarding became at first one more activity that I was to watch whenever I heard the phrase, "Look, Mom." Then, when Stephen became older, I became useful. You see, when the Security Guard at the seminary where I taught asked him and his skateboarding friends to leave, Stephen would point out that his mom worked at the seminary, so it was okay. Sometimes that worked.

Things became more subtle as he grew older. It's not cool to say, "Look Mom" when you're 16 or so. So, I'd wander up to the seminary when I knew he'd be trying new tricks there. He'd ask later if I noticed. Of course I had noticed.

I appreciate our liturgical dancers deeply, and today they truly immersed themselves into the skateboarding theme. You see, Jennifer Schmidt contacts me after they complete a dance, to consider themes for their next sacred dance. Just in case you dancers are a bit exhausted this morning, I want you to know that we do have a theme of "peace" coming up!

Actually skateboarding was not a huge percentage of Stephen's activities—he had plenty of other interests. But, I am sharing reflections upon skateboarding with you because that provided an opening for me into a world that otherwise I would have known **virtually nothing** about, just as the Pilot in the desert would not have known anything about the Little Prince from Asteroid #432 and the Samaritan woman would not have known anything about Jesus.

Like Samaritans and tiny Princes who appear out of nowhere, skateboarders are somewhat taboo. It's an odd sport—something that isn't organized and doesn't have

many places where it's okay, even legal, to practice—just a skate park here or there. Like the Samaritan, a skateboarder can easily expect that he or she is not welcome.

When I greet any skateboarder around here, I'm aware that they may be wary, thinking I'm about to ask them to leave. They don't expect that I'm open to some conversation, just as the Samaritan woman did not expect a Jewish rabbi to be open to a chat.

After Stephen's death, I was at first disconcerted--out here in Southern California-- when I heard, often, that familiar sound of skateboard wheels. I grieved, when I'd hear the familiar sound, because I knew it was not "my" familiar person.

Then something flipped inside me, so that when I heard the sound, I would look around for the skateboarder, usually a guy, who belonged with the sound. When I would see the skateboarder, I would realize that he had become sacred to me. In fact all skateboarders have become sacred to me.

When someone, or something, has become unique to us, then, maybe especially in their absence, all those who are like that one can become special for us, too, even sacred. All the stars are sacred to a Pilot who loves a Little Prince who is living on just one of those stars. All Samaritans are sacred to the Prince of Peace who has had a chat with one.

Once we know and care about one person who is in prison, all people in jails—whether in San Bernardino, Arizona, or half way around the world—become sacred.

Once we've encountered, in a deep way, one soldier fighting today in Iraq or Afghanistan, all soldiers become sacred.

To South Koreans who love one North Korean whom they have not seen for decades, all North Koreans are potentially sacred.

A United Methodist pastor, a friend of ours, who is now in northern Ohio told a little story about himself and his wife to illustrate a point he was making in a book. He wrote: "I usually have a very businesslike relationship with waitresses. . . However, there was a brief period in my life when this...did not hold true. My wife and I thought it strange that waitresses were responding to us the way they did. On one occasion a waitress sat down at our table and talked to us about learning Spanish. In another instance, a waitress joined in on the conversation at our table. Another time, a waitress told us her plans for the evening. Several years after this behavior seemed to have disappeared from my experience it occurred to me that these experiences *had all happened at a time when our daughter was working as a waitress*. What I now suspect is that during that time either my wife, or I or both of us *saw waitresses differently* than we had before. . . . We opened ourselves to communicating with waitresses outside of the hierarchical expectations, and in a number of cases they responded."<sup>ii</sup>

When we love one waitress, all waitresses might become sacred.

A major purpose of cross-cultural trips, such as Redlands First Church's trips to Mexico or our Senior High Youth's Sierra Service Project to Los Angeles last summer is to meet a *few* people who become unique to us. Then, amazingly, those people who are "like" the few we meet are more likely to be sacred for us. The same thing happens for those of you who are volunteering to help persons get showers here, I imagine.

If only, on our life journeys, we'd meet up close and care about one beggar.

If only, on our journeys, we'd get to know a CEO real closely.

If only, on our life journeys, we'd become very well acquainted with one politician.

If only, on our journeys, we'd be close to someone who receives some form of welfare.

If only, on our life journeys, we'd sit down and play chess with someone sitting in a downtown park.

If only, on our journeys, we'd connect closely with a loved one struggling with addictions.

If only on our journeys we'd come to love a recent immigrant.

If only on our journeys we'd spend a lot of time with parents who juggle ten things at the same time.

If only on our life journeys we'd "establish ties" with someone who is living with AIDS.

Wouldn't we truly be drinking from wells that sing—with water that's good for the heart and good for the soul?

Not only would stars where a Little Prince live, Samaritan women, and skateboarders become sacred, but every star, and *every human being would be sacred*.

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<sup>i</sup> De Saint-Exupery, Antoine, *The Little Prince*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1943.

<sup>ii</sup> Bedell, Ken. *Different Ships—Same Boat: A North American Perspective*. London: World Association for Christian Communication, 2000, 47.