

Little Fires Everywhere

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The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." - Luke 15:1-10

Little Fires Everywhere is the title of a recent best-selling novel by Celeste Ng. The book is named for the opening scene. Little fires have been set everywhere in her own home by Izzie Richardson. She's a freshman at Shaker Heights High School, the youngest of four children and clearly the black sheep of her family.

By the end of the opening scene, the Richardson home has burned to the ground. We already know Izzy is responsible. But as the story unfolds, we begin to recognize and smell smoke everywhere. Izzie is only emblematic of conflicts and struggles faced by all of the book's main characters. They are conflicts and struggles like those that may be familiar to any of us here, and with the same varying degrees of consciousness and resolution.

Working tirelessly to keep the smoke at bay and to control the fires is Izzie's mother, Elena Richardson. She's a proud second-generation resident of Shaker Heights. As a journalist for the small local paper, she always strives to show her community in the best light. She knows all of Cleveland's cultural and philanthropic luminaries. She's a go-to person, a confidant and a good friend to many.

Elena thinks of herself as progressive and generous. The author shows us that Elena also has a complicated relationship to her white upper-middle class privilege. Through Elena's eyes we can see, for instance, that African American families are politely welcomed in Shaker Heights. It helps if their sons aspire to Princeton. An immigrant with little English who made an unconscionable decision and can't afford a lawyer doesn't fare so well.

Having recently encountered the character of Elena Richardson may have better prepared me to feel more compassion for the Pharisees and scribes in today's gospel scene from Luke. They saw their place and their roles in their communities as Elena imagined her place and roles in Shaker Heights. They were the proud standard-bearers. They wanted to be the best examples and to provide the best opportunities for young people.

But minimizing the unpleasantness of smoke and the risks and liabilities of fires typically requires conformity, doesn't it? Playing it safe. And for those who don't play by the rules, clear, weighty consequences. In promoting and enforcing the right ways, the Pharisees and scribes had the added leverage of God. We can imagine them often quoting verbatim, and sternly, from the Torah. The Pharisees and scribes of this and other scenes in the gospels remind me of Ann Lamot's description of "God as a high school principal in a gray suit who never remembered your name but is always leafing unhappily through your files."

We are by now getting far along in Luke's gospel. Jesus has been setting little fires everywhere in Galilee as he makes his way to Jerusalem, and here he is again, not properly respecting some town's caste system. He is not likely to get a pleasant review in the community paper's lifestyle section. He will more likely end up in the gossip column, or the police blotter.

"*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" The Pharisees and scribes are described as *grumbling*. We all know how it feels when a downer virus infects a party. The grumbling quickly turns the atmosphere from festivity to awkwardness and confrontation. Jesus responds to the principals in the gray suits by telling two parables of losing and finding. "*Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ... Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?*" Which one of us cannot get that?

These parables nicely complement the apparent premise of *Little Fires Everywhere*. The story's backdrop of Shaker Heights looks awfully close to what the world so often peddles as perfection. And yet so many of the shiny characters are also lost or losing or fighting their own little fires everywhere. One teenager loses her virginity. Another has an abortion, losing both her baby and her boyfriend. A third young woman loses custody of her baby in family court. Trust and respect and true understanding seem to be in a bear market throughout the story. Little fires are everywhere.

The husband of Elena Richardson, and the father of the fire-starter Izzie, is named Bill. One night he tries to make sense of all of the loss and all of the fires and all of the conflicts between and within all of his family members and those beyond. "... *The problem with rules, he reflected, was that they implied a right way and a wrong way to do things. When, in fact, most of the time there were simply ways, none of them quite wrong or quite right, and nothing to tell you for sure which side of the line you stood on. He had always admired his wife's idealism, her belief that the world could be made better, could be made orderly, could perhaps even be made perfect. For the first time, he wondered if the same [idealism] held true for him.*"

The New York Times Book Review described Celeste Ng's novel as 'deeply empathetic,' and I found it to be so. It was easy to stay connected with the various characters and their motives, even those antagonistic to one to another.

I don't find it as easy with the characters in today's gospel scene, where the narrative clearly sets us up to empathize with the sinners and tax collectors and with Jesus for unashamedly consorting with them. But I wonder if we can also drum up at least just a little empathy for the Pharisees and the scribes and their position and point of view.

Perhaps I'm suggesting that our consideration of this story is incomplete unless we look for the Pharisee and scribe, the principal in the gray suit, within ourselves. We deny our quickness to judge. We resist change and new ideas. We invoke God for our excellent and unassailable points of view. We resent those who bend or break the rules or who make up the rules as they go along and then have the audacity to believe that they are still lovable and loved. We resent others who party while we do all of the hard work.

In the end, if we look honestly and fearlessly, we can see that all of us are both the lost sheep and the Pharisee. We are all of us, by virtue of being human, susceptible to little fires everywhere. We are all desperately in need of God's mercy. We are all desperately in need of being found by God, again and again. Amen.