

The Road Less Traveled – May 17, 2019

In the 15 years I spent working as a newspaper editor, I was no stranger to the general criticism and mistrust of my industry. Newspapers were out of touch. Newspapers were dinosaurs. The media was hopelessly liberal and inherently biased. The media cared much less about communicating the truth than it did for selling papers and garnering ratings. And so on.

Twelve years removed from the industry provide a better perspective, and today I look upon it with different eyes. Some of the criticisms are valid. Newspapers are in the business of selling papers, their owners in the business to make money. Certainly there is a bias underlying most news organizations, in fact much more pronounced today than back then, and spread much more evenly across the ideological spectrum. But as I look back, the one area that my opinions have not changed is the people. In the years I spent in the media I worked with some of the most passionate, dedicated and fine people I have ever known. They were people who definitely brought an ideological bent to their jobs, but unlike most other professions, they confronted those biases daily and questioned how their personal ideologies affected their professional work. They cared deeply about the truth and believed they were called to communicate it. They worked hard to cultivate relationships and trust with the people they reported on, even though they knew that, if they did their jobs well, much of what they reported was going to represent bad news for someone. And they were people for whom the criticism of their motives, their work and their industry cut deeply. But they accepted that it was just the reality of the field they chose.

Those 15 years in the media and the perspective of time leaves me with a great deal of compassion for anyone who works today in the airline industry. For the past year we have been inundated with story after story of outrageous treatment of passengers at the hands of the airline industry. People being dragged off of planes after being overbooked. Flight attendants challenging disruptive passengers to a fight. Parents being removed from a flight because of a disagreement over where a toddler would sit. And so on.

Now don't misunderstand me. I know the airline industry is far from perfect, and I also have found myself frustrated by what I perceived to be poor customer service and the seemingly never-ending string of new charges and fees. But the reality is that things like overbooking and people being forced to give up seats for which they had paid is not a new phenomenon. Airlines have engaged in the practice of overbooking for years. What is new – and the reason that we are seeing these stories almost weekly now – is that people are outraged by it.

And that is, perhaps, the more significant story. We are becoming a culture that looks for opportunities to be outraged. We are becoming a people who are incredibly easily offended. Everything is personal. We feel everything deeply. If we are inconvenienced, it can't be a result of bad circumstances or just plain bad luck. It has to be because of our gender or our race or ethnicity. It has to be because someone or some company just doesn't like me or my kind. I am not sure that the airline industry is becoming worse so much as we are becoming more sensitive.

We are becoming a people for whom grace is elusive. And that is frightening.

It's frightening because outrage and offense are relative things. Meaning if you are looking for a reason to be offended, if you are convinced that you are going to be, I guarantee that you'll find something to hang your hat on. If you're itching for a fight, then it's likely that you'll find one. If you're looking for a reason to be mad, that reason likely will find you.

And outrage quickly follows. And it's not just in the airline industry. Look around, and you'll find that tension practically everywhere. In the workplace, in our schools, even in the church. But I really believe that is where followers of Jesus really can make a difference. When we talk about being called to be counter-cultural, I can't think of a better place to start. To actually contemplate, what would Jesus do? How would Jesus react? What is the path, in any situation, to reconciliation? Am I really being persecuted, or just inconvenienced?

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul insists that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and self-control. Meaning that if the Holy Spirit is moving in and guiding your life, your life is characterized by those virtues.

I think it's as good a place as any to start.

See you Sunday.