

HOMELAND SECURITY

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

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There was a girl where I grew up, named Lisa McPherson – at least that is the name I’m giving her. Lisa McPherson was a loner. She had a severe case of the cooties. No one knows quite how she got them. But someone, somewhere along the way at Gordon Elementary school, diagnosed Lisa McPherson with cooties. It’s because, of course, Lisa didn’t look quite right. She was a little overweight. She walked sort of funny. She had a loud voice. She was socially awkward. Well that’s about all you need for a diagnosis of cooties. And because this was long before the HIPPA requirements – everyone knew that Lisa had this American elementary school equivalent of leprosy. And so the word was that Lisa McPherson was so badly infected – that not only were you not to go near her – you were not supposed to touch the ground anywhere near where she walked. So every morning on the Gordon Elementary playground whenever anyone saw Lisa approaching the playground they would start to yell in a sort of chant-like cadence: Mc-Pher-son, Mc-Pher-son. And as soon as you heard someone yell Mc-Pher-son ... you were supposed to start yelling it to. And not only that, you were supposed to jump onto some piece of playground equipment so as to get your feet off the ground when Lisa McPherson walked by. And that’s what we did every morning at Gordon Elementary. “Mc-Pher-son, Mc-Pher-son” as Lisa McPherson with head bowed low ... would walk through our playground on her way to class. Every one of us ... on top of the jungle gym, the slide, the swing-set, the chin-up bars ... all of us escaping the infection of Lisa McPherson.

It has been forty-five years since those shameful events of my childhood. And yet I am no less amazed and appalled that a group of children, me included, could let something like that happen. We had to have

known what we were doing. Enough of us had parents who had made it clear that such bullying and ridicule was clearly wrong. But we did it anyway. And the reasons for why we did it are likely legion. Some of us were uncomfortable with someone different. Some of us were uncomfortable with ourselves. Some of us were just so happy that someone else was being made fun of and not ourselves. But I suspect there were enough of us that knew that what we were doing to that poor little girl was just wrong – and yet the risk of reaching out, the risk of inclusion, the risk of befriending – was so enormous, we felt that we had no choice.

You probably don't have to think very hard to recall a Lisa McPherson in your childhood. The kid that everybody felt obliged to pick on. The one who was just different enough that you felt a license to do whatever it took to put distance between you. Maybe you were the Lisa McPherson of your grade school.

Emily Bazelon, in her book out this past week entitled, *Sticks and Stones*, speaks to how such “early bullying” has grown to much greater proportions through the *instant* social media of text, twitters and Facebook. The identities and reputations of innocent children can be desecrated much more quickly and widely within the seconds it takes to type or click. C. S. Lewis spoke about this long ago when he identified something that is true about all of us to some degree – and that is the desire to be inside what he calls The Inner Ring. Society and culture, no matter where you are, is filled with Inner Rings of people that we all crave to be a part of so as to be given some sense of acceptance and identity – and we will do foolish and shameful things to not only be included – but then also to exclude anyone who happens to be behind us or outside of us. “*Of all the passions,*” Lewis writes, “*the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.*” A group of people who are bent on remaining an

exclusive group of people will end up doing a lot of stupid and foolish and regretful things. Somehow, somehow you have to keep coming up with reasons for why people shouldn't be in your group.

So it may not be a real hard connection for me to make between the playground of Gordon Elementary – and the story we read in Genesis about Abraham's appeal for God to be merciful to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. It's an amazing conversation between Abraham and God – as Abraham tries to talk God down from having to have 50 righteous men that he hopes are in the city, all the way down to ten. Hopefully ten can be found. But never underestimate the power of the Inner Ring!! Because it isn't long before Sodom gets visited by angels. Angels from heaven. Who wouldn't, we wonder, want a visit from angels from heaven! But Sodom has made for itself an Inner Ring. And Inner Rings are where evil creeps in. And not so bad men do such very bad things. And so the angels pay their visit. But the angels of all beings are marked for attack and abuse and inhospitality. The strangers are not welcome. And now we realize that Sodom falls not because of God is some sort of vengeful God – but that Inner Rings have their way of collapsing upon themselves. The hail, fire and brimstone bring a merciful end to this evil group of bullies who don't even care if it's an angel who is abused.

So in our other text this morning Jesus is in the midst of this slow journey to Jerusalem. It is his journey to the cross. And he knows that it is his journey to the cross because he understands that what lies in Jerusalem is the Inner Ring. Jerusalem had a population back then of about 25,000. And inside of the 25,000 was a ring of people on the inside. Jesus was on the outside. The Son of Man was on the outside. The Messiah was on the outside. Jesus knows this. It's why he says something shocking – he says, "It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." It's his way of saying that the closer you get to

the Inner Ring, the better the chance of getting maligned and defamed and killed. Jerusalem is threatened by the different one. The one who preaches something different. And this fear that Jerusalem holds onto makes what are likely at the outset not very bad men do very bad things. They mock, they accuse, they arrest, they torture, and yes, they even kill in order to hold onto their little Inner Ring. And this is no angel. This is the Son of Man. This is Messiah. It's hard for us to imagine that such treatment could be given the Redeemer. Such is the power of the Inner Ring – sort of like their little Homeland Security system. God forbid some backwoods rabbi is going to enter our gates and tell us that maybe there is another way. We have to protect the inner circle. We have to keep our like-mindedness. We have to hold onto our club membership. Such is where the evil breeds. So it is no surprise when Jesus imagines that the day will come when the walls that have kept the prophets out ... someday soon the walls will come down. God doesn't have to bring down the walls – they will do it themselves.

It makes me think about the start of Charles Sheldon's classic book *In His Steps* that tells the fictional story of respectable mainline church in the middle of a Midwestern town and how one Sunday, during their respectable worship, from the outside walks an unemployed man, down on his luck, who staggers to the front of the sanctuary – to the great anxiety of all the respectable worshippers. Paralysis fills the Inner Ring of respectable worshippers. What must we do with this man? The man starts a monologue that wonders what good is this church to a man like himself who needs help? A man who is not tidy or successful or even well. The man collapses in front of the sanctuary in front of the respectable worshippers – and now they are confronted with the question – what must we do with the outsider? What must we do for the stranger? Is he in the ring or outside the ring? And to the quiet queries comes a question in response – What would Jesus do? WWJD. It's a phrase coined over a hundred years ago. And soon they realize that good old respectable mainline First Church – has allowed themselves to become the Inner

Ring. That the evil of indifference, the evil of fearing the stranger has crept in. And it is now time for things to change. Time to welcome the stranger, the visitor, the angels ... yes even the Messiah.

So whether it's angels in Sodom or Jesus in Jerusalem – the question that these stories beg in us is, at what risk are we of the same evils? At what risk are we of putting ourselves in those places and groups of peoples, those inner rings – where there breeds contempt for those on the outside? Those who look different, act different, think different, believe different? Has our personal homeland security built walls that would protect us from any surprise visits from angels and Messiahs? Don't you wonder about that when you look at how polarized our society seems to be? This group believes this and that group believes that – and God forbid that they should talk to each other, God forbid that they would consider the possibility that the aliens on the other side might have something necessary for us to hear. “Neglect not,” says the writer to the Hebrews, “neglect not to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

So I remember the night when my family had gone to visit my brother Jimmy in Pennsylvania. Jimmy is four years older than me and was diagnosed at a young age – toddler age – to be profoundly retarded. In his fifty-eight years he has never spoken a word. He has very little mental capacity. We had been out to dinner with Jim (he was about 25 at this particular time), it was a cold and snowy night and we were driving him back to the school where he lived when we got rear-ended by a truck and pushed into the front lawn of a house. Lots of commotion ensued and to make a long story short the family whose front lawn we had ended up in came out of their warm house with blankets and invited our family and the driver of the truck into their tiny little trailer home to stay warm while police and others attended to what needed attending

to. My brother Jim is not one who likes groups of people – nor does he like sudden changes or surprises. So here he was in a strange house with strange people growing more and more anxious. The two daughters of the family neither being older than 10 - - sort of stood back in the corner and watched all this, very confused especially over this strange 25 year old man who appeared not only very different, but very, very anxious, sitting on their couch rocking back and forth and moaning. Their mom and dad were busy making us some coffee and offering us whatever they had in the cupboards. And there they stood trying to cope with this unexpected evening. The one little girl you could see was hanging on to her teddy bear for dear life. We had invaded the Inner Ring of their family. Just as I was prepared to go over to try to engage them and calm them. I saw something. I looked at the little face of this teddybear-gripping girl as it dawned on her what she needed to do. She timidly began to take some steps and slowly walked over from the corner of their little house and approached the strange, anxious man – and said, “Would you like to hold my bear?” How was she to know that this was the one thing that would calm my brother? He took the bear and clung it tightly to his chest and in a couple minutes grew still. Mom and dad stood in silence, “She never,” they said, “she never lets that bear go.”

A while later when we had finished the invasion of this family’s home and were apologizing out the door, the mother turned to us and said, “Thank you for coming. You’ve taught us something we may never have learned otherwise.”

Neglect not to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.

You know there is an ending to the story about Lisa McPherson. It happened when Mrs. Michaels died. Mrs. Michaels was a first grade teacher at Gordon Elementary. She appeared to be as old as God to most of us. So we made fun of her too. All of us, except for Lisa. Lisa loved Mrs. Michaels. She'd stay after school to help her. She'd clean erasers and wash the chalkboard for Mrs. Michaels. Well, Mrs. Michaels died. And she had been a member of my father's church ... so my dad made me go with him to the funeral home to see Mr. Michaels. Well, I didn't want to go, but I did. And when I got there I kind of sat in a chair in the front of the room waiting for it to be over ... when all of a sudden who should walk into the room but Lisa McPherson. "Oh no," I said to myself, "what is she doing here?" I don't remember but I might have even lifted my feet from the ground. But then I watched as Lisa made her way to the casket all by herself ... and she went right for Mr. Michaels ... and she grabbed him and hugged him ... and in the midst of her tears she said to him, "I loved Mrs. Michaels very much." And Mr. Michaels hugged her back and said, "Well Lisa, she loved you very much too. You were her special friend. It means the world to me that you came."

It was the first time I had ever seen an angel.