

The Outliers Among Us

Mark 1:4-11

Who has heard of the word, “outlier”? Who of us here knows what it means?

The term, “outlier,” has been around for a long time— its etymology dates from the 1600s to be exact. It originally referred to granite blocks that were mined or broken off from their source, but never used and deposited away from the quarry. In other words, an “outlier” was rock that was isolated outside of its normal environment. Eventually, mathematicians used it to refer to integers that were statistically outside of the norm. It was, for the most part, a technical term that few had any need to include in their own vocabulary.

This changed in many ways in 2008 when Malcolm Gladwell published his celebrated bestseller, *Outliers*, which referred to highly successful people and the reason for why they stood out from the rest of us. Though Gladwell has his critics, his book is an interesting one to read and ponder, as it explains in compelling ways why social advantages matter in determining an individual’s ability to excel, challenging the common “Horatio Alger” myth that a successful person is entirely responsible for his or her own achievements and standing in life.

According to Gladwell, “the biggest misconception about success is that we do it solely on our smarts, ambition, hustle and hard work.” Instead, it can be as simple a matter as the month one is born in, or the environment where one has grown up, or even a fortunate friendship or lucky break.

However, along with these advantages, Gladwell acknowledges what is usually an overarching factor which he calls his “10,000 hour rule,” or the sheer dedication a person has to working at least 10,000 hours on a particular task to hone their skill. He gave examples of many successful “outliers” such as Bill Gates, the Beatles, Canadian hockey stars, and several others who have excelled because of various contributing factors to what made them stand out from the rest.

As intriguing as the book may be, associating the term “outlier” with personal success stories, however, may be quite misleading. For outlier, if applied sociologically, refers more to those who stand outside of society than those who succeed within it. Most of the examples Gladwell gave were of people who excelled and achieved great things working within the worlds of business, sports, science, or education. The ones who gained fame and fortune, of course, are admired and lionized for what they’ve attained. They are “outliers” only because the rest of us aren’t as famous or as fortunate.

But, to my way of thinking, that’s not really what an “outlier” is, or at least how the word should be appropriated. An outlier, as I see it, may be one who is outside of the norm, to be sure, but one who often exists on the margins of society instead of within the mainstream, one who isn’t invested in the conventional aspirations of people, one who comes across as countercultural, if not a social critic, who is able to see the failings of the mass majority or what’s wrong with the system the rest of us live within and take for granted. Outliers are those who come from within society, but now purposely stand outside of it, not blindly accepting its values, preoccupations, or standards for success, offering an alternative perspective on the way

things work that helps listeners be aware of what's really going on. They are outliers because they are part of us, but not one of us.

Who are the outliers among us? There might be many people who come to mind depending on the circles you follow or identify with. They usually are nonconformists of one type or another. Many are considered so because they don't fit into the standard mold of character, aspirations, and achievements. Sometimes, they are viewed as ne'er-do-wells and never really achieve much significance beyond their own small circle.

However, the outliers who make an impact on human civilization typically are social or cultural critics. They are able to observe and comment on the world because they have created enough of a critical distance from the machines of politics and commerce or customs of culture to see the broader implications of trends and policies. They pick up on things the rest of us usually miss. Because they are insightful and prophetic, they might be writers, poets, historians, certain religious figures, philosophers, filmmakers, comedians, community activists, whistleblowers of one type or another—people we likely listen to or follow to some degree who share a perspective that challenges or critiques the status quo.

For me, a classic profile of an outlier was found in Henry David Thoreau, around the time when he wrote, *Walden*. As you know, Thoreau literally removed himself from the daily world around Concord, Massachusetts in the early 19th century, and built his cabin along the shores of Walden Pond. There he lived for a year or so and wrote his famous tome. His writings became both provocative and well-received because of his observations on a variety of subjects. He

was a folk philosopher who stands the test of time, largely because he noted things about human nature and society that still hold true.

One of his more notable lines is found in his essay on civil disobedience where he wrote, “most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them,” meaning, because of the toil of their work, the average citizen is functionally unable to attain their dreams or gain much satisfaction with life. This, of course, was one of the social critiques made by the Transcendentalist movement, a spirit of romanticism that faulted organized religion, many social institutions, and political parties of the time for corrupting the purity of the human soul and society in general. Among the Transcendentalists were notables, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickenson, some of them being neighbors and peers of Thoreau in Concord in the 1830s.

Thoreau’s profile as an outlier was not unique, obviously, for virtually every generation has its outliers in one form or another. Even if they don’t physically remove themselves from their world, outliers down through the ages will think outside of the box and offer critical perspective. For that reason, perhaps more than the icons of business or sports in Gladwell’s book, the true outliers who offer social critique or lead social movements that transform the world are among the most influential people in history (e.g., Martin Luther, John Wesley, Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., et. al.).

Another character who fits the profile of an outlier is John, the baptizer of Jesus. During his prophetic ministry, John left the

mainstream setting of Jerusalem and emerged as a prophetic force among the margins of Judean society. He acted out the role of a biblical prophet in his appearance and by calling people out into the wilderness to unmask all that was corrupting them, as well as destroying the integrity of their religion and society. As the Gospels suggest, John's ministry compelled people to retreat from the day-to-day life which defined their normal ways of doing business, so could they understand how they were cooperating with, if not contributing to, the decline of their own part of human civilization.

It is likely people were drawn to John because they were restless with the state of their world; maybe they sensed they were leading lives of quiet desperation that yearned for transformation. In their daily life, they saw no way to change—just the way things always were where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer—the same old complaints where those in power gain the upper hand and advantages that the rest don't have, and the system was failing far too many. That's how they work; that's how people are treated; that's how law and order gets established and maintained; that's how we teach ambition and the rules of success. It's a world of domination. That's the real world in which most of us live!

When you're caught up in the daily flow of life, you can't easily identify what's wrong with it, because it is the norm. You can't stop long enough to regain your bearings to determine if what you are doing or participating in makes any sense or provides the best measure of satisfaction. When we're living lives of quiet desperation, we do it by taking the paths of least resistance and playing along with the system so we don't lose out, even if it strains your conscience at

times to do so. That's why we need outliers to shake us up and offer a different perspective on what is real and what is not, and to point us toward a better way.

Outliers, like John, offer a needed word for their audience, but it doesn't mean it's easy to accept. I'm often taken by the profound nature of John's proclamation and baptism. The need for repentance for the forgiveness of sins (which over time, Christianity has reduced to a religious cliché, devoid of much meaning) wasn't for some small spiritual misdemeanors and indiscretions that we all commonly do. It was meant to be the impetus for a wholesale change in the way people relate and treat each other and to fix the social and political systems of domination that are unjust to many and corrupted in favor of the rich and powerful. John's call to repentance was for starting over, to divest their ambitions and hopes from the present world because things were broken and corrupt.

Today's text in Mark doesn't make this as clear to us, as do the parallel ones in Matthew and Luke. According to Luke, this is how people were to respond to John's call to repentance:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:11-14)

In other words, instead of accepting the status quo for how business as usual was conducted, he called them into account for not only tolerating a system corrupted by dishonesty and abuse, but cooperating with it and being complicit with it.

Of course, John's message and ministry only set the stage for one of history's greatest outliers. It took an outlier like John to compel and baptize Jesus, who would then leave his own daily life in Nazareth to become an outlier, whose message would impact the history of the world!

When you think about it, what we hold sacred as God's word in Jesus' teachings, were largely the views of one who was an outlier, which is why many of his teachings seem like they don't easily fit into the real world of our daily lives. It's because they don't when you're deeply invested into the belief systems of an imperial world like ours. The world of domination feeds off and perpetuates Social Darwinism.

Yet, it takes an outlier like Jesus, who lived among the poor of the earth and wasn't trying to climb the proverbial ladder only to make a good living for himself, who could remind us of the connections between every person, every class, behind every prejudice and injustice, and proclaim with integrity that the first will be last and the last will be first.

It took an outlier like Jesus who stood outside of the conventional wisdom of his society and wasn't afraid to undermine the existing patriarchal system by giving female followers equal status to males, or Samaritans equal value to Judeans, or children the same dignity as adults. It took an outlier like Jesus to come up with the moral challenge to love our enemies in a world of Roman domination and Jewish militancy and claim a nonviolent approach toward achieving justice—to not get caught into the cycle of violence that justifies the killing of others.

It took an outlier like Jesus who didn't stake his life on making a living or the normal ways of doing business in order to defy the place, influence, and abject idolatry of money in human society and by lifting up the moral and existential value of those who possessed less over those who have more. It took an outlier like Jesus who wasn't afraid of challenging the powers that be and was willing to stand up and pay the ultimate price for doing what was right without the fear of death buckling his knees and breaking his spirit. It takes one who has divested himself of all the control, power, intimidation, and fear of a corrupt and abusive system in order to prove who was truly free and able to embrace life fully.

Jesus looks a little different than the conventional notions of Christ when we view him as an outlier, doesn't he? When you're caught up in the day-to-day world, it's hard to make sense of the true implications of his teachings because so much would have to change. It seems so impossible. The world would have to be so different than it is. All we look for from Jesus is relief for all that stresses and oppresses us. We would have to be so different than where we presently are in terms of the things we value and claim as sacred and important and real.

That spiritual stretch between what an outlier like Jesus actually said and what the Christian church has become is only because we, as Christians, have surrendered our faith to the belief in domination; we have invested ourselves in the wrong things—in being a successful part of what Jesus and others sought to reform and transform. Jesus' word doesn't make sense until you get outside of the world he's critiquing. His teachings begin to become real when

we are free from so much that clouds our judgment with fears and perceived losses where we compromise his mission and reduce his words to religious clichés. We can't really follow Jesus unless we're able to go out into the wilderness for a time with outliers like him and John.

And somewhere in our daily worlds, there are outliers like Jesus and John still out in the wilderness challenging each of us to retreat from our lives of quiet desperation for a time in order to join them to see the world with “real eyes”—the prophetic eyes that can realize the truth of where things need to change, personally and collectively, to heal this world of its constant pain. It won't happen when you're overwhelmed and scrambling just to get by; it will happen when you hear the call to stop what you're doing and head to the hills in order to hear and sense the truth of God beckoning your life toward transformation and freedom. That's when we will experience a second birth. When we respond to that call, we will understand what repentance truly is and how liberating it is to find a new life in Christ.

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