



COURAGEOUS



COMPASSIONATE



Sarah's Story

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliver; my God is my rock, in whom I will take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Psalm 18: 2

Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

Isaiah 46: 4

Introduction

Sometimes in life, as mere humans, we are faced with puzzlements that simply have remained such from the beginning of time; meaning, answers have never been surmised by even those that fall under the category labeled as master minds. Certainly, there are folks that are so disturbed or fascinated by a given mystery that they have dedicated a lifetime of study and contemplation to the field without solutions or answers.

Given a situation of this type, rather than admit the mystery is not solvable, they will arrive at a theory that, unfortunately, becomes accepted over time as fact. While on the other hand, there are many that are willing to admit that some things are simply out of their range of understanding and confess openly the only one possessing a "master mind" is the Master himself; our Creator.

Certainly, the Scripture from John 9: 1-12 sheds light on how Jesus handled his disciples' questions about this very thing after they observed a man that had been blind since birth when they asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" His answer to them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world," lets them know who is not at fault, and refocuses them on the business at hand. Do you suppose he is also delivering the message that the subject is above their mental capacity as human beings to understand, thus, is classified as one of his miracles?

Unfortunately, even today, the manner in which many members of the human race view an individual such as the man born with the physical challenge of blindness since birth as just described, results in the person feeling additional pain brought on by exclusion rather than inclusion from others; an attitude that prompts the mortal with the issue to assume the role of an outsider.

Ladies and gentlemen, the desire by people to create outsiders is not an uncommon happening, but, unfortunately, behavior that is intentional due to a need by those doing the ostracizing. Victims of being an outsider can be those living in a certain geographical area, country, or born wearing the wrong color of skin, members practicing an unacceptable religious belief or chosen denomination, being too old or young, male or female, individuals struggling with physical, emotional, or psychological issues, different lifestyle choices, and those dealing with various types of disease states; all man-made classifications that do not speak well of God's creation.

In order to better understand the motives that prompt the need in people to create outsiders, the following quote by Melinda Gates from her book, "The Moment of Lift", gets right to the heart of the matter with the following words:

"Overcoming the need to create outsiders is our greatest challenge as human beings. It is the key to ending deep inequality. We stigmatize and send to the margins people who trigger in us the feelings we want to avoid. This is why there are so many old and weak and sick and poor people on the margins of society. We tend to push out the people who have qualities we're most afraid we will find in ourselves---and sometimes we falsely ascribe qualities we disown to certain groups, then push those groups out as a way of denying those traits in ourselves. This is what drives dominant groups to push different racial and religious groups to the margins.

And we're often not honest about what's happening. If we're on the inside and see someone on the outside, we often say to ourselves, "I'm not in that situation because I'm different. But that's just pride talking. We could easily be that person. We have all things inside us. We just don't like to confess what we have in common with outsiders because it's too humbling. It suggests that maybe success and failure aren't entirely fair. And if you know you got the better deal, then you have to be humble, and it hurts to give up your sense of superiority and say, "I'm no better than others." So instead we invent excuses for our need to exclude. We say it's about merit or tradition when it's really just protecting our privilege and our pride."

Friends, the poignant words written by Melinda Gates hits the nail right on the head as it relates throughout all generations of mankind since the beginning of time. All it takes to realize this basic truism is to view the advertisements that show stylish human beings dressed to the nines and in perfect physical condition; a system built on getting people to spend money on materialistic things that will make their lives perfect! And...we feed their approach by responding in kind.

Additionally, if you want to witness a group of people in society that have been sent to the margins, just walk with the writer down the hallways of a nursing home and observe how many old folks have been left without support from family or the community at large. When searching for the answer as to why this happens, some common responses are, "I am too busy dealing with my own problems", or, "I don't know what to say or do with them." Have you ever arrived at the conclusion that those dealing with the aging process are no longer considered of value by people living in the outside community? Or.... I can't face the fact that I will either die or grow old just like them? So, rather than honor them, I will simply ignore the problem, and go into complete denial.

Another way to think about the impact on the human race of continuing to label others as outsiders, is to focus on the soul; the inner life that exists within every individual, and has since the beginning of time. Simply stated, we all have what many call a soul; the deep permanent part of us that integrates all of our different pieces into a single person; the critical area that needs to be connected directly to God so that nourishment takes place.

Certainly, as human beings that exclude others, causing them to be pushed to the margins of society, not only impacts their soul, but also damages our own in the process. Since it is a basic need for everyone to matter and be counted, failure to correct this human behavior unleashes havoc generation after generation. In the book titled, "Soul Keeping", written by John Ortberg, the author centers on this by quoting Dallas Willard with the following statement: "We are built to count, as water is made to run downhill. We are placed in a specific context to count in ways no one else does. That is our destiny."

At this point, you may be wondering how this topic relates to Sarah's Story that follows. Ladies and gentlemen, when you read the account of her life, not only will you feel privileged to have met her acquaintance, if only from a distance through print, but also be cognizant of how poignant Jesus' words in the story about the blind man above are to the world in which you now live. Since her struggle to "count" encompassed her entire journey on this earth, it will perhaps penetrate some areas of your heart that have been isolated for a very long time; thus, inviting feelings to surface in a way that serve as a healing balm to your own soul. Hear now, Sarah's Story.

Sarah's Story

One day, while serving as a volunteer at a local nursing home, a resident named Sarah stopped right in front of the writer in her motorized wheelchair and stated in a very quiet voice, "Could we be friends? I have been watching you from afar for some time and have arrived at the conclusion that you can be trusted. So, what do you think about spending some time together every Thursday?"

As the activity director looked on, she was absolutely startled that Sarah had worked up the courage to approach a total stranger. After all, the usual behavior that this resident demonstrated was that of being extremely reclusive; constantly staying in her room and attending very few activities. Actually, the only time she joined others was at mealtime, and even then, seldom interacted with the residents.

Based on this description of Sarah's habits, it could also be stated that just certain members of the staff were the only ones with whom she communicated; behavior that prompted her to be labeled as unpleasant and stuck-up.

Therefore, being fully cognizant of this resident's reputation with the others, the writer immediately accepted the proposition; a relationship that was to last until Sarah's earthly journey ended.

As a result, on the first day designated as the official time for getting together, Sarah was so excited that she parked her wheelchair in the large lobby that allowed a direct view of the front entrance.

Thus, the moment she saw the writer enter, she began waving and rolling down the hallway, wearing a smile that met her ears. Not holding back, she began chattering about everything she liked; ranging from food, books, animals, to her favorite TV programs.

Having noted her wide range of interests, it was obvious this lady possessed great intelligence, and was starved for conversation. Also, she not only eagerly shared information about herself, but also made a great effort to learn about the writer.

Therefore, it was during this first meeting that Sarah shared the fact that she had been observing the writer's behavior for a very long time; actions that were her way of determining if the person under her microscope could be trusted. Actually, it had taken considerable time for her to make the decision, followed by the courage to take action.

Yes, folks, by now you have noted the fact that Sarah had an extremely low trust level when it came to people; so extreme that she simply had cocooned herself into a fenced in world with very thick walls.

At this point, you might be trying to solve the mystery of what happened to bring on such deliberate behavior. So, let us start from the beginning. First, it is important to let you know that Sarah had been born with a disease that caused great hardship to, not only herself, but also her parents. Given the fact she needed constant care, the question on the minds of her family members were all built around whether or not Sarah would ever have any type of independence; especially given the fact that she simply did not fit into society's norms.

Thus, even when she finally reached school age, special permission for attending had to be granted by a local near-by institution. Being small in stature at first, the instructors would carry Sarah up the fifteen stairs that went for three floors. Otherwise, she would be stuck trying to maneuver the hard climb all alone; a situation that placed her at risk of falling. Unfortunately, as her little body began filling out, she became too heavy for the instructors to carry any longer. Therefore, she was left on her own to solve the enormous problem; a dilemma that prompted her to crawl up three sets of fifteen stairs in order to reach the third-floor classrooms.

Folks, picture in your minds how she appeared as she crawled on her own up each step; a slow process that caused her to be late for every class. Then, imagine how it felt to always disrupt the classroom, all alone, with just her old trusty walker for support. All eyes were centered on her physical presence, wearing expressions of disgust. At this early age, do you think society had already pushed this sweet child to the margins?

Then, after having formed a close bond with the writer, Sarah dared to share the fact that when earning awards due to being so intelligent, most times they were held back, with the reason for such behavior being, "A person in your physical condition, does not qualify for such prestigious awards."

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the words you just read are not playing tricks on you. Educated adults actually believed that individuals with special physical needs could not possibly be intelligent; ignorance that caused Sarah to have to watch others be presented with the awards she had earned.

Furthermore, not only did this bias toward people with special physical needs exist at school, but permeated the outside community, as well. Thus, once when Sarah fell when entering a movie theater, an older man walked up to her and proceeded to call her a dog. Then, shouting in a very angry voice, "You are lying on the rug like a dog. Get up and start barking." He ended his rude behavior by kicking her as hard as he could with his booted foot.

Therefore, when she was finally able to move into her own duplex, the relief she felt was immense. This meant she would no longer be a burden to her parents; a situation that had been unpleasant in many aspects. Even though she still needed special assistance in some ways, this was classified by her as one of the best times of her life due to the sense of a new found freedom. She would excitedly describe the shenanigans of her pet cats, the beautiful flowers she grew, the precious stump in her front yard, and even a special male friend who would take her places.

Unfortunately, over time, the disease ravaged her body to the point that daily care was no longer possible, a decline that caused her to frequently fall; a happening that required constant phone calls to 911 for assistance; so much that service was finally declined. Thus, after choosing a nursing home, she had to sell her dearly loved duplex; another situation that proved to be filled with, "more of the same" treatment that made up the pattern of her life; all due to an auctioneer that chose to play by his own set of rules. Joining the ranks of bullies that pushed those he considered to be broken to the fringes, the auctioneer treated her so badly that others had to intercede on Sarah's behalf.

However, in spite of this enormous change in her life, and all the past hardships endured, her favorite saying was, "Please understand everyone. I did not come here to die. I came here to live."

Consequently, as the writer and Sarah became the best of friends, it was amazing to not only observe how extremely intelligent she was, but to also feel her trust level grow. An example of this growth was to hear her describe the favorite foods she could not any longer enjoy because of her inability to handle silverware. She would exclaim, "If only I could have a salad with balsamic dressing, a tuna fish sandwich, and mocha-chocolate ice cream.

Thus, one day, the writer asked, "Sarah, if I get permission to take you into the small room beside the dining room, the one without windows, will you allow me make your dreams come true? It would be my pleasure to treat you to those favorite foods you long to enjoy once more."

Consequently, after taking a full week to work up the courage to say yes, she finally agreed to the special time together. Have you solved the mystery as to why this was a challenge for Sarah? If not, try placing yourself in her position having only the ability to use a spoon, maneuvered by two fingers. How is it possible to eat slick lettuce leaves with this limited physical ability? Getting the picture?

Therefore, when the big day arrived, the writer prepared the room in advance by making available coverings for Sarah's clothing and the floor beneath her wheelchair, plus, an ample supply of wipes. Consequently, when she watched the lids be removed and her favorite food come into view, it was like observing the brightest star in the night sky; all due to the glow she wore on her face.

Then, not holding back, she dug into the salad with her fingers and enjoyed it to the very last bite. Her entire body relaxed because she knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that she was in the presence of someone that made her feel like she "<u>COUNTED</u>". She felt comfortable wearing oil on her fingers, chin, and clothing. And.... licking the bottom of the bowl without restraint.

Consequently, over time, as the days made up years, and Sarah's hungry mind was fed with an array of books, accompanied by lively discussions, her confidence grew to the point that she was prompted to venture into forbidden territory by attending activities and becoming the writer's editor. There was absolutely no area she left unexplored. When she felt disenfranchised, disappointed, or sad, she expressed those feelings with a voice of her own; behavior that soon caused her to be labeled as "very smart". She made new friends and advocated for their rights, as well. Folks, this gal that was so timid and withdrawn actually became the most vocal at the resident council meetings; so much that she became adamant

about the facility setting a time, once a month, where all the residents that had passed, be honored; a happening that is still scheduled monthly and named, "The Sarah Jones Memorial Service".

Therefore, as the seasons came and went, Sarah enjoyed her new found freedom with great gusto. If she received a cake or box of candy, her usual practice was to motor down the hallway in her wheelchair offering to share a piece with staff and residents. Also, if a resident without family support was due to celebrate a birthday, she would notify the writer so that a special cake could be brought in as a surprise for the individual. Ladies and gentlemen, Sarah was absolutely driven to be a blessing to others.

However, the disease with which she was born eventually took its toll, causing her time on earth to reach its conclusion; sooner, rather than later. Thus, as she quietly reclined in her bed, word spread rapidly among the staff and residents that Sarah's condition had worsened; prompting a constant flow of people approaching her room to bid a final adieu.

Also, it was during this time when, Connie, an individual who was born with the same disease that Sarah had endured, entered the room in her motorized wheelchair, that new light was shed on how very abstract it is for others to truly understand the depth of despair and challenges some people face in life. Having endured all the feelings of exclusion cruelly inflicted by human beings to those having special needs, these two people had established a bond that was unmatched for all times. Backing her wheelchair as close to Sarah's bed as possible, her friend, Connie, reached for her hand and began speaking softly in a way that sounded like they had written their own language. Folks, for hours and hours, these two friends held hands; all the way to the finish line! Sarah's friend would pause every once in a while, and say, "It's all right. Jesus is here. It's not going to hurt. You will be perfect in heaven. Just relax, smile, and be at peace. I love you but God loves you more. I'll see you when I get there." These sweet words were spoken with such grace that tears were running down the cheeks unabashedly of all gathered around Sarah's bed.

Ladies and gentleman, on the road home, God used the most unexpected people to fall into step beside one of his own that was in need. Lessons were learned that would never be forgotten. Lives were touched in ways that counted. Above all, a person that had lived on the margins of society all her life, found her voice, made friends, and taught others the true meaning of love. But, most of all, throughout the journey with this sweet friend, the blessings received by the writer were much greater than those she could ever supply to Sarah; all because the writer learned to view the world through the eyes of an individual that had spent

her life on the margins of society; a place that was manmade out of pride, and the need to feel superior.

As a conclusion to Sarah's story, let us once again revisit the disciples' question to Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" His answer to them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned."

As we close Sarah's story, I am sure many of you feel like the writer, and are at a loss as to why she was born this way. Some people blame God for her circumstances. If he knew ahead of her birth what her journey would be like, why did he not intercede?

Others, actually take the position of not believing in God because he did not save a person from circumstances or horrible plights in life by crying out, "There cannot possibly be a God, or he would not want someone he created to be in this awful state.

Additionally, some folks stop believing, praying, and feel such anger that their own health suffers as a result. Hope disappears and bitterness grows like a malignant cancer, thus, starving their needy soul from God's love.

On the other hand, before departing this world, Sarah wanted to have the last word on the subject. After all, she was the one that had to endure the affliction all her life. Since having lived in a twisted, deformed body that caused numerous people to either lash out at her in anger, or look away in disgust, Sarah had to come to grips with her own intense anger, ugly bitterness, and dark depression, or die a slow, tormented death of the soul. Given this horrible thorn in her flesh that was embedded in every fiber of her being, Sarah felt she had earned the right to have the last say.

Therefore, she wanted to impart to you, that God was always present in her journey; meaning, he never left her side, and encouraged her to cry out to him in anger, anguish, or sorrow, anytime, night or day. He never failed to pick her up and carry her when her will to live ceased. Above all, she did not want you to be mad at him because of her suffering. She wanted you to love him as much as she had all her life. And...even as much as she loved him, it could never equal the bountiful love he poured into her heart. Her final words to you were, "Sometimes, we have more questions than answers, and are at a loss as to even what questions to ask. Don't worry, he always knows."

Read below, her favorite poem.



I Saw Two Clouds at Morning

by John Gardiner Brainard

I saw two clouds at morning,
Tinged by the rising sun,
And in the dawn, they floated on,
And mingled into one;
I thought that morning cloud was blest,
It moved so sweetly to the west.

I saw two summer currents
Flow smoothly to their meeting,
And join their course, with silent force,
In peace each other greeting;
Calm was their course through banks of green,
While dimpling eddies played between.

Such be your gentle motion,
Till life's last pulse shall beat;
Like summer's beam, and summer's stream,
Float on, in joy, to meet
A calmer sea, where storms shall cease,
A purer sky, where all is peace.