

TERENCE LESTER

FOREWORD BY FATHER GREGORY BOYLE

WHEN

WE

STAND

**THE POWER OF SEEKING
JUSTICE TOGETHER**



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CHAPTER ONE

GET OUT OF YOUR BUBBLE

An email from the principal of a private school in Atlanta arrived in my inbox. In the email, he stated that he wanted his students to learn to see outside of their immediate “bubble.” As soon as I read those words, I knew what he was referring to. Being familiar with the school and the area in which it was located, I knew that the principal wanted me to speak to the school’s affluent students about the importance of learning more about the world beyond their school environment.

The principal’s email went into further detail and described what he meant by the word *bubble*. He wrote: “The students here at the school have tons of privileges like a well-appointed library, top-of-the-line technical resources, and educators with postgraduate degrees, and they have access to everything they could ever imagine and have no clue what is going on right outside the school. It’s a bubble.” From the tone and content of his email, I could discern not only the principal’s feelings of frustration and his keen sense of urgency, but also his compassion and patience in wanting to

help his students understand the impact that they could have on a local level if they were to embrace a sense of awareness of, and proximity to, their local communities.

I accepted the engagement—not because I wanted to deliver a “guilt talk” to people with privileges, but because I hoped to introduce the possibilities of what could happen if these students and educators were to choose to step out of isolation and join the community, which ultimately makes the world around them a better place. It was the principal’s email that made me understand these words from the book *Tattoos on the Heart* to a greater extent:

Only kinship. Inching ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship such that God might recognize it. Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied.¹

When the day arrived on which I was to deliver my talk at the school, I remember vividly what I saw as I drove into the community. Immediately I understood, in much more depth, what the principal actually meant in his email. While driving, I saw people experiencing homelessness. They were pushing shopping carts down the street that contained cans that they were hoping to trade for dollars. I drove past boarded-up homes as well as gas stations at which men were simply waiting around in the hopes of finding work at a construction company. I also spotted

several apartment complexes that I knew were inhabited by those who were on extremely low incomes. I didn't notice a single grocery store on my journey. This meant that the local community was essentially a food desert. Was this the "The Other America" Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about in his speech given at Stanford University?²

I felt my heart breaking as I passed many people who were in desperate need—while I was embarking on a journey to a community that, in contrast, had everything that they could possibly need, as the principal had described in his email. *The opportunities for change are endless if this community would only push past isolation and get involved in building relationships with the community that surrounds them*, I thought. Finally, as I turned the next corner and started to get closer to the school itself, the contrast between the two communities became palpable. I could see that there were new homes in the area that were in the \$370,000 to \$395,000—if not above \$400,000—price range. Construction was underway on more houses, and there were expensive cars in the driveways beside well-manicured lawns. It was as though I had entered a different world. What I later learned is that many families had actually relocated to the community and built homes specifically so that their children could attend this particular private school. The two communities were as different as they could possibly be. As the principal had warned, it felt like I was entering a bubble while gentrification was happening all around this neighborhood.³

Although the school and its immediate community were in proximity, geographically speaking, to the broader local

community, they were mentally and spiritually miles apart from one another. Those who attended the school were essentially living in isolation—detachment—from people who were physically near them but were not “like them” in either financial or social terms. Many of the parents and students in this school had no idea that a number of the current residents in the community would be displaced years down the line because of the gentrification occurring due to wealthier families.

As a result of having the opportunity to speak with students at the school, I found myself compelled to think more broadly about the issue of isolation in our society that is, sadly, becoming more widespread.

COMING OUT OF ISOLATION

Isolation can feel safe. Perhaps it's what you've always known. It can feel, in many cases, comfortable and controllable. We go to work, talk to our group of friends, and live within our own family units. We have created our own bubbles that keep us from living lives that include building relationships with people from varying socioeconomic, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds. For many, including the students who attended the private school I spoke at, the idea of becoming involved with their neighbors felt uncomfortable. What did they have in common with the people staying at the local homeless shelter, after all? The idea that they would have anything in common with such people was completely foreign to them.

The kind of isolation in which the members of this school found themselves was not dissimilar to that which many of us who live in personal “bubbles” often experience. In a similar way, churches separate themselves from others because of denominational affiliations, territorialism, and competition, all in the name of the One who came to unite us: Jesus. Some church leaders find themselves in a “spiritual bubble” while at the same time professing a gospel that is supposed to bring us together. I remember personally speaking to one church leader who openly told me that they had no desire to work with a church that was less than a mile away because it would mean engaging with people who were “different” from those at his church.

As the church leader spoke, I couldn’t help but wonder what God must think, given that so many churches operate like this leader. In addition to Paul’s words about believers being one body (1 Corinthians 12:12-14), Scripture also calls believers to be priests, proclaiming the goodness of God to the nations:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God’s people;

once you had not received mercy,

but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

How can believers come close to offering this hope of God's mercy to a world that is longing for it when we can barely seem to offer it to one another? It seems that, at every turn, believers are snapping at each other's heels on social media while forsaking a message of grace and welcome. Though we are asked not to judge one another, name-calling and finger-pointing are rampant; both apparently occur because of efforts to follow God's will. I wonder how often we encounter someone who has isolated themselves from the church because they found its people to be no different from those they already knew in the other parts of their life's world.

Those who isolate themselves do not seek to do so because of the extent of their privilege or status. Isolation has, in fact, offered a way in which they may protect themselves from what they perceive to be possible sources of risk, hurt, or danger in their lives. Some see isolation as a means of protecting their perceived worth and value in the eyes of others.

People also isolate themselves in order to deal with depression and other things that they struggle with. Sometimes, people crave solitude and become more guarded—putting up emotional walls—in order to try to avoid being hurt again after experiencing certain traumas. On a personal level, isolation is familiar to the human heart. It leaves us without connections, though, causing us to question many things, including ourselves. Too much isolation can lead to loneliness. Although they are two separate

things, it is true that isolation can lead to feeling like you have no one there with you. Unsurprisingly, since humans were not meant for prolonged states of isolation, this can lead to major health concerns. According to health insurer Cigna, more than three in five Americans are lonely, with more and more people reporting that they feel that they are left out, poorly understood, and lacking in companionship.⁴

The rates of depression and suicide have skyrocketed across the nation. Although it's certain that chemical imbalances are partly responsible for such mental illnesses, experts insist that our widespread sense of disconnection is also a key factor. Though we live in a time when technology has produced a multitude of ways in which we might connect with one another, we seem to be missing an essential factor in connectivity—at substantial risk to our health. In 2018, an article in *Psychology Today* called the current scenario an “epidemic.” Sharing Professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad’s work on loneliness, the article stated, “Loneliness poses a serious physical risk—it can be, quite literally, deadly. As a predictor of premature death, insufficient social connection is a bigger risk factor than obesity and the equivalent of smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.”⁵

You may have felt the ache of loneliness that isolation brings. You may even feel it now. But you might also—simultaneously—feel hesitant about taking the initial steps toward joining a community. But what if we could all see the people “on the outside” who appear to be different from us as not really being all that different at all? What if

we really believed that people around us are just like us because they, too, are part of the human family? It would change the ways in which we see ourselves, our communities, and our connections to those Jesus described as “our neighbors.”

DISCOVER POWER IN PROXIMITY

Our hearts have been designed for the kind of kinship and connection that can only come from being in a community with other people. God knew from the very beginning that this type of existence would be the best one: an existence that helps to sustain, empower, and encourage others to live their best lives while simultaneously giving meaning to and enriching our lives. This is the miraculous gift of community. Without it, we’re missing out on one of the biggest, most significant graces of being human.

In his now-famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written in April of 1963, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of our basic need to care for each other and to ensure one another’s well-being. He asserted that the ability to safeguard each of our human rights is contingent on the human rights of another individual being upheld, regardless of their place in society, or regardless of what side of town they live on. In defense of his efforts to seek civil rights as an “outsider” in Birmingham, King said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”⁶

King understood that, as individuals, we cannot even live a waking day without engaging in what he described as the “global village” or the “world house.” He spoke of how connected we truly are—of how connected we ought to be—in his 1967 “Christmas Sermon on Peace” at Ebenezer Baptist Church:

Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent upon most of the world? You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that's handed to you by a Pacific Islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that's given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning and that is poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that's poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you desire to have cocoa for breakfast, and that's poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that's given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured. It is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.⁷

Today, the same remains true. Pause for a moment in your reading and examine the labels on your clothing. Find out where your favorite shirt or dress was made. And while you're up, find out where the candle you burn to help you relax was produced. What about the decorative pillow on your couch? Your dining room table? Look much closer than the label and ask yourself who made the textiles. Where's the wax from? Where does this particular type of thread come from?

Recognizing that our lives are interconnected is the first necessary step in seeking to understand just how much we need each other, and our call to stand together. Community is necessary for us personally, but it is also a prerequisite for our considerations about how we might respond to—and try to solve—the issues and the injustices that we witness in the world. We need to understand this before we can take a stand and make any significant strides toward serving one another well. This is the main message that I wanted to convey to the private school students I spoke with—but it is also a message that we must *all* realize and come to recognize. I believe that this was the apostle Paul's main message when he wrote to the church in Corinth: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

When we start to see the world through a lens of *we*, we will fully grasp what Father Boyle means when he

says: “There is no ‘them’ and ‘us.’ There is only us.”⁸ By understanding our need for one another and decreasing our levels of isolation, we can actually begin to enter into a spirit of community wholeheartedly, becoming proximate and present to our brothers and sisters who are in need: our neighbors.

One thing that I’ve discovered during my time working with communities is just how important the idea of—and the reality of embracing—proximity is.⁹ Embracing proximity is not only the means by which we get closer to real-life issues but also how we enter into and develop deep relationships that could be beneficial to our own lives as we seek to achieve justice in the world. Accepting the need to live in proximity to others is how you become seen as an individual—as well as being, in turn, the way in which you have a chance to see and affirm the dignity of others. Being in proximity to people is how we connect with others to seek justice and change the world. Jesus connected with people whom he was proximate to, so why would it be any different for us? Scripture highlights Jesus’ nearness to humanity in his ability to empathize and sympathize with our earthly sufferings: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Our lack of proximity to one another not only causes us to “otherize” people but it creates more division. No real solutions are developed when we are distanced from each other. In an article titled “Six Habits of Highly Empathetic People,” researcher and author Roman Krznaric says: “Curiosity expands our empathy when we talk to people outside our usual social circle, encountering lives and worldviews very different from our own.”¹⁰ In fact, it is my belief that we have an empathy deficit and are in desperate need of this vital virtue to address the heaviness that we see in our communities and world.

Jesus made a lifestyle of connecting with those who were not like him. He ate with the misfits, the tax collectors, and the sinners. In his book *Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith*, author Larry Osborne says, “[Jesus’] goal was to expand the kingdom, to bring salvation to people who previously were excluded. He came to seek and find the lost, including a large group of folks no one else wanted to invite to the party. Everything about Jesus’ ministry was designed to make salvation and the knowledge of God *more* accessible.”¹¹

When was the last occasion on which you made time to truly connect with someone over a meal whose worldview or status was vastly different from yours? When did you make an effort to serve someone without an agenda? When was the last time that you engaged in a meaningful conversation without trying to politicize the Messiah who came to give all for all?

GETTING CLOSE

As I reflect on my own life, I remember how embracing the values of proximity, vulnerability, and consistency not only served to tear down the walls that were isolating me but also provided a pathway for me to promote these principles among those around me. I was in high school, and struggling hard to find my identity. My father wasn't physically around much in my younger years, and though my mom worked hard to provide for us, I often felt that I was the cause of all of her frustrations. When I was seventeen years old, I remember leaving home because of tension and many times not feeling comfortable or accepted. My mom did all she could to raise a young Black man; my anger would not allow me to receive instructions from men that tried to talk to me who were not my own father. I was broken and couldn't understand why my family was too. Living anywhere other than my own home felt like a better solution, so I took to sleeping in the park. If I couldn't sleep in the park, I'd ask to stay on a friend's couch or floor. Before I knew it, I was a teenager experiencing homelessness from time to time.

On one particular night, I decided to use the little money that I had to call my friend Erik on a gas station payphone. When he picked up, I asked him if it would be possible to spend a night on his couch and to maybe have something to eat. Erik seemed hesitant at first but asked his father's permission anyway. When Erik got back on the line, I remember him saying, "Yeah, come on over—my family loves you."

Maybe I remember his words so clearly because they wound up being so profoundly true. Erik's father, Mr. Moore, would become one of my mentors and someone whose life embodied what it means to love sacrificially. That night, we formed a connection that would go on to last for years.

When I arrived at their family home that evening after a long drive, Mr. Moore came out to my car, carrying food for me. I remember him looking at me—and asking me to look at him. I also remember feeling, for the first time, that I could look at a man and that no harm would come to me—and that it was safe to just listen. I am forever grateful that I did so, because the moment that followed would change my life forever.

He looked at me earnestly and called me a leader.

A leader?

The word didn't seem to fit at all.

How could he say that when I was getting ready to go sleep in a park that night because I rebelled and ran away? Or when my teachers were kicking me out of their classrooms every day because I was falling asleep in lessons? I had issue after issue, all stemming from the circumstances in which I'd grown up, yet here was this man calling me a leader.

But when Mr. Moore said it, he meant it. He said that he saw something in me that no one else had. He'd seen the makings of a leader within me and had decided to speak to this capability. Even as I write this, I am deeply grateful. He passed away the very year that I started our organization

Love Beyond Walls. I wish that he could have seen the leader that I have become. He took the time to notice me—and to really *see* me—and that meant that the way in which I thought of myself slowly began to shift. Mr. Moore went on to become the person in my life I turned most frequently to when grappling with the big questions: “Should I put myself through college and work this job?” “Should I try and get involved with this ministry?” “Should I marry her?” He was even the person who encouraged me to start pursuing ministry and to try to start an organization. All of this transpired because he saw a young man who needed help and took what many would have considered to be too big of a risk. He saw the obstacles that I was experiencing and decided to become proximate. Mr. Moore showed me, in essence, a clear picture of the gospel, giving of himself in order for me to experience both love and restoration. His willingness to come close was more powerful than any sermon or lecture I could ever have received, and it provided the support that I needed to be able to navigate many of my greatest challenges. I wasn’t an “other”; I was a part of his community.

It was proximity that also helped me understand my need for community. In recent years, it has helped me understand how important it is to address issues of injustice alongside other people. I believe that you can’t fully understand a person and their struggles or affirm their humanity until you are proximate. People make judgments about people they have never met all the time and it is

toxic. That's why Jesus modeled proximity when he chose to be among humanity. Jesus' proximity is actually what gave us life and affirmed our dignity, providing healing and connection to God.

VULNERABILITY

Though I was fortunate enough to have Mr. Moore come into my life while I was in high school, I ask myself why none of my teachers decided to find out what was really going on with me and in my life. All I can think of is that their actions were prohibited by their fear of sacrifice. My teachers were not bad people. Probing and entering into a student's or anyone's life, though, requires us to open ourselves up to potential hardship. Hardship produces hurts and those hurts can keep us from making ourselves vulnerable or make us not want to enter in to a relationship with someone that we want to walk with or help. It takes vulnerability of both sides to enter in to a space relationship or connection. So instead of entering into my life in a more personal capacity, my teachers sent me out of class—a lot. I got labeled for something that they did not understand and failed to ask about. However, God brought Mr. Moore into my life by way of helping to correct my path instead.

Our willingness to be open and to embrace vulnerability is key to being able to experience true connection at any level. Mr. Moore rendered himself vulnerable, and it was his vulnerability that helped me to overcome my isolation. This was the message that I hoped to impart to students

through my talk at the private school. Years later, I am modeling that same type of vulnerability with others through our work with Love Beyond Walls. The aim of our organization is to love people who the rest of the world passes by and overlooks. People who are struggling with poverty have lives and stories that are just as valuable as ours. Fear should not stop any one of us from loving each one of them.

Beautiful things can happen when we emerge from our bubbles of isolation and step into the messiness of life. Though most people get into social justice work to “do something” for the betterment of their communities, what they realize over time is that very real work is being done inside of them as well. When Jesus said he came so that we may have life and have it to the full, it is this type of life that he meant (see John 10:10).

The part of us that hopes to remain at a distance from those in need due to our fear of the unknown is robbing us of the riches that are to be found within such relationships. We might feel good about our yearly visit to the local homeless shelter to serve dinner or about our year-end donation to an organization that works with youth in foster care. But that type of service is really more about how it makes the servant feel, rather than making a true difference to the recipient. Giving in such a spirit is nothing compared to what could happen to our hearts—and what we could potentially help to revive or to create—as a result of forging and strengthening social connections.

Our lives feel more meaningful and purposeful once we start to truly care about the people whom we once saw as being “separate” from us. This is largely because once we enter into a relationship, it’s impossible to see someone as being altogether different from us. As a simple action step today, write down the names of your closest friends, family, and coworkers. Then think about how similar or dissimilar they are to you in terms of socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Think about ways that you can become closer to them and also ways you can step outside of your bubble to take steps toward knowing people more intimately or being proximate with those you have yet to meet. Ponder what discoveries you might make by doing this exercise.

If we are truly aiming to make the world better, we must be daring and bold enough to leave our isolated bubbles to both receive people and be received by those whom we have yet to fully meet. You can be close in space to a person and even causally talk to a person and not fully know them. If we are to fully allow proximity to shape our relationships, we must be willing to meet people on a deeper level. That means we must engage their world and allow them to engage our world as well. Taking a stand together means that we must actually be close to each other in ways that cause us to embrace vulnerability and authentic conversation, and move away from the isolation that keeps us separated from one another. A true mark of a follower of Jesus is not just having

all the right things to say or doing things perfectly, but, like Christ, making our presence known with love, grace, truth, and proximity when everything seems to be going wrong in the world around us.