

One New Book for the Preacher

Agnes W. Norfleet

Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

Neil White, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 309 pages.

Davidson College assigned this book as required reading for all entering freshmen two summers ago. The title is what first caught my attention since the words, *sanctuary* and *outcasts*, are frequent expressions in a preacher's vocabulary. This is an easy and enjoyable book which reads like a pretty good novel, and yet its setting, characters, and plot create a complex and interestingly contemporary gospel turf.

In the Sanctuary of Outcasts is a memoir by Neil White, who was a good looking young adult graduate of Ole Miss where he was president of his fraternity. He married a bright and beautiful woman, had two wonderful children, and presided over a growing publishing company in New Orleans where he gained renown for printing magazines which contributed to tourism along the Gulf coast. He seemed to enjoy a full and comfortable life until he got caught kiting checks to keep his business afloat. He confessed his guilt to bank fraud and was sent to the minimum security federal prison in Carville, Louisiana, that shares property with the nation's only leper colony. Neil's eighteen months of interacting with a wild variety of prisoners and patients—outcasts all—helped lead him to turn in repentance and ultimately to a renewed sense of vocation.

As memoir, the plot unfolds a personal story of redemption from Neil's late adolescent arrogance and entitlement toward a profound coming unto himself, but Neil isn't the most interesting character nor is his redemption the most engaging plotline. I found more compelling his descriptions of elderly patients who had the freedom to leave this so-called colony, but taken from their families and quarantined in Carville as young children, this was the only home many of them had known. No longer considered outcasts medically, they still bore the stigma of leprosy and chose to live in this converted prison. The prisoners who longed to be free from the confines of the old leper colony walls were forced to share this oddly renovated space with the patients, albeit in separate quarters. Amid these contrasting forms of imprisonment of Hanson's disease patients and minimum security criminals, Neil White describes a bizarrely singular modern community, the likes of which Jesus moves around in Galilee and Samaria. The Matthew 25 commission is all there in Carville.

At first, trying to deny he is actually a prisoner, Neil pretends he's an undercover journalist with plans to report on the sad stories of the sick and his fellow prisoners. But these outcasts minister to him, heal him, and something of the kingdom of God gets under his skin, changing him. "I felt like an insider as I sat around the cafeteria table with a half-dozen leprosy patients. We told our stories. I was more than an undercover journalist. I was more than an eyewitness. I was participating in a new kind of community. Prisoners and leprosy patients might have been considered outcasts by most of the world, but we were stuck here together. I was still a bit apprehensive about touching them, but I realized they wouldn't want me handling their finances either" (page 84).

Among the patients who had long suffered from Hanson's disease, the most compelling relationship emerges with Ella Bounds, who engages Neil with the stuff of the gospel. The unlikely pair, young white collar criminal and elderly wheelchair bound Ella who lost her legs to the disease, create a bond and friendship. Her disease, displacement, and old age become channels of faith and grace through which he recognizes the need for repentance. The leper helps heal the prisoner.

Toward the end of the book, as Neil is leaving the prison for freedom, he turns to look at Ella:

I wanted to remember my good fortune. A prison sentence, anywhere else, might have been lost time....But most of all I wanted to remember Ella. Every detail. The way she cranked the antique wheelchair handles. The way she twisted in her chair at the dance. The way she turned her disease, the most shameful known to man, into something sacred.... At some point after I settled in Oxford, I would take Ella's advice and find a church. Not just any church. A place like the church at Carville. Where the parishioners were broken and chipped and cracked. A place to go when I needed help. A place to ask forgiveness. A sacred place where people were not consumed with image or money. I didn't know if a church like this existed, but if it did I would go. And I would pray. Not the kind of prayers I used to say for miracles or money or advancement. I would ask for something more simple. I would pray for recollection — pray that I would never forget...Ella in her antique wheelchair." (pages 302-303)

Among a preacher's scholarly tomes, this memoir is a lightweight, easy read. However, the gathering of Hanson's disease patients and prisoners under the sprawling live oak trees of south Louisiana continue to populate my imagination long after I put the book down. I recall conversations in the cafeteria and open air breezeways and think about how this strange place intersects with the gospel of Christ's healing and hospitality. I ponder the flower garden laid out in half buried Coke bottles, because the local Coca-Cola distributor refused the return of bottles from a leprosarium. How a community of outcasts can refashion such an ignorant rejection into a thing of beauty. I remember Neil having to tell his young children he was going to "camp" and the toll his corrupt business decisions and imprisonment took on his family. I think about the irony of his finding healing through someone quarantined and stigmatized with a biblical illness. It's not so much that I have mined the book for sermon illustrations, although you could do that. I've told only one small story from the pulpit. Rather, I found this absolutely weird cloister to offer a refreshingly strange context to imagine how the gospel of Jesus Christ enlightens patients and prisoners and people who populate our pews.