

It Doesn't Have to Be – A Modern Day Parable

inspired by John 2:13-25

Since the end of First Term was near, Principal Jean arranged a time for a "seniors-only" lunch. This was her last year at this school. Retirement and travel were next, but first she wanted to get this right.

She went up to the cafeteria and found there a great chasm in the room. Some tables were active and jovial, while a few tables had only or two students seated quietly waiting. She grabbed a can of Reddi-Whip and ordered everyone to get up and stand against a wall. She made her way around the room marking some tables with a whipped cream number, and other tables she overturned. To the group of senior athletes she said, "Take these out of here!" Raising her voice she said to the whole room, "Stop making this school about divisions!"

No one had ever heard Principal Jean raise her voice in anger before. One of the more popular, outspoken students pointed to the school motto painted on the wall and read it very loudly, "Be the best that you can be." She added, "Some of us are destined to be more important." The principal added in a softer, more serious tone, "But not at the expense of others." She knew in her heart that this was the most important lesson she had ever taught.

The outspoken student answered and said to her, "They just don't fit in with us." She gestured at the small clusters of students on one side of the room. The students now stood in the same pattern as they had been sitting — large groups of socialites on one side of the room, and a scattering of loners on the other. "We don't make them stay away from us," the student continued. "It's just the way life is! People hang around people like themselves. There's nothing wrong with that."

Principal Jean took a long, silent survey of the room. The more outgoing and vocal students stood confidently in their choices. Some almost looked ready to fight for their rights and defend their group. Others stood in a state of shock by what was transpiring, their eyes wide with fear of what was next. A handful seemed to try to blend into the wall as they stood, heads down, and arms folded cradling their small space in the world.

Jean turned back to the adamant student. Taking a deep breath and softening her voice, she said, "It doesn't have to be. Every single person in this room has something valuable to add to the conversation. Life will be much richer if we mingle our minds and honor each other's perspectives. We're all missing out by not knowing each other better. Everyone isn't given equal opportunity to be their best.

The student was joined by a few friends and they persisted saying, "What examples in the world can you show us where people are actually doing that?" Principal Jean answered and said to them, "Give me three days. We will destroy the stereotypes and raise up new standards."

But, the students said, "Most of us have been in class together for 12 years, and our parents were in class here before us doing the same things, and you think you will change the ways in just three days?"

The new way began quite easily with a rule that no one sits alone, and everyone sits with a different group of people each hour. There were discussion questions on the tables, and every person was given a chance to speak. As the hours passed, and the students became more comfortable with the process, they came to believe the words Principal Jean had spoken: "It doesn't have to be the same as it's always been."

Everyone saw a change. The room began to feel level. Power and position weren't lurking over their heads. The speakers listened, and the listeners spoke.

It happened naturally, and those three days were a beautiful testimony to the truth about human nature. Jean no longer needed to issue rules for being kind and appreciating differences. The students began to understand it well.

