

Outside the Fold

June Hopkins

An urgent knock at the door, late on a cold rainy night, had me immediately thinking of an emergency. I opened the door a fraction, then wider as I saw the face of our pastor. Immediately in front of him was a barefoot, bedraggled, teenage girl.

‘Police found this young woman in the local park, trying to sleep in a picnic shelter. Driving past the church they saw the lights were still on, so they brought her in to see if I knew someone who might give her a bed for the night.’ He spoke quickly, grimacing oddly at me behind her back. ‘She doesn’t seem to have any possessions,’ he added.

I looked more critically at the teenager, noting that she was scowling. She flashed angry eyes in my direction, reminding me of a trapped animal. Her stance was hostile and defensive, and had it not been raining so heavily, I think she would have run away from us, right there and then.

‘You have teenage girls,’ the pastor continued, ‘so I thought you might be willing to have her stay here.’

‘Of course she can stay. What’s your name, lass?’ I asked, trying to sound more accepting than I felt. My teenagers were naïve, well-loved innocents. In those few seconds the girl stood before me, thoughts of drug addiction and rebelliousness coloured in the larger picture, accurately or not. I was always nervous about my own offspring coming in close contact with or being influenced by someone like her.

The pastor shook his head. ‘She refuses to tell us her name.’ The girl did not answer my question.

I thanked the pastor and led her into the house.

‘Are you hungry?’ She nodded, so I began making her some toast. After she had eaten, I suggested a warm shower might make her feel better, feeling thankful when she said ‘Okay.’ I found her some pyjamas and showed her the bathroom.

By now, my own seventeen-year-old daughter had arisen and come to see what the noise was all about. She generously offered to give up her room for the night, saying she would sleep on the sofa.

When the girl emerged, a difference in her demeanour was evident. She hung her head when I introduced her to my daughter, but I saw her shoulders had relaxed and I glimpsed the hint of a smile. Perhaps she realised she was safe.

‘You can call me Sandy,’ she said, ‘but that’s not my real name.’ I sighed with relief at the change in her attitude, and that she had spoken without prompting.

After she was safely bedded down, I climbed into my own bed and thought about the situation.

‘Where are you, Lord, in all of this? What do you want of me?’

His answer was fast. ‘Remember the ninety-nine sheep that were safe, but one was out in the cold and lost? That lamb is this child.’ I got the message. The Bible uses the term ‘fold’ to describe the place where sheep are together, sheltered, and safe. The lost lamb, in the biblical story, was nowhere near the fold. My family and I needed to be the hands and feet of Jesus to this girl, enfolding her with his love. It sounded so simple, but the arrival of the next day showed me that we were traversing rough terrain with this lost lamb.

Rather than eat breakfast, Sandy asked me for money so that she could go buy some cigarettes. I was challenged about what it means to love unconditionally. Was it the Holy Spirit that prompted me to give her the money? I gave her twenty dollars, having no idea of the cost of cigarettes. She asked directions to the local shops. As she went, I was certain she wouldn’t return, but she did.

For the rest of the day, she sat under the gazebo in our back yard, puffing her way through the packet. I tried hard to engage her further in conversation, but she gave nothing away. I had no inkling as to where she lived, why she was homeless, or if she was in trouble. She limited her conversation to sharing about the difficulties of living rough, her speech littered with swearing and expletives. Alone with her, my daughter had a little more success with gleaning information. Sandy revealed to her she had an abusive stepfather whom she refused to live with. She had much younger siblings who took up most of her mother’s time.

Reading between the lines in the limited conversations she had, my daughter deduced there had been a big fight in the home, following which Sandy had run away. For the past several weeks she had been living on the streets.

I prayed much more than usual because I didn’t know what to do. The truth was that I did not want her to stay with my family for long because her rough language, street-smart attitude and addictive behaviour might negatively impact my daughters. I wrestled with God about letting her stay. My mind repeatedly returned to the lost sheep. Eventually I achieved a peace about the situation when I heard God say, ‘Trust me.’

Sandy seemed to be settling in, when on the third day she suddenly revealed that her mother had a part-time job working in a shop a few suburbs away. I offered to drive her there

to see her mother, which is what I thought she was angling for. Perhaps a taste of family life again had softened her attitude.

She agreed so long as I went into the shop with her. In clothes and shoes loaned by my daughter, and with her hair neatly combed, Sandy appeared both excited and apprehensive to be seeing her mother.

After attracting her mother's attention, we waited until there were no customers. Initially, Sandy's mother was distinctly cold towards her. She also looked me up and down with a dismissive stare. When Sandy began to cry, her mother's stoic composure broke, and she reached out to her for a hug.

'I am not coming home,' Sandy said. 'I can't live with him, but I'll stay in touch, Mum.' That was the end of the interaction.

Driving back to my place, I offered to help her find somewhere suitable to stay. I shared with her that she mattered to God, and he was there for her, with answers for her if she turned to him. She gave me a sceptical smile in response.

Over the next few days, I sought accommodation options for her, but Sandy was reluctant and too restless to commit to any resolution. Then, exactly a week after she had arrived, I woke one morning to find her bed was empty. She had left us overnight. A note on her pillow thanked us for helping her and for the 'God stuff'.

I realised then that we had been asked to plant a seed. In my quiet time I reflected on 1 Corinthians 3 verse 6. One plants the seed, another waters it but it is God who makes it grow. I continued to pray for her, asking God to send others along to water that seed, with the hope that eventually there would be the growth of faith in him.

A couple of years later, she recognised me at a shopping centre and rushed over to greet me. She was pushing a pram and was already a young mother. She seemed happy, emotionally together, and capable. There was no apology for her sudden departure, but she assured me she had been helped by other 'God people' after she left. Sandy did not claim to have become a Christian, but I saw that her journey with God was still an active work in progress.

This happened years ago, and I never encountered her again. However, a recent event reminded me of the inner conflict I experienced over Sandy. I was approached in the supermarket by a healthy-looking, scruffy teenage boy. He asked me for money. It was another one of those times when I was confronted with the question of how willing I was to be used by God, when what was being asked of me brought disquiet to my psyche. Determining my responsibilities to those 'outside the fold', especially when they are on a path contrary to that which seems healthy and honourable to me, remains a challenge.