

Every now and then those books come into your life where the pages simultaneously can't turn fast enough and yet you want them to slow because the faster the ending comes, the sooner the journey will be over. I long for those moments, those moments when you know a book will linger and stay with you indelibly. They are rare, but when they happen, it's incredible. I just had one of these such moments. I turned the last pages of *The House in the Cerulean Sea* sitting in the middle of a park in Lititz, Pennsylvania and it was like the world around me wasn't even there. I was on a little island in the middle of a crystal blue sea, with waves crashing in the distance, and the sounds of Bobby Darin lingering in the air.

The premise of the book was a little weird. It centers around the life of one Linus Baker, a no one of a dude, who lives his life behind the same desk, doing the same job, day in and day out. He's diligent, dedicated, and well...stuck. His job is to investigate orphanages to make sure that the children there are being treated respectfully and with care. However, there's a little twist. The orphanages he examines? They're occupied by magical kids. Kids with special talents and gifts who need a unique kind of care, especially because they live in a world that sees them as a threat to be controlled. They have to be documented, registered, and tracked to make sure that they don't get out of hand or become a threat to society.

One day, Linus is assigned to investigate an orphanage unlike any other. One that houses what are described to him as the most dangerous of dangerous. Eccentric, strange kids whose gifts must under all circumstances be contained and controlled. He's chosen because he's a no nonsense guy. He is unbiased, knows how to keep his distance, and doesn't get emotionally invested. He just reports what he sees. So he travels to the island where this orphanage resides, in the middle of a sea the color of the deepest cerulean. There he finds a gaggle of kids that scare the living daylights out of him. Their names sound innocent enough, Talia, Phee, Chauncey, Sal, Theodore, and Lucy. Yet who they really are are, a gnome, a wood sprite, a blob of a kid made up of honest to God goo, a boy who can transform into a dog, a dragon, and...the antichrist. I told you...it was a weird book.

For the first week, Linus tries to keep his distance, to remain objective and detached and just observe. But when he realizes that these kids, even with their unique circumstances are some of the sweetest, most loving, caring kids he's ever met who have formed a family of their own, where they love and accept one another as they are, he loses his ability to remain unfeeling. He deeply loses that ability when he travels to the nearby village with the kids and watches the way the ordinary people of the world treat these tiny little kids all because they're different. They are mocked, scolded,

kicked out of ice cream parlors, and treated like they are freaks who should be destroyed. It breaks his heart. Because he has come to *know* these kids. He knows their hearts, their minds, their interests. He knows they are more than just their outward appearances. He knows that they are more than what the world would define them as because of what they can do. Deep down, he knows that he has come to love these kids not only because of who they are, but because of who *he* is around them. On this island he is no longer some desk jockey with a gray, boring life. He's vibrant and loved and teased and seen as worthy because he's Linus and they love him.

In the end...Linus realizes that life...*real life* is meant to be lived in full blown, bright, brilliant color. Life isn't meant to be gray, it's meant to be cerulean. He realizes that here on this island he is his best self, surrounded by people who truly see him, who make him better. He realizes that when you live your life allowing yourself to be seen for who you are and allowing yourself to see others for who they truly are, the family, the home that gets created in those moments is sacred. He realizes that life is better when it's a little off-kilter and adventurous as long as he's with people who love him, even if those people are a bunch of magically strange kids. On this island beyond the sea, he realizes that life is better lived when you're wearing God-colored glasses, as opposed to world-colored ones.

It's a lesson that Paul desperately wants the Corinthians to understand. It's a lesson that Jesus desperately wants the crowds to understand. But let's face it...humans have always been humans and sometimes it takes a mixture of blunt talk and mysterious parables to actually get the message across. Let's start with the Corinthians, who are nothing if not Paul's problem children. They can't seem to really get the whole gospel thing right, at least not consistently. When he's with them, they've got it, but when he leaves they resort back to their old habits, particularly those habits that center around divisions and exclusion.

The Corinthian church was made up of a vast and diverse population, but even with Paul's words about being the body of Christ echoing in their minds, they can't help but keep forming themselves into their tiny, known circles. The wealthy and the well to do over here, the poor, laboring classes over here. Men here, women there. Popular here, outcast there. They can't shake the human need to categorize each other into knowable, distinguishable categories so they know who's in and who's out. It drives Paul crazy, because he needs them to see that in Jesus' love for all of humanity, in Jesus dying for *all* of God's children, they have been rendered one people, one body, one cherished group of humans all on equal footing beneath the cross. Paul pleads with them, reminds them, "From now on,

therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.” Their old human categories no longer matter, what matters is their identity in Christ. What matters is that in their church, they are a family. Their church should be where they are beloved and cherished for who they are, entirely and completely without reservation, without judgment, without discrimination.

What Paul is doing is essentially doubling down on Jesus’ message of what the kingdom of God, the kingdom the future church is called to emulate is meant to look like. Jesus tells the crowds gathered around him that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that when it grows into fullness is so big that its branches provide enough shade for all the birds of the air to nest beneath them in comfort. He doesn’t say *some* birds, he says all of them, and as you picture the branches of this mustard seed growing and pushing outward, you realize that the imagery is akin to...Jesus’ arms outstretched on the cross, no distinguishing who is gathered beneath the shelter of his body, but creating enough space, love, and grace for all of God’s children. Jesus is the mustard seed of the kingdom, arms stretched wide so that all may find safety, home, and acceptance beneath the branches of his love. Jesus is the mustard seed of the kingdom meant to teach future generations that all are meant to be welcomed, all are meant to be sheltered,

all are meant to find a home in the shade of gospel, *with* those who proclaim that gospel out into the world.

For Paul, for Jesus, they call God's people to create spaces like that orphanage in the Cerulean Sea, places of love and acceptance where all are seen for who they are. For Paul, for Jesus, *that's* who they want God's children to be, that's how they want the church to operate. The church, the kingdom of God which we occupy is meant to be a place with branches extended for all, where we view one another not from a human point of view but from a godly point of view, and I think we know this. In our *minds*, we know this, but we just never let our hearts hear it, feel it, *live* it.

For far too long, the church, the place where the kingdom of God is supposed to take root and branch out into the world has been a place not of branches extended out, but of leaves curled in on themselves. We have been the perpetrators of prejudice, judgment, and exclusion despite knowing intrinsically that that is simply not who God called us to be. What does it say that if you were to ask someone you passed on the sidewalk what their impression of the church was that they'd be just as likely to say it's a place of hypocrisy, judgment, and pain as they were to say it's a place of God's love and acceptance? Is that honestly who we want to be? Is that the house of God we want to create? One where people have to question whether or

not they will be accepted for who they are when they walk through our doors? Wouldn't we rather be a place where anyone, *anyone* can come in, their full blown colors shining for all to see and know they will be loved, accepted, and given a branch to shelter under, cherished for the gifts they bring to the table?

The scary thing is...I'm not sure we know the honest answer. Again, I think our *minds* tell us, of course we want to be that open, accepting, cerulean place, but our *hearts*? Our hearts drive us to our usual, gray human instincts of exclusion, division, and desire to box one another in based on prejudice and judgment. It's a hard reality to confront, and yet that's what the gospel does. It confronts the barest truths of our hearts and forces us to ask, what would God's love have us do? Would God's love have us remain content in our isolated, sheltered, fearful world where we judge everyone based on what we *think* we know about them? Our would God's love compel us to be better, to see to the heart of one another? To see one another with God colored glasses and say, no matter who you are, no matter what you have been through, no matter what you bring to the table, here you will be loved, here you will be accepted, here you will be encouraged to be your best self. What color do we want the shade of our kingdom of God to be? Gray and dull? Or bright, brilliant, and cerulean? **AMEN!!!**