

## *Soul Growth*

*1 Samuel 1:15-20; Hebrews 10:24-25*

It's so wonderful to hear the bells back and have music flowing again...it's great. This week, I was gifted with a book in my mail slot. The book was by W.O. Mitchell, and it is entitled *Roses Are Difficult Here*, and I suspect there are a number of you out there who have read that book. I was gifted with a little note that suggested that the individual giving it to me thought that I might like it, and upon further conversation, there was a meal involved as well. It was kind of like, "Maybe we could get together over lunch and talk about it." Well, as you all know, I'm all about food, and so I went home and read it the next day. And then, much more than the offer of simply a meal was the inspiration that someone like W.O. Mitchell can offer in our world.

For those of you who haven't had too much of an introduction, he was a man who was born in southern Saskatchewan and who was spent some of his years as a prairie boy. Wrote *Jake and the Kid* and *Who has Seen the Wind* based in that area. And at some point moved to Calgary, and *Roses Are Difficult Here* is based on a little town in southern Alberta that is clearly fictional, but the people aren't. Because you've met them everywhere.

The thing that struck me about the way Mitchell writes, the way Margaret Laurence writes, the way Louise Penny writes, probably any novelist that you could pick writes, is that they don't try to write about a whole district. They don't try to write about the city the size of Edmonton or Calgary. Largely, they pick a small community, or they create a small community. Louise Penny could've had Detective Gamache in Montreal. That's where he and his wife lived. But no, she took them into Three Pines. And it took me some time to sort through, but I realized that every little body...we can take this congregation. Or we can divide this congregation into one, two, three, four, five, six sections...sorry, folks. Seven, eight. Gee, where are my manners? Nine. And you'll get a microcosm of the macrocosm. For every small group of people that we put together, we'll get the person who's lonely. We'll get the person who doesn't have much but gives all. We'll get the person who's trying to sort out why they're here in the first place. We'll get the person, or persons who are non-binary, who come from another culture, who speak another language. And even in a book set in the 1950s in southern Alberta, W.O. Mitchell put all that together. Except for maybe the non-binary part – he had difficulties trying to speculate there, I think. And as soon as that happens, we get the amazing interaction that is humanity.

Well, what does *that* have to do with today's scripture? I don't know, I'm getting there, I think. It has *this* to do: because our soul growth is all about interacting in the midst of that diversity in a way that gives us a sense of our own purpose in life and the purpose of those around us. The main character in *Roses Are Difficult Here* – I'm pretty sure I won't have to meet the person for lunch. I've unloaded all I need to say about it here –

the main character is clearly at a point in life where he's not sure that he is where he should be. He's a newspaper guy. He likes to write. So why not write for a big paper in a big city where, you know, there's all kinds of fascinating stories to grab onto, instead of writing about the disappearance of Emily's cat. By the end of the book, once the big-city sociologist has come and done a survey of the community and published it. And she's basically trashed the community that he is living in and raising his family in and growing to love, he discovers that what he's passionate about is that small community with that group of people, and he stands up for them in a way that makes it abundantly clear that he is indeed an amazing author and has a purpose in life.

So, how do we compel one another to good deeds? I mean, do we have to wait for the amazing sociologist from somewhere else to come in and trash our community before we get enthusiastic about it? Or do we find that in our interactions with one another on a regular basis? What were the words from Hebrews? "Provoke". That's it. How do we *provoke* one another? Okay, let me try this: Karen, laugh. She did it. She was provoked.

So, I could go to all of you and say, "Give." That'll provoke you, alright. Out, they'll say. How about this: apparently, word got out last week that Lynn and I were celebrating our anniversary, which by the way was good. Celebrations in our house go on at least a week, so we went out for dinner one of those nights. And we were sitting in a local restaurant enjoying a down-home meal. And at one point, I looked over and I saw these other two women sitting over against a wall having a meal together and in conversation, and I turned to Lynn and I said, "Look at those two over there. Isn't that neat? You know, that's going to be us in ten years." She has glasses, so she looked over and then it was, "Sally, that's a mirror."

That's how you provoke a whole body of people! If we want to really encourage one another to acts of kindness, of goodness, of generosity... I suggest that the way to do it is to live in community, to grow to love one another well, and then to share with each other the very best of what we see. And in so doing, our own souls are deepened, we grow in our own maturity, we become as wise as Spritely, and as daring as roses that are difficult to grow, and as abundant as it is possible for a community to become. And so, I invite you to provoke one another, always. In goodness and in love, and in generosity. Amen.