Courageous Leadership of Lars and the Real Girl’s Community

Reviewed by
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A large part of what inspired us about Jesus is the courage he showed in including and standing in the gap for people who others looked down on at the margins of society. He broke the bounds and lives outside the box in this aspect of his life as much as any other. He ate with all sorts of undesirable types of people. That took courage when there was all sorts of social and cultural and religious expectations to stay “pure” and not mix too closely with people of another culture or gender, social class or undesirable vocation. We see courageous leadership in Jesus not just in his teaching and discipling, but in his friendships and eating patterns.

We often think of Jesus’ courageous leadership with inclusive community building when we gather at the Lord’s Table. Let me explain. Jesus didn’t just ask us to eat a little bit of bread and wash it down with grape juice to remember him. He reckoned he also invited us to follow him in his table manners — to befriend and include and eat with people who are struggling with all sorts of challenges. We need that dinner list even if it makes us uncomfortable. (In fact if we are not uncomfortable yet, maybe we need to invite someone else to our table)

We often think of Jesus-shaped courageous leadership also when we go to the movies. Give us a night with “Avatar,” “Lord of the Rings” or “Dances with Wolves,” and we’re inspired to join with God’s even bigger story and help lead to make the world a better place. Our passion in mission — for our churches and our whole denomination — is to help bring the world more into line with God’s dream for it; in other words to advance the Kingdom of God. And we get a picture of God’s dream for a better world in some of these epic movies that portray forces of good overcoming evil and restoring the world to its kind of ideal. But we also get a glimpse of God’s dream for a better world in some more arty movies.

“Lars and the Real Girl” is a delightful 2007 film about socially challenged Lars and his gracious community that fostered a safe healing place for him. Lars (Ryan Gosling) lives in a garage behind his brother Gus and pregnant sister-in-law Karin’s house. He presents as a nice albeit quirky and isolated bloke, and avoids everyone including his pretty co-worker Margo. Karin and Gus are delighted when he finally accepts an invitation to share a meal and, furthermore, want to introduce him to his new friend he met on the internet, a missionary in a wheelchair named Bianca. To their astonishment, Bianca is a life-like sex doll that Gus relates to as his new girlfriend, but asks if she can stay with them.

With the advice of their family doctor/psychologist, they and the whole town accept Bianca for Gus’s sake. The doctor suggests Gus imagines Bianca as real, a delusion with some purpose. So Bianca stays in Karin and Gus’ guest room. The church welcomes her to their Bible studies. The school includes her as a volunteer. The beautician gives her a makeover. As they accept Bianca, Lars finds himself relating with more of the town. We learn that Lars, because his mother died during his birth, is fearful of having children. Thus he is so anxious about Karin’s pregnancy and any possibility of a real relationship himself. Over time and in the safety his family and community offers, Lars comes to a new place of healing. Lars’ dependency on Bianca shifts and with a surprising twist gives herself permission and the excuse to get to know Margo.

The movie shows us the power and grace of a church and community functioning at its best, supporting a needy member with grace and acceptance wherever they are at. Whatever other shapes our churches take, they need to be safe places for people like Lars as they grow towards wholeness.

Ensuring our churches are safe places is an important element of courageous leadership. A litmus test of courageous leadership, we could suggest, is to what extent we include and embrace those who are different from us, or even strange.