

Sunday, July 6, 2025

“THE OUTSIDERS: Stay Gold!” | Ephesians 2:13-22 | Pastor Jess Scholten

Nature's first green is gold,/ Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;/ But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf./ So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day./ Nothing gold can stay.
("Nothing Gold Can Stay" by [Robert Frost](#) 1874 – 1963)

Ponyboy Curtis, the lead character in, the Outsiders, quotes this poem from Robert Frost while watching the sunrise in the country outside Tulsa, Oklahoma. He's a teenager in the mid-1960s, on the run from the law with his buddy Johnnycake Cade in an abandoned church. And it comes to mind as he and Johnny reflect on the beauty and brevity of the early morning golden hour.

Johnny later interprets the poem in this coming-of-age YA novel turned Broadway musical – when you're young, you're green, and everything is new like dawn. He urges Ponyboy to hold onto that newness – stay gold!

“Like the morning light/ And the dawn it brings
You see the world, finding beauty in the simple things”
(Stay Gold, Outsiders the Musical)

The love that Ponyboy, the main character of S.E. Hinton's book, has for literature is probably what made me fall in love with the book in middle school and read it on repeat. I remember loving the movie as well. So last fall when my friend Kate and I booked an impromptu trip to New York City because I'd never been... when we were choosing shows, I immediately put my vote in for the Outsiders.

We were not disappointed. It. Was. Phenomenal.

So imagine my surprise when some of you have wondered why on earth, after watching the movie, this made it into our summer series. While Pastor Charlie started his sermon last Sunday with a quiz most of you probably aced on Hamilton, the Outsiders – though the Tony Award winner for Best Musical 2024 – hasn't quite made the rounds or the splash that Lin-Manuel Miranda got with his hip hop musical. Has anybody else seen the Outsiders in NYC? It starts touring this Fall, so soon, you too may have a million-dollar sweatshirt and be thrilled to see the cast as part of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

I don't know what to tell you other than the movie is probably the worst depiction of the Outsiders, mainly because the violence was glamorized in a way that it wasn't quite so in the book. And the musical, which is where our focus is today, with our Gospel on Broadway series, does two things the book doesn't. One is, it Broadways it – you know, catchy tunes and smooth moves that help engage us even when it's serious subject matter. It's worth seeing just for the dancing alone. For the die-hard Broadway Show fans, think West Side Story meets Fame – Greasers vs Socs with 60s-style “rumbles” between them... with each group on their own side of town, their own side of the tracks. Imagine a rusty old Rambler on one side of the set – a shiny 1957 Corvette on the other. The Greasers with their long hair, slicked back, white t-shirt James Dean wanna-bes vs the preppies in their letter jackets, popped collars, and clean crew cuts.

The musical also adds an element Hinton did not – a division not only of the haves and the have nots of money, but also the haves and have nots living with racism.

There can hardly be more dividing walls between the two groups – the Socs and the Greasers. Ponyboy is the youngest of three boys who are left on their own when their parents die in a car crash. The oldest and smartest brother, destined to be the first one to attend college in the family, ends up having to leave his dreams behind so he can work and take care of his two younger brothers, scrambling each day to just to keep on living. Their friends are a long string of kids turned adults-too-soon by crime or horrible home lives full of abuse or neglect from parents stretched too thin by systemic poverty and generational trauma.

The Socs – or socials – in the book have their own problems, but more like problems of privilege – stress from parents to achieve or overindulgent parents with a lack of accountability or instilling a sense of compassion, a dissatisfaction with everything.

Even still, it's the age old story of two groups sparring against one another – a common thread from almost the very beginning. Think second generation humanity with Cain vs. Abel or twins Jacob and Esau, generations of fighting over the Holy Land, the Montagues and Capulets, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, Tom and Jerry, Apple vs Android, and right to our door in 2025 about who cares for whom and why... this day... in this country. The dividing walls are there between us.

How then shall we live?

Our Scripture passage this morning is part of a letter that circulated to the church in Ephesus, yes, which is now the western region of modern-day Turkey, but also circulated more widely to help the early churches in general to be reminded of their call to unity. The letter addresses communities that are made up of two opposing groups being brought together – Gentiles and Jews – into one household – the dwelling place of God in Jesus Christ. “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

In Ephesians, God calls us to something different as followers of Jesus, even with vitriol between two groups of people. The distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles could hardly have been greater. They ate differently, they worshiped differently, they held the government in opposing levels of esteem. One group couldn't even touch the other without dramatic complications.

I'm not sure we comprehend how very important unity, then, is to the very core of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. Here are people who, in one generation, go from enemies to worshipping in unity. This dramatic new belief in Jesus – these leaders of the early church who were turning the world upside down – this new way of being was counter-cultural and utterly... wildly radical. Where there once was the greatest of dividing walls, there now is peace; what had been two is now one. An entirely new humanity was born into being two thousand years ago when God called all of us to live as one body.

This unity is our call. And finding examples of it – in Scripture, in our own lives, in literature, in Broadway musicals – and holding onto those so that we can better live out the Gospel, is vitally important to our faith. It opens the door for the Holy Spirit to continue to be at work in us. It shows us ways to find connection and compassion for one another.

Throughout the Outsiders, musical lines taken directly from the book show ways the Socs and the Greasers... even while they are fighting as groups, as individuals are seeking to highlight the humanity in each other – a sense of connection, of belonging, of breaking down dividing walls.

The question is how to stay gold, How do we stay hopeful and in love with the fresh details of the world – while fighting against dividing walls, isolation, destruction, and harsh realities? More singing, great dance moves, and catchy lyrics help. But SE Hinton and the team that wrote the music and lyrics for the Broadway show highlight some really important lessons as well: lessons about belonging and peace and how we can harm or care for others.

When we are seeking to breaking down dividing walls – whatever animosity comes between us and others – it's really important to remember our shared humanity, all of us. Just before a big Rumble, one of the Socs reaches out to Ponyboy for a conversation in his car. They talk about human things – not who has what, but just how it's hard for everyone and the fighting doesn't help things. After Pony returns, one of his friends, suspicious of the other side, sarcastically asks him what “Mr. Super Soc” had to say. “He ain't a Soc... he's just a guy. He just wanted to talk.” And then Ponyboy reflects to himself, “Socs were just guys after all. Things were rough all over, but it was better that way. That way you could tell the other guy was human too” (p 118).

Keeping in mind the humanity of others helps us live into the peace God has already granted us. Find ways, even when you differ in political opinions or religious beliefs or any disagreement you have with Apple users, to explore commonalities. Unless someone is a true sociopath, we often want similar things and care deeply about common good. If nothing else, pray for your enemies – pray God's goodness and blessing for them. It might not do anything for them, but it will do something to your own heart.

In Ephesians 2, the author writes about Shalom – peace, which is about more than just a stalemate or the absence of conflict. It is well-being, security, and a sense of belonging. When one of the Soc girls, Cherry, talks with Pony, she reflects on how life is rough everywhere, and what she names is an itchy dissatisfaction with everything. “It seems like we’re always searching for something to satisfy us, and never finding it” (p. 38). The places where the viewer sees the opposite of this itchy dissatisfaction is in the community. When one character’s parents abandon him, and the group all bonds together as family for him, caring for him. All the fighting, all the striving – it won’t satisfy. Instead, finding beauty, seeking connection, creating community – these bring about shalom.

If we want to live more fully into the unity God has granted us in Jesus Christ, we also have to check the assumptions we make about others. Socs...Greasers – and yet, here’s Ponyboy, a greaser and a poet – Cherry a Soc, catching the beauty of a sunset.

Beyond checking assumptions, we must pay attention to the harm that we cause others. We may not be stabbing each other in knife fights, but we inflict pain with our words and with our actions. Instead, we must be generous and firm and kind.

And lastly, I think staying gold is about the kind of endurance of hope in our passage this morning – looking at the long game and standing firm on a reality that has not yet come to be... but believing it nonetheless, and working towards it, nonetheless. The dividing walls between people were very likely still securely in place in these new churches even though they had been broken down in Christ Jesus – that’s why this letter had to be circulated. But a new vision is cast – not of the old ways of being, but a new way of being the church – not by location, but by geography of the heart, no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens and members of the same household. Forget about a geographic location – God’s house is now a people.

The world is not good right now. People are being harmed with new legislation. Our government appears to have built what looks horrifyingly similar to a concentration camp while leaders make jokes about our Latinx siblings, friends, and family. Climate change is literally drowning our children in their bunkbeds at camp in Texas. It is not good. And yet, we will not give into despair. We are people of hope, holding on to hope, so that we keep doing the work we are called to do on behalf of others and our future.

Dr. Christine Jeske is a professor at Wheaton College who lives in the Madison area. Several of us who were part of Awaken Dane, the group in the community trying to foster better relationships with our neighbors, heard Dr. Jeske speak at Upper House’s Kingdom Justice Summit.

She has a new book coming out, *Racial Justice for the Long Haul: How White Christian Advocates Persevere (and Why)*, and she had an article published in a recent *Christianity Today* which highlights the book and hope – not fluffy hope that shows up when things get better, but a tenacity that embraces “a deeper and more biblical hope that rests on grace, grows out of suffering, aims for shalom, and calls for action”

(https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/06/not-just-any-hope-will-do-martin-luther-king/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=)

This is the kind of hope we hold onto and live into that helps us Stay Gold, as we live into our unity, care for others, and are the faithful and compassion-filled church wherever we are.

If you're worried about time, finding beauty in the fold is the only way to keep from growing old. My friend, stay gold. Amen.