

Wild Things in Church

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The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another...and it was still hot.

I can't be sure because it was a very long time ago, but I think the first place I heard those iconic opening and closing sentences was in my childhood Unitarian Universalist church, as I sat in a pew with my siblings and parents, listening to my minister read. Whether that was really the first hearing or not, I always associate that book with church, and it makes sense to me that I do.

Church, it seems to me, is the perfect place for Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are*. The central message of the book is powerful enough—that even when we transform ourselves temporarily into wild things and make mischief of one kind and another, we are still loveable and deserving of a hot supper (though also not undeserving of some consequences). How much more powerful that message becomes when it is delivered in church. Church, that place traditionally associated with judgment and punishments of all kinds—both worldly and otherworldly. Church, that place we go to for lessons about right and wrong, good and evil, acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Church, where ministers stand in for God or the Divine in the eyes of children and adults alike, subconsciously if not consciously. Church, what better place for us to hear the story of Max donning his wolf suit and threatening to eat his mother? What better place for her to send him to bed without anything to eat? What better place for his wild rumpus? What better place for him to arrive home and discover his supper after all, and it being still hot?

For let's face it, we all put on our wolf suits now and then, and make mischief of one kind or another. We get a poor night's sleep, or wake up on the wrong side of the bed, or can't face another blizzard or grey March day, or make the mistake of listening to too much news or spending too much time on Facebook, or for no discernable reason at all, we pull the dog's tail, pound holes in the walls, threaten to eat our mother, spouse, child,

co-worker, honk our horn in traffic, send nasty e-mails, engage the friend of a friend in a snarky tit for tat, fail to tip the server and so on, until we would be sent to bed without any supper, if only someone had that power.

And maybe someone does—maybe a supervisor or spouse, a parent or a good friend calls us to task for our behavior, disciplining us in one way or another. With a good scolding (or perhaps more effectively, with a good questioning) or a notice in our personnel file, or unfriending us, or a night in the doghouse (whatever that might mean in any specific relationship). And at those moments, aware in our hearts of our own deplorable behavior, yet stung by our lack of supper, we're liable to feel a mixture of a couple of emotions—the rebelliousness of Max, who sets off in his boat to where the wild things are, **and** a tinge of uncertainty about our loveability.

But if we're lucky, we'll also have spouses, supervisors, parents, or good friends who eventually follow the good scolding with a supper that is still hot—that is to say, with words of understanding, forgiveness and humor; an invitation to join in a shared activity; a physical gesture of affection; a story of the time they themselves put on their wolf suit and made mischief of one kind or another. Because like Max, and all human wild things, we learn best when disciple in tempered by love. We are more likely to change in ways that are tension-resolving, relationship-building and life-enhancing when we are embraced and accepted for our whole selves, though not necessarily our entire range of behavior, than when we must restrain or hide or suppress or deny parts of ourselves in order to be accepted and included.

So, where, I repeat, better than church, for the reminder that our wolf suit days and our wild rumpuses are simply part of our being human? Where better than church for the reminder that sending a loved one to bed without any supper (you know, metaphorically speaking) is part of telling them that there are limits to the behavior we will accept in our relationship? And where better than church, for the reminder that the later provision of a supper that is still hot is part of our covenant as a congregation of love.

Church, this church, is the place where we come not to be judged, contrary to some popular understandings of church, but to be welcomed and celebrated for who and what we are. Church is the place we come to fit in—odd angles, strange curves, singular ideas, different drum beat and all—when we don't fit in anywhere else. Church is the place we come to be loved, especially after we've had a string of wolf suit days and wild rumpus

nights without any supper and we've begun to doubt our lovability. Church is the place we come to for a supper that is still hot, no matter how long our absence or how wild our rumpus.

And this church, like mosques and temples and churches the world over, offers hot supper—from welcoming words and smiles to candles of joy and sorrow, from meals and rides and visits at times of need to gestures of encouragement, congratulations and condolence. Because here we acknowledge that both the animals in us all the time and the wild things we become when we put on our wolf suits are part and parcel of the very persons whose inherent worth and dignity we covenant to affirm and promote. Here we gather in our fullness, and celebrate our wholeness.

Still, we don't forget the temporarily going to bed without any supper part. We expect that the church and its members will hold us accountable for our behavior. To remind us of our obligations as a member of this community. To invite us into conversation if we've been putting on our wolf suits more than usual, or letting our wild rumpuses get destructive to ourselves and others. To tell us when we've disappointed, hurt or disrespected them or others. To do so, to withhold supper (metaphorically speaking) is part of building and maintaining community. Part of courageously, honestly loving one another, for as new parents learn, often painfully, love without limits isn't love at all. While in the end it's the provision of supper we strive to excel at, without the sending to bed without any supper, the hot supper is meaningless.

Wild things in church. Not just this week but every week. It's who we are. And we're gladly, deeply, truly welcome, every one of us. Amen.