

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Through a Child's Eyes

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, September 25, 2016

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

²⁵ "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

³⁰ "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

³¹ "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Luke. Thanks be to God.

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Do you remember Garfield the Cat? It's a cartoon. When we used to get the paper newspaper, Garfield was in the comics. Garfield used to have his own television show and even a full-length feature film. You remember Garfield, he's more than a little bit sarcastic and he obviously rules the house because that's what cats do.

One cold winter night, Garfield looks out the window and sees Odie the Dog peering through the window. Garfield thinks to himself: "This is horrible. Here I am in the comfort of a warm house, well fed, and there is Odie outside begging to get in, cold and hungry. I can't stand it anymore. I just can't stand it." So, with that, he goes over to the window, and closes the curtains.

There you go. That's the parable in a nutshell.

Contrast that with the story of my cousin Leslie. Leslie is the only girl with four older brothers. She is a few years younger than me and her Mom didn't let her have Barbie dolls, and, as you might imagine, with four older brothers she was much more used to going outside to run and play – a tomboy.

One time when we visited their farm, it was raining, so going outside to play was not an option. I was probably in 8th or 9th grade and so Leslie was still in elementary school. Still, we went to her room to play. There I saw for the first time a netting, looking rather like a hammock, hanging from the corner of a wall to the other. Inside the hammock were dolls and stuffed toys.

"What's your favorite doll?" I asked staring at the dozen or so dolls and toys hanging in the hammock. I didn't want to pick the one she would play with, after all I was the older cousin and I felt a responsibility to play well together.

"Promise you won't laugh at me if I tell you?" she answered.

"Of course I won't laugh at you. Everybody's got a favorite." I tried to assure her that this was not a trick question.

Satisfied with my response, she moved to the closet, slid open the door, and pulled out a worn-out, tattered doll that looked like a refugee from the trash pile. There was a crack in the arm, a missing nose, marks all over the body and a bald head. She held this doll with tenderness and great affection.

"Why do you love this one the most?" I asked.

Leslie said, "Because she needs it most. If I didn't love her, nobody would."

Even though I was only 14 years old, I took this personally, deeply personally. My mother, with all of her sewing skills, had mended, repaired, resuscitated and even resurrected more than one doll that needed extra TLC. I myself had carefully glued back together a statute of St. Francis that I had accidentally bumped off the shelf one time when I was angry. I also knew it could very well be me who was unlovable – I was 14 and growing and awkward and peculiar. I was not popular or pretty. I was not sporty; and I didn't believe I was smart. It could happen that I would be like that doll and need love most of all.

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That's the parable in a nutshell.

It's not about whether you are rich. The Rich Man in the parable did not perish simply because he was rich. There is no judgment on wealth. And Lazarus does not rise to heaven because he was poor. The issue is what do you see and to what are we blind? Make your list. You all have your own circumstances and situations. We are all busy dealing with our lives and our ministries and our families. So many people heading in so many different directions and everyone is tired all the time. And another man asks us for change on the street and we put our blinders on as we head to Home Depot. We have paint samples to match, after all.

Back in high school, my youth group did an annual work camp/mission trip. One year we went to a small, struggling, inner-city church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Our job that week was to paint the church and lead the Vacation Bible School for the neighborhood. In the evenings, there were a combination of fun activities and speakers and guests to study inner-city problems and the faith of the people in this small church.

One evening we had a handful of homeless and formerly homeless men to tell us their stories. I still remember clearly a moment when one of my friends asked a man what to do when a person on the street approached him asking for money. He said that we should do what we felt like doing. If we give them money, be fully aware, he said, that it may be used for food, but just as well may be used for something else. He said to follow your gut as you make that decision. Then he added the critical point: *Say, 'yes,' or say, 'no,' but treat me like a person, he said. We spend our whole day not being seen. Do not act like we aren't there.*

You and I are part of powerful communities--churches, neighborhood organizations, a wonderful country, an abundant world where there is plenty of food to go around. We can do better as a country. I can do more as an individual.

If we listen to Jesus, we have no choice--we're called first to see Lazarus, and then we are called to feed Lazarus. There is a long history of the actions of ordinary people that have brought miraculous changes in the past twenty years: the number of children dying before their fifth birthday has been cut almost in half throughout the world. That's five million children every year saved from starvation. This happened because we -- those persons with resources, with time, with financial resources, with skills and talents -- it happened because we work together and do it.

Jesus knew long ago what economists and hunger advocates are telling us now: we have everything we need to end world hunger. It would take an additional \$13 billion per year. That's just 2.2 % of our defense budget.

I know that hearing statistics isn't enough to change us--nothing will change us without conversion. We can even read our Bibles and not be changed--unless we listen to Jesus. If we try hard enough, we can find almost anything we want in scripture. We can find verses that proclaim wealth as God's blessing and poverty as God's curse.

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But the Hebrew prophets had a radically different vision, and so did Jesus. People are dying of hunger in a world with more than enough food. Do we need more statistics? more courage? more time to volunteer? *Perhaps most of all we need more faith.*

Jesus' parable ends with these ironic words: "Abraham said to the rich man, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Well good people, someone has risen from the dead. What more do we need? The risen Jesus is calling us to give Lazarus something to eat.

Today we bring non-perishable food to the church – we do this once a month. Many of us long ago ran out of the “extra cans of food” from our pantries and cupboards. We now actually buy extra cans of food at the grocery store each time we go. We bless it on the altar and we gather it in the Fireside Room. We donate the food to the San Lorenzo Food Pantry because our destiny is wrapped up in the destiny of others.

On Thursday, October 8, you are invited to join the Not-Yet-Retired Action Committee and Friends in the Fireside room at 6:30 pm. You can bring with you a case of something that can be part of our project to create “Essentials Bags.” We will set up an assembly line and fill a two-gallon Ziplock bag until we have 50 bags. On that next Sunday each of you will receive at least one of those Essentials Bags that you can give away when you next see a person who lives on the street or meet someone who is begging or know someone who needs some extra TLC.

As part of the bedtime routine, a father kneels down next to his son at the side of the bed. They fold their hands and they say their prayers. The young boy began his childhood prayer which he had repeated so many times before:

"Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

On this night, however, he got the words mixed up and instead, he said:

“Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should wake before I die . . . Oh Daddy, I got it all mixed up.”

With a father's hand on his son's back, he said, “No, not at all. Actually I think that is the first time we have said that prayer the way it is supposed to be prayed for our deepest longing is to wake up before you die.” That's what this parable is about. Wake up. Wake up. Amen.