

A Gulf Wants Spanning

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Luke 16:19-30

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Larry was one of the people I most admired in my first congregation. He and his wife, Cindy, sort of adopted Debbie and me into their family, and in time became the Godparents of our children. Back then Larry was an executive for IBM. He was one of those smart, strong business minds that people hushed up and listened to when he talked. Everybody respected Larry.

That's why I asked him to talk to our senior high youth group on the subject of world hunger.

The youth were doing a Planned Famine. Just in case you aren't familiar with what that is: a Planned Famine is a sort of youth lock-in at the church, the central feature of which is what's called a World Feast. We all sat at the same long table in the fellowship hall. Some few young people received the bounty of food that is typical for those of us fortunate enough to live in places like the United States. A lot of others at the table received proportionately less. Others received little or nothing at all for dinner. When you sat down at the table you had no idea what you would receive till you turned over the card in front of you. It was the kind of learning experience our youth loved.

After the feast we planned for a time of discussion and a teaching session. I would lead the discussion when the youth reflected on how it felt either to gorge themselves while their neighbors went hungry or how they felt not eating when a neighbor had plenty. After the discussion was when I wanted Larry to teach about world hunger. But when I asked Larry to teach, I knew there might be a fly in the ointment.

Larry said something to the effect of, "You know, Mike, I'm a pull-yourself-up-by-your-boostraps kind of guy. I don't think you and I would see eye-to-eye about these programs to feed hungry people overseas. If we're going to give anyone a hand, it ought to be here in America."

Knowing Larry well, I was ready for his reply, and I said, "Larry I trust you. If, after studying the subject and thinking about it your mind doesn't change, then that's what I want you to tell the kids. I know the kids will take seriously whatever you say. They respect you and so do I."

So Larry studied the problem of world hunger. He immersed himself in it. Larry was a real student of the Bible too. And he submitted his views to the Bible. I had no idea what he would teach the kids. He didn't tip his hand. But the evening of the Planned Famine, with thirty young people sitting around him, most of whom were still hungry after the "World Feast," Larry taught us a lesson I will never forget.

He told the kids where he had started out on the question of world hunger. But, he said, his thinking had changed while studying the conditions that led to poverty and hunger in the world. And when he studied the photographs of starving people, he looked at the faces of children especially, starving children in countries he'd never given much thought to before. And that's when it hit him like a shot.

Sitting there in that fellowship hall surrounded by kids he had known since they were babies, Larry said, "There's nothing in this world as important to me as my family, Cindy, Camille, Ronny and Geoff. And I'll bet there's nothing in the world as important to somebody as this little guy here (pointing to a photo of a starving baby boy too weak to brush away the fly that had lit on his face), and this little darling here (pointing to a photo of an emaciated little girl)."

"I realized something," he said, "According to the Gospel, there's no barriers between us. These children aren't just precious to someone else. They also are my family. These aren't just somebody's children. These are my children too."

The young people and I watched this smart, strong man, dressed like a picture from the weekend casual section of the Brooks Brothers catalogue. We watched him as he paused, and we noticed tears gathering in his eyes, pooling, and beginning to make their way down his cheeks.

When, recently, I read the passage from Luke's Gospel that is the text for today's sermon I thought of Larry immediately. The story Jesus tells in Luke's Gospel is compelling because it foreshadows a dilemma we've seen played out so often in human experience that it has become conventional wisdom. It has spawned a cliché. "People don't change."

"Everyone knows that," the cynic will tell us, "People don't change. Peoples' ways are set. Peoples' minds are like stones impervious to new ideas."

Even Jesus seemed to join in that chorus. "If they are able to ignore the law and the prophets, even someone rising from the dead won't convince them" to be gracious.

When someone repeats the conventional wisdom to me, I remember Larry. There is nothing in the world as powerful as the Spirit of Christ. Nothing has the power to open a human heart like the Spirit.

You never see it coming. You don't know where it comes from. You don't know where it is going. You can't touch it. You can't manipulate it. The Holy Spirit blows where it will, a breeze, a gale, a whisper, a tornado. And it opens what it will. The Spirit gets in where preachers don't. The Spirit gets to our hearts when laws only stand outside of us and judge. The Risen Christ sends the Spirit to get into places even he can't reach; to reach across gulfs so wide that flesh, even risen and glorified, cannot span them.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

Amen.