

Lazarus at the Gate

October 26, 2008

Burlingame, UMC

Luke 16:19-31

I could hear the whispers in the kitchen.

I got out of bed and walked down the hall, and stood in the shadows.

Mom and Dad were talking.

How can they survive? They have some savings.

What will they eat? We will all do what we can to help.

Who? Food has always been there, who wouldn't have food?

It was an *adult conversation*. I knew I wouldn't be welcome.

So I walked down the hall

and climbed back into the top bunk of the bunk bed.

I prayed for people without food.

When we were waiting for the school bus the next morning.

I asked my mother

who doesn't have any food?

What do you mean dear?

You and Daddy were talking last night about somebody without food.

They have food dear.

What does "survive" mean?

It means that you stay alive in spite of hard times.

Who isn't going to survive?

It's nothing for you to worry about dear.

It is just that Mr. Swift lost his job yesterday.

And that means that

if he doesn't get another job soon

there will be problems for the family.

They won't have enough money to buy food.

My Dad always worked

there always was food on the table

It was inconceivable that there wouldn't be any food
any money to buy food.

I got on the school bus and was quiet
in spite of the American made candy bar
that Johnny Biggers was showing off.

His father flew back to the states every month
with some embassy documents
and brought back American candy for Johnny.

Normally I would have been angling for a taste.
But I couldn't stop thinking about Mr. Swift.

They had a daughter in third grade two grades ahead of me
at Lincoln School, a school for Americans in Buenos Aires.

We were children of Business people,
embassy personnel, and missionary kids
It was a three story white building
built on a hill side over looking a wide section
of the River Plate.

We were required to be taught at least 4 hours a day in Spanish.
So we had 4 hours of class in Spanish
and 4 hours in English.
It was a long day for us.

The bus was early that day so we got to go play.
The play ground was centered around a huge Ombu tree.
We played tag in the shade of the tree, with the trunk as base.

It was then I saw them.
It was a family building a wooden shack
on stilts along the shores of the river.

A short dark skinned man wearing a light blue T-shirt
and blue jeans.

He had two children who wore the same clothes every day.

His wife looked like she was an Indian.

Short, dark and washing clothes on the rocks in the river.

Each recess before playing

I would look down at the river and check on them.

One night there was a terrible rain storm.

The next morning during recess I noticed the river was much higher.

But the house was gone!

They were gone, the kids, their mother were gone!

washed away in the night. And nobody seemed to notice.

I told my mother what had happened. She said

Argentina had many poor people like that

who come to the big city to look for work

they can't afford to rent housing so they build

little shacks where ever they could.

I asked

if they died in the river.

She said

she hoped they were able to get away in time.

She also told me that

Mr. Swift hadn't been able to find work yet.

So we were going to take the family a sack of groceries.

The next Sunday in Sunday School

We read about a poor man named Lazarus

who lived outside the home of a rich man.

Who dreamed of eating the crumbs

under the rich man's table.

Each morning on the way out the rich man stepped over him

and ignored his pleas for help.

One day Lazarus died. and went to heaven

where God held him close to his heart.

The rich man died and went to hell.

That afternoon I asked my father
if we were rich?

He said

*not really, but we didn't have more money than some people.
Why did I want to know?*

*Because in Sunday School the Bible said
the rich people went to hell.*

And poor Lazarus goes to heaven.

He said

*The rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich
It was because he didn't share
because he didn't see or hear Lazarus
even though he had to step over him
to get out of his house.*

Next week at church

*I heard some ladies during coffee hour say
that the Swift family was moving in with her mother
until he could get a job.*

I went out in front of the church
and there on the right, next to the steps
was a woman begging.

She had no legs.

I had never seen anyone without legs.

Being only 6 years old

I hid behind a pillar and watched what happened.

Her stumps were wrapped in cloth.

She had two boys about my age with her.

*She was sitting on a piece of plywood
with roller skates attached to it.*

She pushed her self along with her hands.

I could see that she had large calluses on her knuckles.

Every time a church person would come out the door
she would hold up a hand and beg
*"Por favor señor, Dispensa señora, ayuda por favor.
Por Díos, limosna por favor."*

Some gave her some change
others walked right past not even looking at her.

I ran to my father and told him about the lady with no legs.
He said,

*That is María. I have helped her a lot.
I give her money almost every week.
She lost her legs when she was hit by a truck last year.
She begs now to get money for her children.*

*But so many people in the church walked right past her.
The Bible says to help.*

*You are right many do ignore her. I think that is wrong.
Why don't you think hard about
what should be done for her.*

As we drove home
And I thought about Maria... and Mr. Swift
and the family at the river.

My brother and I always sat in the back of our gray
Opel Kadett.

I looked out the window practicing my reading
by saying the signs out loud.
I saw so many people like her.

People hunched over wearing rags.
Some pulling carts filled with everything they owned.
And people were walking past them.

We drove along the river on the way home.
On a hill side I saw thousands of shacks
made out of cardboard and pieces of metal and wood.

My father said the Argentines call them *Villages of Misery*.
He said *millions of people in south America live places like this*.
And that all the government does is build walls around them
so they won't have to look at them.

Dad said
there might be a revolution some day if nothing is done.

We stopped at a little diner for lunch.
I wondered if María was hungry.

That night there was a Bible study at our house.
I sat in the kitchen in my pajamas listening
to my father talk about
one of the mysteries of the New Testament.
Why is it when Christ is raised and appears to his followers
no one seems to recognize him?

Mary goes to the tomb finds it empty
someone has stolen the body!
she sees a man and thinks he's is the gardener
she asks where they took the body.

He says "Mary"
and she recognizes him as Jesus.

Then two disciples are walking on a road
toward a town called Emmaus.

They are despondent over the death of Jesus
confused over reports of a missing body.

A man comes and walks with them
that chat and talk over the scripture

And they stop at a restaurant
and in the eating of dinner the breaking of bread
they recognized him as the Christ.

Almost every time the Risen Jesus appears
he is a stranger and no one sees him for who he really is.

He told a story that came out of the Warsaw Ghetto during the second world war.

The Nazis had warehoused tens of thousands of Jews in a closed off area of Warsaw.

The Jews took up arms and began to fight back and the Nazis decided to kill them all.

A few were able escape the enclosure of the Ghetto.

They ran from house to house frantically looking for someone who would take them in.

But one after another the homes closed their doors to these escaping Jews.

One young boy managed to escape and as he was hunted he banged on the door of an older couple.

They came to the door and were about to close it on him But the boy said,

*Don't you recognize me? I am the Christ the one you love
I stand at your door in need, will you take me in?*

They opened their door embraced him and hid him for the rest of the war.

That night I asked my mother when she came in to say my bedtime prayers with me.

*If all those poor people were Jesus in disguise.
If Lazarus was Jesus in disguise.*

She said, *They just might be dear they just might be.*