

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 16:19-31
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 September 29, 2013

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE – “The Burning of the Rice Fields”

(from “Stories for the Journey,” William R. White, Augsburg, 1998)

Long ago in **Japan** there was a small village. To the east of the village was the great ocean; to the west a high mountain. Some of the men made their living by fishing while all the other villagers – men, women and children – worked in the rice fields that lay on top of the mountain. Each morning the villagers climbed the mountain path to work. Each evening they trudged home to sleep in their huts. Only **grandfather** and his **grandson, Ti**, lived on the mountain, where it was grandfather's job to **keep the fires lit at night to ward off the wild animals.**

Early one morning, during the season when the rice fields had turned gold and dry, ready for the harvest, grandfather stirred the fire for the last time. Down below, the villagers began to move about doing their morning chores before they started their trek to the top of the mountain. When the fire roared again, grandfather went to the edge of the mountain to watch the sun rise. **This morning, however, he could not see the rising sun. What he saw brought fear to his soul.**

Quickly he ran to the hut where Ti was still sleeping. **“Ti, get up.” “Oh, grandfather, let me sleep.” “Do as I say,”** the old man shouted. **“Get a burning stick from the fire.”**

This time Ti obeyed, for he had never heard grandfather sound so urgent. Without understanding, Ti got up, took a burning stick from the fire, and then went out to join grandfather who was thrusting his burning stick into the dry rice. Grandfather spit out a command, **“Burn the rice fields.” “But grandfather, this is our village's food. Without it we will all go hungry!”** **“Do as I do,”** grandfather shouted over his shoulder.

With tears streaming down his face, Ti took the burning stick and began to set the precious rice fields on fire. Soon smoke from the rice fields billowed up, filling the sky. Down below the villagers saw the smoke and the priests began to ring the bells to alert the people who were not outside. Soon every man, woman and child ran up the steep mountain path as quickly as

they could. When they finally reached the top all they could see were the flames consuming their precious rice. Everything was destroyed.

“Who set the fire?” the people cried. Grandfather stepped forward and said, **“I did it.”** **“You, grandfather? But why?”**

“Look,” grandfather said, pointing out to the sea. What they witnessed was a **gigantic tidal wave** rushing ominously toward shore. When it reached the village, it crushed the houses like a giant hand smashing paper cups. Soon a second wave and a third wave followed, covering the village with tons of water. **The villagers looked at their ruined homes and their burnt fields in despair.**

“We have nothing left,” one voice cried. **“On the contrary,”** an old woman countered. **“We have our lives. Everyone survived.”** **“This afternoon we will start all over,”** the village elder said. **“But first, we must thank grandfather for his act of courage and wisdom. His action saved our people.”** All of the people agreed. For the rest of his life the village honored grandfather for his courage and wisdom. (The End)

Kids, sometimes **your parents** have to **look at their lives** and **decide if everything is going in a good direction.** Sometimes they might have to decide to **give something up,** to **stop doing something,** or to **change something really big – in order to keep your family safe, well and truly happy.** Grandfather had to burn the rice fields in order to save the lives of the people. **May God guide your parents** in making the very best decisions so that your family can have the **best life possible.** And kids, **God will help them with that,** and **God will help you too.** Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

God is so generous. **God has so much** that is good and beautiful, deep and rich. And **God shares it generously,** abundantly. God doesn't sit on God's stuff. God is all about giving good gifts to the people that God has created.

The **natural world** around us is absolutely amazing. God gives us this breathtaking creation to use, care for and to enjoy. Our home, our work, our recreation, everything that is good comes to us from the hand of our generous God.

The **relational world** that we live in – family, friends, co-workers, and the whole world village that surrounds us – also comes to us as pure gift from God.

God even gives God self to us – on the cross, in the Word and in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion – God comes to us in the flesh of humanity to love, forgive, make new and empower us for life.

The **natural world**, the **people** and **God** all come to you and me as **pure, undeserved gift**. Thanks be to God.

God even gives God self away when God **creates us to share love and life together with God**. Jesus makes clear again and again that we have been created to be in a **love-trust relationship** with **God**, with **each other** and with **God's world**. The oldest story in the Old Testament recounts how **Abraham and Sarah** were invited by God to receive a special blessing. They were, God said, **blessed to be a blessing** so that all of the other people of the world could be touched by God through them.

God made us in a certain way. In God's plan, we receive the deepest, richest, most joyous lives when we **give ourselves away for the other**. Constantly in both Old and New Testaments, we hear God's call to care for the poor, the sick, the suffering, the stranger and in that way to **live fully into God's generous kingdom of life**. God's plan isn't just to help the **poor**. It is also to help the **rich**. God's plan is the best way for **everyone**.

As a pastor, I made a big mistake. I used to have the notion that **stewardship** was all about me having to preach a sermon to beg people to give more money to keep the church going. It took me years to discover that **stewardship is a part of God's plan to bless us**. Stewardship-creation care is all about inviting God's people to **live lives according to God's life-giving plan**. God's church is not dependent upon the money we give. But, when we truly realize that **WE ARE totally dependent upon our loving and generous God**, we give money, time, hard work and love in **thanksgiving to God**. And, **we give ourselves away** in order to **join in Jesus' mission** to love and care for God's world and the people in it...
God's work – Our hands.

God is so generous with everything that God has, with everything that we truly need. **How do you say thank you** to God. We aren't talking "**responsibility**" – somehow earning our life or salvation. God has already given us life and salvation. We are talking about "**opportunity**" to be **blessed and to be a blessing** to someone else...

You heard the parable/story that Jesus told. There was an **unnamed man who was very rich** and a **poor man named Lazarus**. The first had far more than he needed of life's blessings. The second was barely surviving. They lived **right next door** to each other. Or rather, the **rich man's door stood between** him and Lazarus' needs... Neither the rich man nor Lazarus was being blessed by how they were living. The rich man was simply taking care of himself with great resources. Lazarus simply suffered unhelped. Lazarus is the only person ever given a name in one of Jesus' parables. The **rich man has no name**. **Lazarus** means "**God has helped**."

"God has helped." The **rich man didn't need God** or anyone else. Lazarus did. God often comes and helps through the neighbor – you and me. The rich man, neighbor, had way more than enough. Lazarus didn't have enough. **So, if you have no need for God in your life in this world, why would you need God in the world to come?** The rich man soon found out, but it was too late to matter.

MOSTLY, I am the **rich man**. In terms of world economics, I have more wealth and opportunity than most of the people in the whole world.

SOMETIMES I am the **needy man**. There is no perfect life. Everyone gets a turn at carrying a heavy load. **ALWAYS** I am the **one God helps**. I have observed often over the years, that some of the people with the least stuff are the most generous in helping others, in thanking God...

Carol Sheffer sent me an email entitled "**From the Sanctuary to the Basement**." The story tells about **Frederick Douglass** who published an abolitionist newspaper, "**The North Star**." The author, **Abigail Accettura**, points out that Douglass did this liberating work, **out of a church basement**. She then goes on to list several other examples where **churches were the source of life-giving work**. **Martin Luther** posted his 95 Theses on the doors of **Wittenberg Chapel**. **Paul Revere**, from the bell tower of **Old North Church**, warned the patriots of the British army's

advance. **Martin Luther King Jr.** launched his civil rights movement from the **church pulpits** of dozens of southern churches in the 50's and 60's.

Accenttura then points out that her own home church in Illinois hosts several community enhancing groups. She says, **“Congregations across the country open their doors to food pantries, tutoring programs and town meetings. They serve as polling places, disaster shelters, blood donation banks. Not all of these programs have a religious affiliation – in fact, most do not. And yet churches remain open to them, encouraging their work and offering a safe place for them to operate.”**

She goes on to quote Hebrews 13:2: **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”** **“Nothing,”** she says, **“could be more accurate. Congregations should attract activity to their basements and classrooms and kitchens: a church building isn't a wall to keep people outside, but rather a conduit through which God's work can be done. The wider we keep our doors, the more opportunity we have to entertain God's angels and further God's work in the world.”**

Carol Sheffer read this Lutheran article and said it **reminded her of First Lutheran** here in Aitkin. If what we do here in this **sanctuary** doesn't have anything to do with the needs of the world beyond these doors, we are **not listening to Jesus**. If what happens at the **dinner table in our house** doesn't have anything to do with the needs of the world beyond our front door, we **haven't been listening to Jesus**.

The rich man had a wonderful time all by himself behind his closed door. Lazarus waited all by himself on the other side. **Each needed the other. Both needed God.** Jesus longs for **such doors to be open** and for **life and community** to be **flowing back and forth** through them and from God.

There was no name for the rich man. Lazarus was the name of the poor man. **God has helped. God's people also help.** God's people help - **not have to, but want to.** **My name, your name is also Lazarus...** **God has helped.** Thanks be to God. Amen.

