

WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.31.2019



If...Then

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Luke 16:19-31

In the 1960's, a Harvard University graduate student in anthropology named Jean Briggs spent 17 months living on the Arctic tundra with the indigenous Inuit people there. Over the course of many years, she remained connected with the families with whom she lived, and she later wrote a book about her experiences.

What she found during her time living with the Inuit people was a culture that had remained remarkably unchanged for thousands of years- in an increasingly modern world, they still lived in igloos in the cold weather and tents when it was warm and they ate only what they could hunt or forage.

In the midst of some of the harshest living conditions on earth, though, Briggs found herself immersed in a peaceful community where cooperation and calm response to frustration were highly valued traits. She noted that Inuit adults were remarkably good at controlling anger and frustration when things didn't go their way. It wasn't that they didn't ever get upset, Briggs noted, but when they did, they remained calm and kept on with what needed to be done.

Recently, NPR science reporter Michaelleen Doucleff traveled to some of the same areas Briggs had lived in some fifty years ago because she was so intrigued by this revelation. She wanted to see what it was that the Inuit people were doing to maintain many of the same cultural values that their ancestors had held so dear, including this peaceful way of handling challenge.

What she learned is at once deeply powerful and incredibly simple. It starts with the children. At the heart of Inuit parenting is a commitment not to speak in anger or even frustration to young children. Avoiding yelling at or even punishing



young children is how they cultivate a culture of peaceful response to frustration, and Doucleff found it fascinating, if a little bit confusing.

If you don't yell at children or send them to time out when they've done something wrong, Doucleff wondered, then how do you teach them how they are to behave? The Inuit answer? Tell them stories.

The Inuit people have a vast collection of oral stories passed down through the generations that are "designed to sculpt kids' behavior in the moment." When a child does, or is about to do, something that they shouldn't, the adult with them tells them a story. The stories aren't complicated, and most don't take long to tell, but when employed consistently, they seem to have the desired effect.

For example, Inuit parents often tell their children a story about the northern lights- they say that the lights like to find children not wearing their hats, and use their heads for a game of soccer. It turns out that this is an effective way to get children to wear their hats in freezing temperatures without nagging, scolding or yelling.

And living where they do, so close to the dangerous Arctic Sea, there's an oft-told Inuit legend about a sea monster who has a giant pouch on its back. If a child gets too close to the churning waters, then the sea monster lurches out of the water, grabs the child and takes him down to the depths of the ocean.

It may seem a bit counterintuitive to us- these stories are kind of scary, after all. But as Doucleff reflected, "the point is not to scare the kids, but rather to intrigue them and to make them think."

And apparently it works. Because among the Inuit people, this practice, employed over thousands of years, has shown to be an effective way of crafting and cultivating the type of community they value.

Storytelling is a universal human activity. It has been used since the beginning of time to impart information, entertain, and pass along cultural values and norms. This is true for Greeks and Hebrews, Inuits and Americans, Jews and Christians. Every cultural group from ancient times to present day has its own cache of stories that help its members to know who they are, where they came from, and what is important.



Jesus was the consummate storyteller. In all four gospels, his stories, or parables, take center stage in his teaching ministry. According to Matthew, Jesus “always spoke in parables”, choosing to tell stories rather than to lecture.

This is an important thing for us to remember as we consider this morning’s text. This story of the rich man and Lazarus is, not unlike the Inuit sea monster story, a bit disturbing. But it is a story, not a lecture. And it doesn’t have to be true to reveal an important truth.

So the story goes as follows- two men live in proximity but not community- one is wealthy and has everything that he needs and more, and the other is destitute and hanging on by a thread. This is not an unfamiliar setup for any of us- we are painfully aware of the economic and social divides that are such a painful reality in our world.

But then, there is a massive reversal of fortune. Both men die, and the poor man Lazarus is whisked away by the angels to the bosom of Abraham- a coveted position for sure. But the rich man (who remains unnamed) is buried and ends up in Hades, being tormented.

Consumed by flames and beset by terrible thirst, he calls out for just a bit of relief from Lazarus. But Abraham denies him even that small comfort, reminding him that he did nothing to provide comfort to Lazarus during the men’s lives.

The rich man then, in what appears to be an unexpectedly selfless move, asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to the land of the living to warn the man’s brothers, so that they might repent of what we can only assume to be the same self-absorbed behavior as their doomed brother.

Once again, Abraham denies his request, this time being clear that what is expected of his brothers – therefore, what is expected of all people – is clearly delineated in the law, and if they don’t listen to the law as it has been sent to them from God, then nothing else is going to convince them to change their ways.

It is understandable why, to many people, this is a story about the afterlife- that is after all, where most of the action happens.. By this thinking, the story is saying, “if you are bad in this life, then you will burn in hell.”

That is a way to interpret it, for sure.



But that's not the only possible interpretation. Remember, this is a story, not unlike the Inuit sea monster story, and stories are not intended to be taken literally.

Imagine if we interpreted the Inuit story literally. Then we would believe that "if you get too close to the sea, then a sea monster will eat you."

That sounds a bit ridiculous, right? We know that this is not true – there are not sea monsters waiting to snatch misbehaving children from the shore and whisk them off to the depths of the ocean.

But that doesn't make the story any less powerful. That's the thing about stories- they don't have to be literally true in order to carry a powerful meaning, and it's not hard to hear this as a needed warning for children to exercise caution when near the powerful waves of the sea. There doesn't have to be an actual sea monster for the ocean to be dangerous, and there are ample opportunities to practice safe and responsible behavior to avoid those dangers.

Similarly, there doesn't have to be an actual burning hell for a life lived separate from God to be utter torment, and there are ample opportunities in this life for us to practice discipleship to avoid that torment.

It's not that Jesus wasn't concerned with eternal life, he certainly was. But throughout the gospels, it is clear that Jesus' main concern was how humans live in the here and now under the commandments to love God and love one another. What we do with the life we have been given, in response to the generosity of the giver, is much more at the forefront of Jesus' ministry than any talk of the afterlife.

Jesus taught through storytelling, through parables, in order to illuminate the values of God's kingdom.

As professor David Lose writes,

Parables aren't told to give you a complete theological system or to address ultimate questions once and for all. They are meant to give us a glimpse – often surprising, even jarring glimpses – into the kingdom of God. They present various slivers of the "kingdom logic" of the God who regularly surprises us with God's compassion and concern. So maybe this parable isn't interested in explaining to us how



people get to heaven but rather invites us to look at the people around us – right here, right now – from the perspective of this peculiar logic of God.

If one goal of storytelling is to shape behavior, then it is clear that this story is asking us to think long and hard about how we interact with those around us who are struggling, suffering, and living without. And he uses a powerful motivator- the fires of Hades- to get us to do this.

So much of Jesus' teaching, particularly in this section of Luke that we are studying this season, is about reversals. The lost are found, the least are honored, the last are first, and that got me thinking about something. Perhaps these parables of reversal are inviting us to reverse how we look at our own behavior and what motivates us.

We are so accustomed to the "if...then" formula when it comes to behavior and consequence – "if you do this, then this will happen." In this thinking, behavior is motivated primarily by what we think it will get us, or help us avoid.

But what if we reversed that? What if, instead of thinking of our behavior as the motivator, we see the consequence as the motivator- what if we understood our behavior as the response to the gift rather than the gift as the result of the behavior? So then this isn't about Jesus trying to tell us how to control the afterlife with our actions in this life, but rather about Jesus telling us how we are to live in this life as a response to God's love, so that we might remain close to God in all things?

What if instead of hearing it as "if you act this way, then God will love you" (with the understanding that that is your ticket to heaven), and instead heard it as "if you love God, then you will act this way" (with the understanding that our actions can contribute to the reality of God's kingdom on earth?

So then it becomes not, "keep my commandments and I will love you,"

But rather, "if you love me, then you will keep my commandments."

And not, "care for others and I will love you"

But "If you love me, feed my sheep."

As Abraham makes clear to the rich man who asks for his brothers to receive



a warning, we have already been given everything we need to know about how we are to live as followers of God in God's world. The rich man's problem was that he knew how he was supposed to act on earth, and he didn't do it. The poor man, Lazarus, was literally at his doorstep every day, wanting relief from pain, a little bit to eat, and just to be noticed, recognized as a human being. And the rich man walked past him as if he were not there. He had the opportunity every day to show his love for God by extending compassion to another human being, and he never did it.

The favored character in this morning's story is unmistakably Lazarus, whose earthly life is marked by hunger, pain and suffering, not the rich man with his easy life surrounded by material blessing. Rather than focusing on what happens to them after they die, perhaps we should be thinking long and hard about what in their earthly lives Jesus is highlighting.

God's commandments are all about honoring and loving God and living in community with all of God's creation. This means not thinking too highly of ourselves, not believing that what we accumulate has the power to save us, not living as if we are the only ones who matter, but rather entrusting our lives to God and believing that our stories are inextricably intertwined with the stories of the other.

Looking at it this way, we begin to see how Jesus is using this story to nudge us into a deeper, more meaningful way of living- to guide us to think more broadly about how we are to live, to remind us of who we are- children of a loving God whose desire is for creation to live in peace and harmony, justice and love – not someday, but right now.

