

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND WILLIAM R. FLEMING
MARINERS' CHURCH OF DETROIT
JUNE 5, 2016

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

THIS SERMON IS A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO TODAY'S GOSPEL. IT IS FROM A VERY TOUCHING STORY BY PHILLIP MARSHALL THAT EMPHASIZES GOD'S LOVE FOR US.

"ONE BITTERLY COLD NIGHT, WHEN WASHINGTON WAS COVERED WITH A BLANKET OF SNOW AND ICE, A MAN SAT IN HIS HOME ON MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE. THE HOUSE WAS VERY COMFORTABLE...A CRACKLING LOG FIRE IN THE FIREPLACE THREW DANCING SHADOWS ON THE PANELED WALLS.

HE READ THE PASSAGE OF LUKE WHICH IS OUR TEXT, AND THEN COULD READ NO MORE.

SOMEHOW HE COULD NOT GET AWAY FROM THOSE SIMPLE WORDS. HE HAD READ THE BIBLE OFTEN, FOR HE WAS A GOOD MAN, BUT NEVER BEFORE DID THE WORDS SEEM PRINTED IN FLAME.

"I MUST BE SLEEPY AND DREAMY," HE THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, "IT IS TIME I WENT TO BED." BUT IT WAS LONG ERE HE FELL ASLEEP, FOR STILL THE VOICE WHISPERED, AND STILL HE WAS CONSCIOUS OF A PRESENCE IN THE ROOM.

HE COULD NOT SHAKE IT OFF. NEVER BEFORE HAD HE BEEN SO CHALLENGED. HE THOUGHT OF THOSE WHOM HE USUALLY INVITED. MOST OF THEM WERE LISTED IN "WHO'S WHO IN WASHINGTON"; AND THERE WERE THOSE WHOSE NAMES WERE HOUSEHOLD NAMES: IN BUSINESS, FINANCE, CLUBS AND IN GOVERNMENT CIRCLES. THERE WERE MEN WITH THE POWER TO GRANT POLITICAL AND SOCIAL FAVORS.

BUT THEY WERE NOT POOR, OR MAIMED, OR LAME, OR BLIND.

THERE WERE BEGGARS WITH TREMBLING LIPS. THERE WERE SIGHTLESS EYES THAT STARED STRAIGHT IN FRONT. THERE WERE STICKS TAPPING ON THE PAVEMENT. THERE WERE CRUTCHES THAT CREAKED WITH THE WEIGHT OF A TWISTED BODY.

AS HE WATCHED THEM PASS, HE FELT HIS OWN HEART TOUCHED. HE WHISPERED A PRAYER THAT IF THE LORD WOULD GIVE HIM COURAGE, HE WOULD TAKE HIM AT HIS WORD AND DO WHAT HE WANTED HIM TO DO. ONLY THEN DID HE FIND PEACE AND FALL ASLEEP.

WHEN THE MORNING CAME, HE WAS IMPATIENT TO GO DOWNTOWN.

HIS FIRST CALL WAS ON THE ENGRAVER WHO KNEW HIM WELL. AT THE COUNTER HE DRAFTED THE CARD HE WISHED ENGRAVED, CHUCKLING NOW AND THEN AS HE WROTE, HIS EYES SHINING.

THE CLERK WHO READ THE CARD LOOKED SOMEWHAT PUZZLED BUT MADE NO COMMENT.

THE CARD READ:

JESUS OF NAZARETH
REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE
AT A BANQUET HONORING
THE SONS OF WANT
ON FRIDAY EVENING, IN A HOME ON MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE
CARS WILL AWAIT YOU AT THE CENTRAL UNION MISSION
AT SIX O'CLOCK

A FEW DAYS LATER, WITH THE CARDS OF INVITATION IN HIS HAND, HE WALKED DOWNTOWN AND GAVE THEM OUT, AND WITHIN AN HOUR THERE WERE SEVERAL PEOPLE WONDERING WHAT COULD BE THE MEANING OF THE CARD THAT A KINDLY MAN, HAD PLACED IN THEIR HANDS.

THERE WAS THE OLD MAN SEATED ON A BOX TRYING TO SELL PENCILS; AND ANOTHER ON THE CORNER WITH A RACKING COUGH AND A BUNDLE OF PAPERS UNDER HIS ARMS. THERE WAS A BLIND MAN SAYING OVER AND OVER TO HIMSELF, "JESUS OF NAZARETH REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE."

A FELLOW WHO WAS FINGERING A GUN IN HIS POCKET AND BITTERLY THINKING OF SUICIDE WONDERED WHETHER HE SHOULD WAIT UNTIL NIGHT.

BECAUSE HIS NAME WAS AN IMPRESSIVE ONE, BECAUSE HE WAS RICH AND INFLUENTIAL IN WASHINGTON BUSINESS AND POLITICS, HE MET WITH AN ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE AS HE TOLD THEM:

"IF YOU CARE TO COME OUT TONIGHT, I PROMISE YOU A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE."

AT SIX O'CLOCK, A STRANGE GROUP OF MEN STOOD WAITING IN THE VESTIBULE OF THE CENTRAL UNION MISSION, TALKING SOFTLY TOGETHER. "WELL, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? I'D STAND ALMOST ANYTHING FOR A MEAL." AND THE BLIND MAN, WITH THE LITTLE BOY AT HIS SIDE, VENTURED TO REMARK: "MAYBE IT'S PART OF THE GOVERNMENT RELIEF PROGRAM." AND THE CYNIC WAS SAYING, "AW, SOMEBODY'S KIDDIN' US, AS IF WE WEREN'T WRETCHED ENOUGH ALREADY."

JUST THEN SOMEONE CAME OVER AND ANNOUNCED THAT THE CARS WERE AT THE DOOR; WITHOUT A WORD, THEY WENT OUTSIDE.

PERHAPS THERE WAS SOMETHING INCONGRUOUS ABOUT IT ALL, SEEING THESE MEN, CLUTCHING THEIR THIN COATS TIGHTLY AROUND THEIR THIN BODIES, HUDDLING TOGETHER, THEIR FACES PINCHED WITH COLD AND UNSHAVEN, THEIR TOES STICKING OUT OF THEIR SHOES, CLIMBING INTO TWO LIMOUSINES. IT WAS TOUCHING TO SEE THE LAME GET IN, DRAGGING ONE FOOT. SWINGING UP WITH A TWITCH OF PAIN, AND TO SEE THE BLIND MAN FUMBLING FOR THE STRAP.

THEY STOOD GAZING AT THE HOUSE, ITS BROAD STEPS AND LAMPS, ITS THICK-PILED CARPETS. THEY ENTERED SLOWLY, TRYING TO TAKE IT ALL IN. THEY WERE MET BY THE HOST, A LITTLE NERVOUS, BUT SMILING.

HE WAS A QUIET MAN, AND THEY LIKED HIM - THESE GUESTS OF HIS WHOSE NAMES HE DID NOT KNOW. HE DID NOT SAY MUCH, ONLY, "I AM SO GLAD YOU CAME."

THE HOST ROSE IN HIS PLACE, AND IN A VOICE THAT TREMBLED SLIGHTLY

SAID: "MY FRIENDS, LET US ASK THE BLESSING:

"BLESS THESE MEN. YOU KNOW WHO THEY ARE, AND WHAT THEY NEED. AND HELP US TO DO WHAT YOU WANT US TO DO. ACCEPT OUR THANKS, IN JESUS' NAME. AMEN."

THE BLIND MAN WAS SMILING NOW. HE TURNED TO THE MAN SEATED NEXT TO HIM AND ASKED HIM ABOUT THE HOST. "WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE?" AND SO THE ICE WAS BROKEN; CONVERSATION BEGAN TO STIR AROUND THE TABLE, AND SOON THE FIRST COURSE WAS LAID. "MY FRIENDS, I HOPE YOU WILL ENJOY THE DINNER. I WOULD SUGGEST THAT WE WASTE NO TIME, FOR I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT YOU ARE HUNGRY. GO RIGHT AHEAD."

THERE THEY WERE - MEN WHO OTHERWISE MIGHT BE STILL LOITERING ON THE BACK STREETS OF WASHINGTON, CROUCHED IN DOORWAYS, OR HUDDLED OVER SOME WATCHMAN'S FIRE.

IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT THESE MEN WOULD BE THE VERY ONES THAT JESUS WOULD HAVE GATHERED AROUND HIM - THE LEGION OF THE WORLD'S WOUNDED, THE FRATERNITY OF THE FRIENDLESS, PIECES OF BROKEN HUMAN EARTHENWARE.

HIS REASON WAS THE SAME OLD GLORIOUS REASON THAT JESUS HAD FOR EVERY MIRACLE, FOR EVERY GESTURE OF LOVE, FOR EVERY TOUCH OF HEALING. IT WAS SIMPLY BECAUSE HE WAS SORRY FOR THESE PEOPLE, AND BECAUSE HE WANTED TO DO THIS ONE THING ON AN IMPULSE OF LOVE.

YET THERE WAS NOT A TRACE OF CONDESCENSION IN HIS ATTITUDE. HE WAS TREATING THEM AS BROTHERS, TALKING TO THEM AS THOUGH THEY HAD A RIGHT TO BE SITTING WHERE THEY WERE.

HE WATCHED EACH PLATE AND DIRECTED THE SERVANTS WITH A NOD OR A GLANCE. HE ENCOURAGED THEM TO EAT; HE LAUGHED AT THEIR THINLY DISGUISED RELUCTANCE, UNTIL THEY LAUGHED TOO. AS HE SAT THERE, IT SUDDENLY OCCURRED TO HIM HOW DIFFERENT WAS THE CONVERSATION!

THEY WONDERED, MOST OF ALL, WHO THIS MAN WAS, AND WHY HE HAD INVITED THEM ALL HERE.

WHEN THE MEAL WAS OVER, THERE WAS MUSIC. SOMEONE CAME IN AND SAT

DOWN AT THE PIANO. HE BEGAN TO PLAY SOFTLY, FAMILIAR MELODIES, OLD SONGS; AND THEN IN A SOFT, BUT UNDERSTANDING VOICE, HE BEGAN TO SING.

SOMEONE ELSE JOINED IN - A CRACKED, WHEEZING VOICE, BUT IT STARTED THE OTHERS. MEN WHO HAD NOT SUNG FOR MONTHS. MEN WHO HAD NO REASON TO SING. THERE THEY WERE, JOINING IN. SOON THEY BEGAN TO REQUEST THIS AND THAT, AND BEFORE THEY KNEW IT, THEY WERE SINGING HYMNS:

"WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS"

"THE CHURCH IN THE WILDWOOD"

"WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS."

THE PIANIST STOPPED, AND THE GUESTS GROUPED THEMSELVES IN SOFT, COMFORTABLE CHAIRS AROUND THE LOG FIRE; SOME OF THEM SMOKED.

THE HOST MOVED AMONG THEM, SMILING...HIS EYES SHINING. THEN WHEN HE HAD SETTLED HIMSELF AGAIN, AND HIS GUESTS WERE COMFORTABLE, HE SAID: "I KNOW YOU MEN ARE WONDERING WHAT ALL THIS MEANS. I CAN TELL YOU VERY SIMPLY. BUT, FIRST, LET ME READ YOU SOMETHING."

HE READ FROM THE GOSPELS STORIES OF ONE WHO MOVED AMONG THE SICK, THE OUTCASTS, THE DESPISED AND THE FRIENDLESS. HOW HE HEALED THIS ONE,

CURED THAT ONE, SPOKE KINDLY WORDS OF INFINITE MEANING TO ANOTHER. HOW HE VISITED THE OSTRACIZED, AND WHAT HE PROMISED TO ALL WHO BELIEVED IN HIM.

"NOW I HAVEN'T DONE MUCH TONIGHT FOR YOU, BUT IT HAS MADE ME VERY HAPPY TO HAVE YOU HERE IN MY HOME. I HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED IT HALF AS MUCH AS I HAVE. IF I HAVE GIVEN YOU ONE EVENING OF HAPPINESS, I SHALL BE FOREVER GLAD TO REMEMBER IT, AND YOU ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO ME. THIS IS NOT MY PARTY. IT IS HIS! I HAVE MERELY LENT HIM THIS HOUSE. HE WAS YOUR HOST. HE IS YOUR FRIEND. AND HE HAS GIVEN ME THE HONOR OF SPEAKING FOR HIM.

"I'M GOING TO GIVE EACH OF YOU HIS BOOK OF INSTRUCTIONS. I HAVE MARKED CERTAIN PASSAGES IN IT THAT YOU WILL FIND HELPFUL WHEN YOU ARE SICK AND IN PAIN, WHEN YOU ARE LONELY AND DISCOURAGED, WHEN YOU ARE BLUE AND BITTER AND HOPELESS AND WHEN YOU LOSE A LOVED ONE. HE WILL SPEAK A MESSAGE OF HOPE AND COURAGE AND FAITH. I HAVE MADE ARRANGEMENTS FOR EACH ONE OF YOU TO GET BACK TO YOUR HOMES, AND THOSE WHO HAVE NOWHERE TO GO, I INVITE TO SPEND THE NIGHT HERE."

THERE WAS A NEW LIGHT IN THEIR EYES A SMILE WHERE THERE HAD NOT BEEN EVEN INTEREST BEFORE. THE BLIND MAN WAS SMILING STILL, AND AS HE STOOD ON THE DOORSTEP, WAITING, HE TURNED TO WHERE HIS HOST STOOD. "GOD BLESS YOU, MY FRIEND, WHOEVER YOU ARE." A LITTLE WIZENED FELLOW WHO HAD NOT SPOKEN ALL NIGHT PAUSED TO SAY, "I'M GOING TO TRY AGAIN, MISTER; THERE'S SOMETHIN' WORTH LIVIN' FOR."

THE CYNIC TURNED BACK, "MISTER, YOU'RE THE FIRST MAN WHO EVER GAVE ME ANYTHING. AND YOU'VE GIVEN ME HOPE." "THAT IS BECAUSE I WAS DOING IT FOR HIM," SAID THE HOST AND STOOD AND WAVED GOOD NIGHT AS THE CARS PURRED OFF INTO THE DARKNESS.

WHEN THEY HAD GONE, HE SAT AGAIN BY THE FIRE AND LOOKED AT THE DYING EMBERS, UNTIL THE FEELING BECAME OVERWHELMING AGAIN THAT THERE WAS SOMEONE IN THE ROOM. HE COULD NEVER TELL ANYONE HOW HE KNEW THIS, BUT HE KNEW THAT HE WAS SMILING AND THAT HE APPROVED. AND THAT NIGHT, ON MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, A RICH MAN SMILED IN HIS SLEEP.

BUT WHY SHOULDN'T IT HAPPEN, ON MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE IN

WASHINGTON? ON PARK AVENUE IN NEW YORK? IN DRUID HILLS IN ATLANTA? ON THE GOLD COAST IN CHICAGO? IN BEVERLY HILLS IN LOS ANGELES?

I WONDER WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE ALL AGREED TO READ ONE OF THE GOSPELS, UNTIL WE CAME TO A PLACE THAT TOLD US TO DO SOMETHING, THEN WENT OUT TO DO IT, AND ONLY AFTER WE HAD DONE IT...BEGAN READING AGAIN?

WHY DON'T WE DO WHAT JESUS SAYS? HOW EXCITING LIFE WOULD BECOME WERE WE TO BEGIN LIVING ACCORDING TO HIS WAY OF LIFE!

FRIENDS WOULD SAY WE HAD LOST OUR MINDS - PERHAPS. ACQUAINTANCES WOULD SAY WE WERE "PECULIAR." THOSE WHO DISLIKE US WOULD SAY WE WERE CRAZY.

BUT SOMEONE ELSE, WHO HAD THESE SAME THINGS SAID ABOUT HIM, WOULD SMILE, AND THE JOY AND PEACE IN OUR OWN HEARTS WOULD TELL US WHO WAS RIGHT.