

“Human Doors, Heavenly Bread, Earthly Grace”  
1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Luke 11:5-13  
Rev. David Hutchinson  
Sunday February 16, 2020

This morning’s sermon is a story. I wrote it as a different way to reflect on the scripture texts. / It is a work of fiction, but it might seem - - familiar. It’s about a small church a lot like this one. But it is NOT about this one. / Some of the characters might seem familiar - - but there will be obvious differences too. And ANY similarity between these characters - - and actual people here - - is entirely coincidental. / However, feel free to make connections if you like... Which is in fact what I hope you will do....

Here we go...

Daniel was a little boy of about 6 years old.

Daniel is peripheral to this story - - but in another way - - he’s the center of it.

So pay attention to what happens when he’s around.

Daniel - - this little boy - - was stacking Kleenex boxes up - - like blocks.

He was sitting on the floor cross legged - - building a tower - - on the waiting room table - - in the hospital. A tower of Kleenex boxes. Most of these Kleenex boxes - - were empty - - or they had only one or two sheets left in them. But now they’d taken on a new purpose - - as building blocks.

The older members of his family were gathered around on chairs and the sofa next to a magazine rack. One of them held a sheet of that scratchy hospital tissue - - that had been in the Kleenex box on the table.

There were about six boxes in the tower,

which reached just about high enough to tip over.

It had been a long afternoon in the family waiting room #3, just off the main waiting area. It was stuffy in the smaller room, and family members ebbed and flowed between there and the intensive care unit.

But Daniel was stationed by the kleenex boxes, and was not allowed into the unit because of his young age.

A phone call earlier in the week had set Paul Adams on the twisting winding path that eventually led him to this little room - - and to Verne's bedside in the ICU.

It all started - - when he had called a long-lost member of the congregation of 3rd Presbyterian Church, where for the last four years - - most of the people in the congregation - - had referred to him as "Pastor Paul".

Her name was Jane.

Pastor Paul had called long-distance on the church phone to reach Jane. And as Jane picked up the receiver - - he was checking his calendar - - and he was envisioning the church treasurer, Richard, in his mind. He could see the Richard grudgingly subtracting from the churches annual telephone budget - - because the church still had a land line phone - - that charged extra for long-distance.

Jane lived 75 miles away now, and though she did not attend worship, she was still listed as an "active" member of the congregation.

Pastor Paul had only ever called her one other time.

This time it was about the memorial fund.

The church treasurer Richard - - had asked him to get her permission to spend these memorial donations. Money had been left to the church on behalf of her brother.

It had collected over the months as line #12 in the designated funds portion of the treasurer's report.

When the donations reached a level above \$300.00 it began to catch the attention of several elders. Each one had a project in mind, which they had proposed, which had been tabled. Pastor Paul was asked to set them out as options for Jane. Kind of like in a catalog.

“Describe them objectively”, Richard had advised, “and not leaning one way or another, so as to let her decide. Don’t let her know which one YOU want her to choose”.

Jane picked up after three rings, and recognized Pastor Paul’s voice.

“Mr. Adams?”, she asked.

“Yes”, he had responded, ready to lay out the options.

But that’s not where the conversation went. They talked about her job, and her cats, and the last time she had been to church. And in the course of the conversation she told Paul about Verne. She had just been talking to his wife Iris, and found out that he was in the hospital.

Iris and Verne had been married in the church, and had two grown children. They were in their mid-70’s and after 45 years of marriage, they were in love. Their marriage was one of the rays of light that would have brightened the stained glass windows of third Presbyterian Church from inside out.

Paul remembered seeing a photograph of them on the front porch of the house where the church secretary lived. Doris had been the church secretary for 22 years and Paul had had a dream in which her toes extended out through her shoes and became roots, which grew down into the floor of the church, like tree roots.

He had never been invited into her house to sit down. Which was fine with him. But while he waited on her porch one day - - having stopped by to drop something off - - she went back inside and brought the photograph out to him.

She held it out - - at arm's length - - for him to look at.

There sat Iris and Verne laughing on the balcony of the "Victorian Inn". They had pulled the table out onto the balcony of this Bed and Breakfast which was located twenty-six miles up the road from 3rd Presbyterian, in the town where their son had been married. They had stayed in the B&B rather than drive the 26 miles home, an act of extravagance rarely known in their lives. On the table was a bag of pretzels and two bottles of Michelob Light. Doris said they had called it their second honeymoon.

Doris and Iris were sisters, and were still friendly with Jane, even though she lived 75 miles away now.

So, as Paul sat listening to Jane on the phone, he was told information that he didn't know, by someone who lived far away, concerning the condition of a church member who lived just around the corner.

Such are the workings of God, he thought

And then corrected himself - - such are the workings of the church anyway.

As he hung up, Pastor Paul thought that it might be nice to bring the photo to the hospital, to cheer up Iris and Verne. But that would mean another visit to Doris' porch, and it was raining. Doris had never been his favorite person anyway.

But she was Iris sister, and she had the photo.

So he went - - thinking about how he'd explain to Richard that he had forgotten to mention the memorial fund money.

Paul had sat on that porch before in the rain. He had gone over to Doris' house to try to convince her that a homeless woman named Grace should be let into the church. Grace lived in shelter after shelter in the downtown area, and smelled like she might.

She was a little out in left field on most days - - but basically a nice person.

Some people gossiped and said that she had a mental handicap.

Pastor Paul had once confided in another pastor friend,

“I’m no psychologist, but I do like Grace better than Doris”.

Grace had a circuit. She traveled from one bakery to another. She stopped by grocery stores and restaurants. And she collected bread. She transported the bread in a foldable cart with metal-mesh sides and little wheels. When filled to capacity, the cart could hold quite a lot of bread.

It was more bread than Grace could eat herself, and that’s not why she collected it. Her circuit included the senior citizens’ center, a homeless shelter, and some churches. She would seek out other people in need, and offer some of her gleaned bread.

It was her day old gift.

Once or twice she had offered Pastor Paul some bread as he left the “Loaves & Fishes” center, after volunteering. He declined twice. After that, he started eating a little less at lunch. And one day his lunch consisted of her bread.

He didn’t know exactly why he had made the change regarding Grace, and her bread. He didn’t need the bread, and it was always a little stale. But he couldn’t help himself. And once he had eaten the bread, he couldn’t help but pay more attention to Grace.

He took note of her circuit. What he began to realize was that she went right by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Presbyterian church on Wednesdays. Wednesday was the same day as the church put on a meal for low-income people. The Lutheran church did the same thing on Mondays.

Why didn’t she stop?

What Paul found out was that she had tried to stop.

But the church secretary Doris - - would not let her in.

The DOOR - - had remained locked.

That door.

The door to 3<sup>rd</sup> Presbyterian opened automatically with a buzz if someone pressed a button on the outside. Normally it was kept locked for safety.

Doris had peeked through the window next to the door several times. She had peered out through the glass. But she had never opened the door to Grace.

Paul had gone to Doris' house to explain that he had checked Grace out, and she was ok. He urged Doris to let her in and simply let her distribute bread to those who might want it. Grace could be ushered out as soon as she was done. Pastor Paul had done his best to assure Doris that she didn't have to take any bread herself.

"It's a service to the community", he said, as he pulled his coat collar closer around his neck, sitting in a white plastic chair as Doris stood.

He watched as rain pelted the sidewalk and splashed onto his hand.

He never did see beyond the door of Doris' house that day.

And he had not convinced her to open the church to Grace.

So now the prospect of another rainy encounter on her porch was not what Pastor Paul wanted to do with his afternoon. But Iris and Verne looked so happy in the photo on that balcony. As if they might watch the sunset forever.

A HA! He had an idea!

Instead of going over there again, Paul decided to call Doris on the phone and ask her to bring the photo to the hospital. He would meet her there, and they could visit her sister and Verne.

Sitting in family waiting room #3, Paul waited to see that photo again.

As he waited, Daniel, who had been building towers changed to putting the Kleenex boxes in criss-crossing connecting rows.

The boxes looked maybe like alphabet blocks in the nursery, arranged to make a crossword puzzle. Three horizontal and three vertical, connecting to make the letter "L".

"L" like in the word "love".

Daniel was the only person in the room who had not cried.

At six years old, it was difficult to imagine what was on the other side of a door where he was not allowed. Daniel didn't know what the intensive care unit looked like. He had not seen Verne's bed like the rest of them had. And while they gathered there and prayed, on the other side of the waiting room door...there he sat.

He sat and he played with their kleenex boxes.

Like God as a youngster, rearranging the pieces of our sorrow and anxiety.

What would happen - - if God could have a day to rearrange things?

To build something - - out of our grief?

Could it be that God in fact was childlike - - and hopeful - - and creative?

Pastor Paul crossed back out into the waiting room as the door buzzed open, after praying with the family. It was the same kind of buzzer as on the church door.

Looking through the window by the sign that said, "Family Room #3" Paul saw Daniel showing off his kleenex box creation - - to Doris.

The photograph of Iris and Verne was on the table by the telephone.

As he opened the door to the family room Doris saw him and smiled. He had seen that smile before in the photograph, on her sister's face.

But he had never expected Doris to smile at him.

Doris said to him, "Come in and sit down, why don't you".

It was like a key turned inside him and something was let out.

He crossed through the door and into the room. He sat on the chair as Doris had invited him to do. Looking at her with Daniel - - with the photo in the background - - he felt completely different about Doris.

"Daniel has been a very good boy, playing in here all this time", said Paul.

"Maybe you would like to go for a walk ?", he asked.

Daniel looked up and his eyes popped open wide as he shook his head, yes.

"It's ok", said Doris, "I'll take him. You wait here so you can show my sister this picture when she comes back. And - thank you for coming."

Paul watched the two of them wander around the lobby of the main waiting room as the family room door slowly closed. He watched through the window as they visited the table with the unfinished jigsaw puzzle. Then they proceeded past the information booth, and toward the main door. As they approached the electronic laser eye on the wall, two huge glass doors swished open, and they wandered out into a sunny afternoon.

The next day, Paul got to the office late. He had first run some incomplete errands from the day before. As he approached the big red wooden church door he took out his key. He put it in the lock under the speaker and button which visitors, homeless people, and salesmen might push. He jostled the door open a crack with his shoulder, while carrying his briefcase.

As he rounded the corner by the church office, he said "hi" to Doris.

He settled into his desk chair and looked out across his cluttered desk, and past his own Kleenex box. There it sat with a Kleenex sticking up out of it - - waiting - - and ready.

He was glad to have heard the message on his answering machine late the night before that Verne was doing better.

And then - - he was astonished to see - - Grace!

Grace had been let - - into the church!

Grace was standing in the social hall, with her cart behind her - -

And she was handing out bread.

Doris put her head in through his office door on her way to the bathroom,

“Paul, would you care to come by some time for lunch?”, she asked.