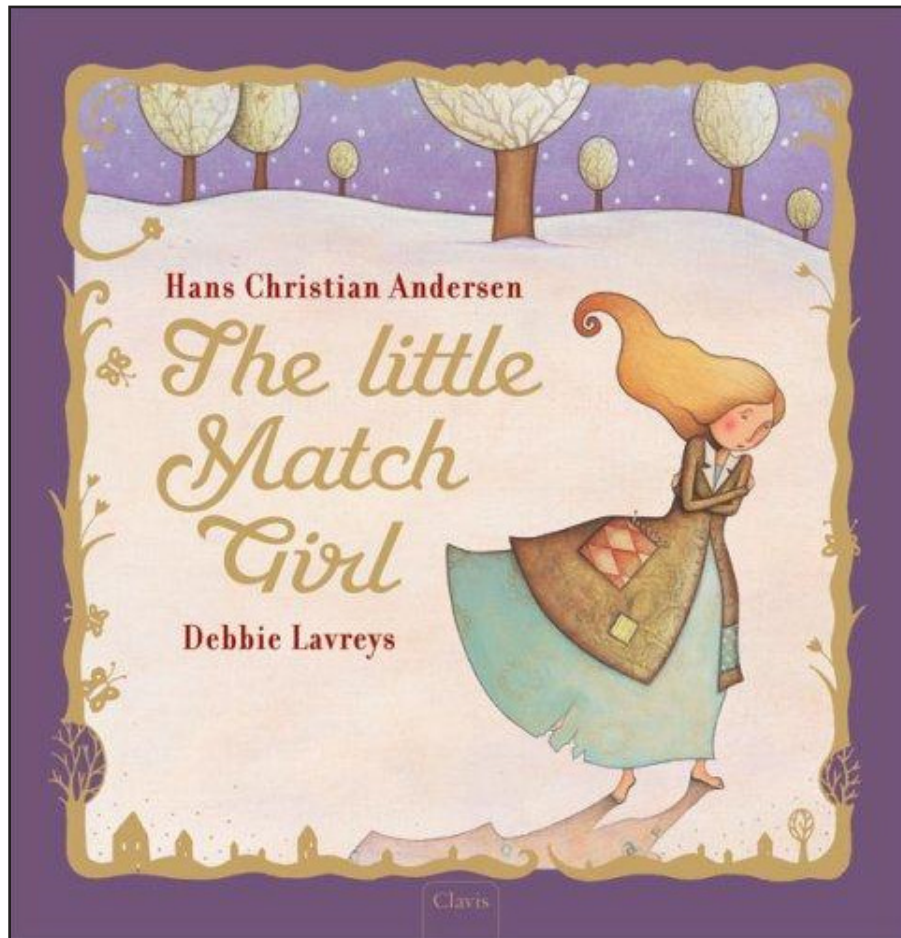


Living Grace

CYCLE C 6TH SUNDAY
ORDINARY TIME

“WE STAND DAILY ON THE THRESHOLD OF HEAVEN”



*In **The Little Match Girl**, a young girl is afraid to return home to a violent father without having sold enough matches for the day. She remains on the street resigned to warming herself by only lighting matches. With each match, she sees a vision - a warm stove; a table laden with hot food; a beautiful Christmas tree decorated with lights leading up to the sky, so high that one becomes a shooting star. According to her grandmother, each shooting star is a person who had recently passed on and is now heading to heaven. Her next strike brings a vision of her grandmother, the only person in the world who ever loved the Little Match Girl. Her grandmother takes her away in a warm embrace to heaven.*



HANDS, ALL TOGETHER

*Photograph from a Youth Fellowship Day ~ 2007
Avondale Pattillo United Methodist Church ~ Decatur, Georgia, Unites States*

EXPLORING THE ART:

WE SUFFER & REJOICE TOGETHER

"...Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Matt 25:40

This photo and bible verse were printed on t-shirts for a youth fellowship day at Six Flags in Atlanta. The image reflects that hand-in-hand, and with genuine love, is our sense of Christian mission. There is no genuine holiness apart from a recognition of, and response to, the spiritual and material good of others. Christ identified himself with all people, and he teaches that whatever we do for good or evil, we do to Christ who is the head of the Body of Christ. In emphasizing "the least of these" we realize that when we do good for those in great need, we are more likely to be doing it for the right reasons of empathy, compassion, and brotherly love. When we help the well-off, we are often doing it to gain favor or because we think they will help us in return.

The image above also reflects the singularity of the Body of Christ. When one member rejoices or suffers, the whole Body of Christ rejoices or suffers. Those who assist the least will inherit the kingdom, as our acts of service come from our transformed hearts in response to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. In caring for those in need, we discover that our acts of compassion are the same as if done for Jesus himself. Our times cry out for this kind of holiness.

Living Grace

READ-ALoud STORY



ABIDE IN ME

Vicki Shuck, Esperanza Arts

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.

~ John 7:7-9

Read-aloud video link:

THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL

Written by Hans Christian Andersen & Illustrated by Debbie Lavreys

Sunday Gospel

LUKE 6:17, 20-26

Jesus came down with the twelve
and stood on a stretch of level ground
with a great crowd of his disciples
and a large number of the people
from all Judea and Jerusalem
and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon.
And raising his eyes toward his disciples he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for the kingdom of God is yours.

Blessed are you who are now hungry,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who are now weeping,
for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you,
and when they exclude and insult you,
and denounce your name as evil
on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice and leap for joy on that day!

Behold, your reward will be great in heaven.

For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way.

But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are filled now,
for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will grieve and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for their ancestors treated the false
prophets in this way."

Making the Connections

FOR ADULTS

THE BEATITUDES SHOW US HOW NEAR WE ARE TO THE THRESHOLD OF HEAVEN. THEY INVITE US TO BECOME INSTRUMENTS FOR GOD'S GRACE TO FLOW THROUGH US FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH.

The Little Match Girl gives us the opportunity to talk with our children about death and suffering. It is a sad but beautiful story that teaches us that in our greatest loss - death - we have nothing to fear. Positioning death and suffering within the context of the Beatitudes helps us to embrace the reality of death with the hope we hold in our greatest yet most challenging Christian truth: The Paschal Mystery - Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Jesus teaches us this paradox - in suffering there is blessing, and in death there is life. Blessing in suffering? Life in death? For Christians, this is the whole point: It is through the graces of love and beauty that heaven breaks into our daily lives, and it is through suffering that we develop eyes and hearts that are more in-tune to those graces. It is when we are weak and suffering that the values of heaven can break through our sense of security and flow into our lives.

Both our children's story and Gospel this week give us clues as to this mystery. The beautiful visions of the Little Match Girl show us how to focus on heavenly values while living with our present earthly challenges. Her desperate situation leads her with no alternative but to open her arms and reach out to receive the blessings of heaven. When everything and everyone on earth failed her, visions of her own past beautiful earthly experiences - sitting with friends by a warm fire, enjoying a table full of family and food, experiencing the magic of a Christmas with a tree filled with lights, the warm embrace of her grandmother's arms - gave her peace, comfort and joy, and opened her heart to life in heaven. This story helps us to look toward the simple gifts in our own lives to discover heaven in our midst. This is also the message of the Beatitudes. When we suffer, we get in touch with what really matters. We become open. Suffering breaks open our hearts and becomes our teacher when we are in need and "poor in spirit". Through our mourning, meekness, hunger, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and persecutions, we find life and love. It is a mystery, but when we recognize these heavenly moments on earth, we know that we have a glimpse into heaven above. If we want to live heaven on earth, this is the mysterious formula.

In Jesus' teaching on the Beatitudes, we also learn that seeing heaven all around us is the best way to understand the greater reality of eternal life, and this keeps us focused in our earthly journeys. To really live for heaven will dramatically shift our priorities. Everyday we are faced with choices - whether to stay at work late trying to get ahead, or get home in time to have a family meal together; to spend time shopping, or take time to visit an elderly family member or neighbor. By making the latter choices, we are shifting our values toward heaven. When we look toward heaven, and are in touch by what really matters, we bring heaven to earth. The saints of our church are people whose lives grew the values of heaven within them. This growth happened through their everyday lives where they learned to embrace their own relationships, sufferings, and sacrifices with joy, peace, and acceptance. The values of heaven grew within them, and throughout their lives, they grew the kingdom of heaven on earth. Saints and saintly people point to the values of heaven. Therefore, their lives are worth our study and our friendship. To be saintly, is to be in touch with these greater values of the kingdom of heaven here on earth and to live with them as priority. Creating heaven on earth for those who are suffering and in need is the surest way to grow the values of the kingdom in our own lives.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." Heaven is here and now, as we recognize the simple gifts in life that give us a sneak peek of what is in store for us. To follow the way of Jesus, offers us a life filled with an abundance of love and joy by bringing heaven to earth. Understanding this can help us to meet death with peace and free from fear, as we are filled with love and hope of our future life in heaven.

Making the Connections

FOR CHILDREN

YOUR STORY: What do you think of when you think about heaven? When you see beautiful things do they make you think of God who created them? Do you think they represented the values of heaven? How? How do you experience what heaven might be like when you gather with family or friends? How do you feel when you walk by a homeless or lonely person? What do our hearts really hunger for? What is it that really makes us happy? How can suffering help understand something about heaven? Can you think of someone that seems to be filled with a heart of love here on earth? Do you think they represented the values of heaven? How?

THE CHILDREN'S STORY: What did the Little Match Girl experience in the story? What did she do when she was suffering the most? How did this help her?

THE GOSPEL STORY: Do the Beatitudes seem strange when you first hear them? Are these the things that today's world considers "blessed"? What is Jesus trying to teach us here? What do we call the people who live the values of heaven here on earth?

Who in your family, school, or neighborhood might be suffering? When you spend time with them, how can you learn more about heaven's values? How might you be called to live closer to the values of heaven?

Biblical Background

LUKE 6:17, 20-26

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: This teaching is the beginning of the famous Sermon on The Mount. In Chapter 4 of Matthew, Jesus begins his ministry along the Sea of Galilee by calling a few fishermen, Simon/Peter, his brother Andrew, and two other brothers, James and John. From there they set out through all of Galilee. "News spread about him all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." (Matthew 4:24-25) The Beatitudes are the first teachings that Jesus gave after initiating his ministry in the area by working miracles and driving out demons. Large crowds began to gather, and this was where he laid the groundwork for his mission and ministry. In many ways, Jesus spends the rest of his life unpacking the meaning of the Beatitudes. Surely this message would have confused and shocked the listeners as it would have been in great contrast to the military Messiah whom the Jewish people had been waiting for.

TERMS: Blessed are... In the Old Testament, life is categorized as one of "blessing" or one of "curse". This begins in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. They lived together in union with God and each other. When sin came into the world, so did domination, and then life moved forward for mankind in a state of curse. This curse has continuity for the Jewish people in tribal divisions, wars, and oppression as slaves to other nations. The journey of the Old Testament is one of prophets and leaders trying to redeem a cursed, enslaved, and divided people. Jesus began his teaching by mapping out how those engaged in the "kingdom of this world" could now restore themselves to the state of blessing. "Blessing" is the state of union with God and each other. There is no more dominion in this state, as it is one of mutual care and nourishment of all of God's people. This is the blessed state that comes to all in the "kingdom of God". The poor, the mourning, the meek, and the hungry will come to a place of reliance upon God and each other. Through this path the state of blessing will be returned.

Kingdom of God People in the time of Jesus are waiting to establish military might over the Roman oppressors. They were hoping for a Messiah who would initiate this. When they hear "kingdom" they think of what Jesus refers to as the "kingdom of this world". This world's defining organizational systems are families, people, cities, and nations, and they comprise the "kingdom of this world". Jesus' message breaks open a greater reality in describing the "kingdom of God". Belonging to the "kingdom of God" requires a reversal of values. Status in the world's kingdom does not ensure status in God's kingdom. This is the essence of Jesus' message and ministry. He came to initiate the kingdom of God in that time and place, and for all eternity. This is why we call it "Good News". It did not come across as Good News to the listeners in Jesus' crowd, and it still does not come across as Good News to many people today. It takes eyes that can "see" and ears that can "hear" the ways of the kingdom of God. This transformation is what we are continually invited to in our life today as Catholic Christians. It is a reversal of values of the kingdom of this world in our present time as well.

CULTURAL INSIGHT: In the time of Jesus and in the Jewish mind, people who were in need were placed in that state by God to call forth from those "with means" to actions of mercy and provision. People found their redemption through doing works of mercy...care of the blind, the poor, the hungry. People were born into states of need to call forth kindness and charity out of those who had abundance. This was, in a sense, their understanding of a social security system.

INSIGHT INTO MEANING: The notion of "kingdom" meant a very different thing to the crowd that Jesus was speaking to than the meaning of "kingdom" he has come to restore and initiate. "The kingdom is here and now," is the first thing that Jesus proclaims after his baptism by John the Baptist. People hoped in the long-awaited Messiah for military might and emancipation from Rome. Jesus came to initiate the "kingdom of heaven" which compelled a status reversal that set people free not just from Rome, but from the far greater captivity of sin and death. This was "new" news to all the listeners - news of a life that never ends. This challenged all their previous suppositions. In essence, all religions work to help a person deal with the harsh reality of death. In the Christian message, Jesus went through death himself, to conquer death and to lead us onto the path of eternal life. This is a big-picture vision for humanity's deepest needs and fears. The Beatitudes speak to those needs and point the way to resolving those needs. It was far from what anyone was expecting, thus the reactions begin.

Family Activities

SHARING THE MISSION AT HOME
AND IN THE WORLD



QUESTION OF THE WEEK: What image, memory, or person do you hope greets you in heaven? When you think of death and suffering, what do you feel peaceful about? What do you worry about?

CHARACTER QUALITIES: SEEING GOD IN SUFFERING
UNDERSTANDING THAT DEATH IS NOT THE END

FAMILY ACTIVITIES: This story helps all of us deal with the painful realities of death, but also the beauty, love, and promise that awaits us in heaven. Create a collage brainstorming which people, places, and experiences would be heaven for you. For the Little Match Girl, it was a warm fire, a feast, a Christmas tree, and her grandmother. Through this process, we realize that these heavenly people, places, and experiences are all around us, and how must never take them for granted.