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Legacy of Caring

Luke 16:20

One of the fascinating features of Ken Burns' documentary "The War" is the story of how World War II changed the people who experienced it on the home front. The urgent need to produce the weapons and equipment of war transformed the face of America. Women and minorities were offered employment in fields which were never opened to them before. Huge numbers of people moved from rural communities to the manufacturing centers of America. I can see that process in my own family. My parents moved from a small town in Kansas so my father could work in aircraft production in Wichita. My mother-in-law and two of her sisters made a similar journey from another small town in Kansas to work in the war industry in Wichita.

Burns points out that this massive upheaval of people created many problems. In Mobile, Alabama managers and workers struggled with what it meant to have an integrated work force for the first time in history. What I found most interesting in the Mobile story is that the ruling elite of the city was profoundly uncomfortable with all the newcomers who were pouring into their community. They didn't like the black sharecroppers or the white rednecks who were crowding their city. They preferred to be better insulated from the rural poor of both races. The structures of insulation created over hundreds of years were suddenly swept away. The long established citizens of Mobile were threatened by all the strangers at their gates.

We see a similar mind-set in the 16th chapter of Luke. There Jesus tells the story of a man who is fabulously wealthy. He is so well off that he is able to wear purple, the color of royalty in ancient times. He feasts in grand style in his luxurious home. He enjoys all the benefits of living at the upper end of the social spectrum. The rich man is faced with a fundamental choice about the use of his resources. Will he use his wealth to address the needs of those less fortunate or will he use it to insulate himself from their pain and suffering.

Jesus explores this issue in his story by describing the stranger who lives at the rich man's gate. The man is so poor that he has no place to live. He is often hungry because he eats only when someone shows him charity. He has no family to provide a safety net. He has no access to the healthcare system. There is no treatment for his numerous medical problems. The closest thing to medical care that he receives is the licking of his open sores by the neighborhood dogs.

The wealthy man must decide how to respond to the stranger at his gate. Will he see the stranger's pain? Will he listen to the stranger's need? There is no indication that the wealthy man agonizes over his decision. He knows exactly what he wants and he understands how to get it. He uses his money to keep the stranger at a safe distance. He makes sure that the poor are kept comfortably out of sight. His wealth becomes the means for insulating himself from the pain of our world.

The prophet Amos encounters the same attitude when he leaves the farm to travel north to the more affluent region of Israel in the 8th century. There he meets people who have no use for country bumpkins like him. He sees people who use their affluence to insulate themselves from those who

struggle to survive. Amos describes their lifestyle by referring to them as those who are at ease in Zion. The prophet uses the word ease not just to describe their affluence. It also suggests their spiritual condition. They are at ease because they have insulated themselves so well they can no longer see the suffering of others. They have lost the capacity to grieve over the pain of those around them. Without empathy they are spiritually dead.

This is the truth that closes in on the wealthy man in Jesus' story. In the end he is not protected by his efforts to insulate himself from pain and suffering. In death he discovers that the chasm he created to separate himself from the suffering of the poor now works against him. Now he is on the wrong side of the chasm and it is as impenetrable in death as he wanted it to be in life. When he calls for water no one can cross the chasm to bring it to him. He is condemned to the isolation he spent a lifetime trying to create.

The people who founded this church understood the point of Jesus' story. They knew that no matter how privileged we are we cannot isolate ourselves from the pain and suffering of the world around us. They recognized that American society in 1835 was broken by the institution of slavery. They grieved over that brokenness. They grieved because slavery was breaking the spirits of those in bondage and poisoning the souls of slave owners. They believed that God grieved, too, and that God would lead the way to wholeness. The empathy with which they confronted this painful reality established a legacy of caring which has shaped this church for more than 172 years. Our pledges of financial support for Westminster's ministry constitute a powerful connection to the empathy of those who created this church.

Vernon Tott was an American soldier who helped to liberate the Nazi labor camps at Ahlem. His story was reported by NPR last week. He could not believe the horrendous condition of the survivors that he found at the camp. He took out a little Brownie camera he was carrying with him and photographed a large group of these survivors. When he went home he took those photographs, stuffed them into a shoe box, and put the box in the attic. He did not want to see the pictures again. The burden of grief which they elicited was just too painful. It was 50 years later when he pulled the pictures out of the shoe box. He had been contacted by one of the survivors he photographed, a man named Ben Sieradzki. Sieradzki wanted a copy of the picture of him to share with his sons so that they could understand what he had gone through.

Vernon Tott discovered that the photographs which he had tried to bury had the power to heal. This discovery changed his life. He began searching for the other survivors that he photographed. He found 16 of the 40 who were in his photos. He learned that he could serve these people by being their witness. The final years of Vernon Tott's life became a journey of empathy. As we make that journey together we, too, can create a legacy of caring.