



Thoughts on the Journey...

Suanne Gettings—Pastoral Associate — September 29, 2019

At the time, it was the most amazing wedding I had ever attended: Barquisimeto, Venezuela 1995. Being family of the bride, my children were asked to be ring bearer and flower girls in the wedding. Our first

few days in this South American country were busy with wedding preparations, fittings for the girls dresses and my son's tuxedo, helping the bride with errands, and family celebrations leading up to the big day. We stayed with the bride's grandmother in an elegant high rise condo suite that took up an entire floor of the building, complete with marble floors, open-air balconies overlooking the city, large interior spaces impeccably decorated, guest rooms that you never wanted to leave, and maids who tended to our needs. I must say, I was swept in by the luxury of it all.

The lavishness escalated on the day of the wedding. When we arrived at the church, the walkway was lined with candlelight. As I approached the church, a man who was begging close to the entrance, was ushered away. I was so caught up in the moment that I really didn't give him a second thought. After the ceremony we traveled to a venue that looked like something out of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Huge arches lined with chiffon that the night breeze blew in and out. The room was set with large round tables covered with white linen. The centerpieces were tall wrought iron plant stands filled with red roses that overflowed and cascaded down the sides of the structures. China, crystal, and gold place settings were set at each guest's place to accommodate the seven courses that were served throughout the night. Three different Mariachi bands kept the guests dancing until the last guest left at 6:30 a.m.

When the wedding festivities were over, we decided to rent a car and travel through southwest Venezuela concentrating on the Andes Mountains. The extravagance of our first few days in Venezuela was a stark contrast to the poverty that surrounded us wherever we went. A flashback of the beggar at the church the night of the wedding made ruts across my conscience as we traveled through villages where people's homes consisted of piled tires and garbage bags tied to sticks. Hungry children, in tattered clothes, begged wherever we stopped. Clean water was scarce. I couldn't help but think of how many impoverished people the lavish wedding expenditures could have fed. It was my first glimpse at abject poverty and my ignorance to it. During my stay, I learned that Venezuela had virtually no middle class. Less than 2% of the population lived as our wedding hosts lived; but, the vast majority of people living in Venezuela lived in substandard conditions.

In Luke's gospel this week, Jesus had been dealing with the Pharisees who scoffed at his teachings about money, particularly his parable about a dishonest steward. In re-

sponse to their criticism, he tells another parable. In this parable, Jesus is sending the message that man must love God and use money instead of using God and loving money. He uses as examples in his story, the rich man who lives a lavish life in every way and flaunts it shamelessly and Lazarus, an infirmed man covered with sores begging outside the rich man's house. To the rich man, Lazarus is invisible and he has no compassion for his suffering, nor does he help him in any way. Lazarus dies and the angels carry him to the bosom of Abraham. The poor man dies and goes to the netherworld and, from his place of torment, pleads for help from Abraham. Abraham reminded the rich man that he received good things throughout his life on earth and Lazarus suffered greatly. The rich man then pleads that Lazarus be allowed to go and warn his brothers so they do not have to suffer for eternity. Abraham, denies his request and says,

"If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead."

The Pharisees were familiar with Moses and the prophets, they witnessed first-hand Jesus raise the dead, they saw his countless miracles, and still they are not convinced. The point of the parable? The rich man isn't in hell because he was rich, any more than Lazarus was in heaven because he was poor. The rich man was in hell because he didn't listen to the word of God, and Lazarus was enjoying eternal life because he listened to the Word and never stopped trusting in God.

Once we truly listen to the Word of God and embrace the message, conversion should begin taking place. We should be transformed by what we know and change our stubborn, self-indulgent, self-centered thinking. When we take the Word of God to heart, we begin to see what once was invisible, becoming acutely aware of the world around us. The more we let Christ take root in our hearts, the less appealing a lavish lifestyle becomes and the more we crave to be vessels of hope and healing, compassion and mercy.

Now and again, I think of the old man begging by the steps of the church on the evening of that lavish wedding in Venezuela. I also think of the other missed opportunities to serve God's people because I was too lazy, too selfish, or too absorbed with my own life - creating, at times, a blindness of convenience. We can't go back and undo what didn't do to begin with. The cumulative void of ignoring God's Word will one day call for an accounting. On which side of the great chasm will we be standing?