

Story, Scripture & reflection questions for worship on February 28th, 2021.

For February 28th worship, you will need to be familiar with the fictional story I have written below. We will have a sermon/study time in worship that uses this story (which is based upon real situations that real young people have found themselves in), and the scripture. Please read carefully, and answer the reflection questions so that you can be prepared to participate next Sunday.

Two Guys in the Attic

- by Janaki Bandara

Treeseey and Joe had been best friends since high school ... well, since before the end of high school anyway. They never did finish high school; left early 'cause they couldn't deal with the bullying. Went on to do their GED's so that they could find work and keep it. So that they could move out of their parents homes, out from under a variety-pack of abuses, to find a life that felt like life.

They both went on to get vocational training: Treeseey had his in auto mechanics. Joe got his in hospitality. Joe got a job with his fancy hospitality diploma working at Tim Hortons minimum-wage. The only advantage Joe had over his non-college trained coworkers was his student loan.

Treeseey had a connection through his brother, so he was able to get a job at a mechanic shop... One of those independents run by an immigrant whose English wasn't good but who knew the language of any vehicle's engine like a multilingual translator. He could speak any make, any year, any model!

They both finished schooling and started working around the same time, so the two first paycheques put together made enough for first and last month's rent on a tiny apartment. They moved out of their family homes (if they could be called that) with a few bags of clothes. Picked out their furniture from the St. Vincent De Paul store on Dundas and the Redemption Prison Ministry store down by Water Street.

It was neat to see how much good stuff made its way to the thrift stores. Recycling at its best.

Little by little their little studio began to look like a real home. They said Tuesday is a spaghetti night and Sunday was roast beef dinner. Gave them the sense of family that they always longed for as children, something neither one of them got in their homes, where their parents were, for all kinds of reasons, emotionally and otherwise unavailable. Their lives settled into a rhythm, and the security that comes with that rhythm.

Here and there, they would run into their classmates from the last few years of high school and the bullying still continued. They'd have to endure the teasing that came of the assumption that they were gay, when all they were was cemented in the friendship that got built around common family dysfunction and the shared need to be independent. Contrary to the other's beliefs, the boys weren't "a couple". But modern-day bullies aren't so much interested in the truth as they are in the entertainment value of whatever brings the most likes and OMG's and shares and follows. It was this ruthless hunger to fill the hungry ghost of virtual likes and friendship that made the modern-day bully so much more dangerous than the old fashioned, steal-your-lunch-money kind.

Because fame and being liked had become a well of infinite depth. The bottomless nature of that well makes the modern day bully insatiable, whereas the old fashioned bully could be satisfied with your lunch money, some name-calling or a shiner. It was the hunger of modern-day bullies like this that drove Treeseey and Joe away from organized education.

Both boys dated. In between and around their jobs. Treesey settled down pretty quickly with the one steady girl... Steady in that they remained together but all the steadiness in their relationship really came from Treesey. He was the one who kept the job, made sure food was on the table, made sure there was money for their share of the rent.

Treesey somehow pictured a life with his girl in which they would make a family and he would be the dad and she would be the mom. The kind of family he always wished for, the Tuesday-spaghetti-Sunday-Roast-Beef kind of family. Somehow her lack of interest in taking responsibility before they had kids didn't hinder Treesey from imagining that she would suddenly become the partner of his dreams when a child came along. But none did. Maybe that was a good thing.

Joe on the other hand had many girlfriends, sometimes dating two or three at the same time in between spaghetti night on Tuesdays and roast beef night on Sundays. He almost seemed to be collecting the experience of being in love for the first time each time. Although he wasn't ready to settle down with any of them; he had his share of pregnancy scares and it seemed just a matter of time before he would be named somebody's baby daddy.

Why the planets aligned so that both boys lost steady paying jobs within weeks of each other, nobody could tell. Furthermore, nobody knew what ironic planetary alignment or misalignment lead to their eviction just days before the COVID lockdown in March 2020.

They had managed to take the most valuable of their gathered-up belongings and store them in Joe's car. A temporary measure, which allowed them to couch surf for a while, under the pretense of visiting with loved ones during lockdown. Nothing like all this unemployed down time to get caught up with the people you love the most but had gotten too busy to visit with regularly. At first the couch surfing hosts were happy to have them over.

But as COVID infection rates increased, the hospitality of friends and family decreased proportionally. Soon Treesey and Joe found themselves with no more couches left to surf. The waters of the hospitality of loved ones had grown still and flat, offering no more free rides on the couches that stood between the boys and the stark reality of being homeless and income less.

They went to the Bridges, figuring they were together, they had gotten through way worse than this. Surely they could get through this too, especially if they had the freedom to bunk together. Treesey would take the top bunk so Joe, who was afraid of heights, could take the bottom bunk. They would have each other's back again with a roof over their heads until the stupid pandemic passed.

But as it turned out, there was no room in the inn.

They are smart boys. They sign up for Ontario Works, making arrangements for delivery through one of Joe's coworkers. Former co-workers to be more accurate. And they had the foresight to line this up as soon as they lost their jobs. So that trickle of money began around the time the couch surfing ocean went flat. But OW and market value rent are worlds apart. There was no way to live off of OW without a roof over their heads that would allow them to save the first and last months rent needed in this rental economy to put a roof over their heads. Catch-22.

Joe had an idea. Over in west Galt was a neighbourhood full of huge houses. The streets had those old-fashioned globe streetlights, cleverly outfitted by science and technology with energy conserving lightbulbs which allowed the old fashioned look to prevail with modern technological efficiency. Interesting how science could find economy for streetlights, but not economy for the housing crisis.

Joe and Treesey could observe these houses by parking in the lane ways that ran behind the houses. You see, these huge houses were a throwback from the era in which guests entered at the front and help and deliveries were made at the back. All the backs of all these grand houses opened onto these narrow lane ways where parking spaces held cars and fancy garages held the toys of the wealthy. Where wooden fences protected those enjoying a barbeque or a sun bath or splash in the pool from the prying eyes of the homeless or the wandering walkers with dogs on leashes who would use these laneways as a way of being outdoors, whilst escaping the rush of busy streets.

By taking an obviously unused parking space in the laneway, ducking low and trusting in the privacy provided by Joe's tinted car windows, they could sit in the car and observe the patterns of coming and going of the people who lived on these picturesque streets. By so doing, they identified one household where the light never came on in the attic window, and the two adult occupants a man and a woman, supposedly husband and wife, drove off each day in the morning in their European imports, usually returning after dusk, often with telltale takeout food packages describing in the blue bin the dominant pattern of their diet: Bombay Sizzler twice a month, Pizza Hut every week usually Fridays, Sushi to get them over hump day every Wednesday night and an assortment of plastic containers with premier salads from the premier grocery stores where Treesey and Joe never shopped: Farm Boy and Sobeys and Zehrs. Because people need to eat their vegetables to stay healthy, you see.

The boys knew what their diet consist consisted of because, on garbage night, the husband or boyfriend or roommate - whatever he was - would like clockwork put all the bins out on their laneway. The following night like clockwork he would gather them back in, into the garage which housed the bins and expensive seasonal toys like the skidoo which got pulled out maybe three times in the winter, or the Jetski which followed them to the cottage like a pet staying there for the full duration of summer.

But what was really of interest to the boys was that lightless attic windows. When they were confident that they had established the pattern of the couple, they took their chance trying all the doors and windows on an early spring day after the couple had left for work. The back screen door had been left unlocked. Through it they got in and were super careful to make sure that their soft soled running shoes did not leave any trace of their entry into the house. The first thing they did was wash their hands with soap and water, practicing good COVID safety protocols even in this borrowed home.

They looked through the fridge and the pantry taking things, being careful, only to take what would not be missed. It was not hard to do – there was so much food. They took their meals and went up, finding their way into the attic. Once there, they looked around to find a plug point for their ubiquitous cell phones and to find two places where they could sleep undiscovered if someone were to suddenly enter the scarce-used but warm and sheltered space.

Once food and bedding were secured, Treesey went to have a shower, while Joe looked high and low to find the Internet hub and password so that they would not have to use their precious prepaid dollars to access Internet on their phones. It did not take Joe long to find what he was looking for, and by the time Treesey came out of the shower all pink and fresh looking, his phone was already programmed for access.

While Joe took his turn in the shower, Treesey gathered up the clothes they had left in the car that needed to be washed, so that by the time Joe emerged, he too all pink and fresh looking from his hot shower, they could put the borrowed towels, the loaner face cloths as well as their clothes that needed laundering into the washer and dryer.

In a matter of hours they had eaten and showered, done the exploring necessary to know what gifts this home could give them, what they could use without the owners ever even knowing what they had supplied to two complete other adult human beings from the sheer abundance of their own lives. Well in advance of the couples' usual return time, the boys retired to their new abode, safe and snug as two bugs in a rug, happy for the shelter over their heads, the food in their tummies, the warmth that was kissing them goodnight, and the freedom to stretch out in sleep: all things they had missed dearly during their weeks of sleeping in the car.

Spring gave way to summer. The couple who lived in the house must have had stressful jobs and good leave packages. By the time Canada day rolled around, winter clothes had been stashed at the edges of the attic; clothing and bedding and coolers and inflatable beach toys were packed as the couple began enjoying that season of cottage time that is the pleasure of those who have more than one home.

Their home in west Galt provided shelter for Treesey and Joe for the whole summer. It was a little more costly for Treesey and Joe to live there in the summer, because their pantry and fridge were not replenished as regularly, since the couple spent most of the summer at the cottage. The upside was that they had more of the house to themselves. They had to be careful that they gave no signal to the neighbours of the equally big houses that were adjacent to their new address, for the residents of those houses who didn't go to cottages for the whole summer had the part-time job of watching the house now occupied by Treesey and Joe, unbeknownst to anyone except Treesey and Joe themselves.

When there is no room in the inn, no affordable housing on the market, what else were these boys to do?

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Luke 19:1-10

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?"

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost." [The Message Translation]

Questions for Reflection:

1. In the story when you hear the line "there was no room in the inn" what does it remind you of?
2. How do you feel about the actions of Treesey and Joe? Do you think they were justified? What would you have done? Can you even imagine being in their circumstances?
3. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way. Is there anything in the way of your seeing Jesus in the story of the boys in the attic? What might be crowding your view?
4. Is there a tree you can climb to gain sight of Jesus in the story of the boys in the attic? What might that tree be?
5. Jesus greeted Zacchaeus with great friendship, even though he was known as an unfair tax collector. Do you believe Jesus greets you with great friendship despite your biases and judgments against others?
6. What does it mean to you when Jesus says "Today is my day to be a guest in your home"? How does it feel when Jesus invites himself in?