

“Goldilocks and the Three Church Members”
July 2, 2006

Exodus 16:13-21
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named “Goldilocks.” Goldilocks was an especially curious girl, and she would often ask the grown-ups in her life all sorts of questions. She would ask her parents questions like, “Why is the sky blue?” and “Why do dogs and cats have fur?” She would ask her teachers, “Why don’t we recite the alphabet from Z to A, instead of from A to Z?” or, when she learned that many children throughout the world aren’t able to go to school, she would ask, “Why can’t those children own come to our school?” She would ask her minister, “If God loves everyone, why do some people have no home to live in, and why doesn’t everyone have enough to eat?” And she would ask anyone she thought might know, “Why are people so mean to each other sometimes?”

Everyone who knew Goldilocks knew that she might ask them a question that would seem impossible to answer. As a result, every now and then, some grown-ups would try to avoid her, walking on the other side of the street or staying on the other side of the room when they saw her. Most times, though, everyone listened to Goldilocks’ questions and tried to answer them. When they didn’t know the answer and told her so, she would simply nod her head and then go along her way.

Then, one beautiful spring day, when she was visiting her grandparents, she told her grandfather that she wanted to walk around town and see what people were doing on such a sunny, warm day. Her grandfather thought she was still too young to do that by herself, so he said, “That sounds like fun! May I go with you?”

Now Goldilocks loved her grandfather – and her grandmother – very, very much, so she wanted her grandfather to have fun, too. But she was feeling very curious that day, and she thought she might have many questions to ask. She remembered the last time she had visited her grandparents and how the grown-ups seemed to pay less attention to her questions when her grandparents were nearby than they did when her grandparents couldn’t hear what she was asking. So Goldilocks thought and thought.

Finally, she said, “Grandpa, you can come, but would you let me talk to people by myself?”

“By yourself, my dear one?”

“Yes, Grandpa. That way, you can have fun, and I can have fun, and we’ll have fun with different people. If we do that, when we get home we can tell each other all about what happened on our walks around town.”

Grandpa nodded and smiled. “All right, Goldilocks, we’ll go out together, and we’ll make sure we can always see each other. But when you stop to talk with anyone, I’ll stay out of the way. Will that work?”

“Oh, yes, Grandpa! But don’t forget, while you’re staying out of the way, you’re supposed to be having fun, too. I want us both to have a good time!”

“I’ll do my best, my little one.”

And so Goldilocks and her grandfather left the house and began to stroll around the town. It was a beautiful day. Spring had finally arrived after a long, cold winter, and

most townspeople were outside, spending time in their gardens, washing their cars, bathing their dogs, or simply sitting in the sun, enjoying its warmth. For the first few blocks, Goldilocks and Grandpa held hands and talked about all the flowers that had started to blossom.

Then Goldilocks squeezed her grandfather's hand, looked up at him, and nodded her head. This was their signal, so Grandpa let go of her hand and watched as she walked up to a young man who had just given his dog a bath. The young man smiled at Goldilocks as she walked toward him, but he quickly returned his attention to drying his dog, because the dog seemed to want nothing more than to run around the yard and roll on the dirt.

Goldilocks watched him and the dog for a few moments and then asked, "Why do people bathe their dogs but not their cats?"

The young man answered, "Because cats bathe themselves, but dogs don't. That's why most dogs start to smell kinda bad if they don't get a bath every now and then."

"Then why don't dogs bathe themselves like cats do?"

"You know," the young man said, "I've asked my dog Buster here the same question – 'Why can't you bathe yourself?' He never has answered me, though, so I don't guess I know the answer to your question. It's a good one, though."

Goldilocks looked at the man and his shaggy, wet dog and nodded her head. After waving to her grandfather who was half a block behind her, she continued her walk.

She turned down the very next street, which was Church Street. After making sure that Grandpa could still see her, Goldilocks walked over to the grounds of First Church, where three people, two women and one man, were sitting on a bench, drinking some iced tea. "Good morning!" she said.

All three responded with their own "good mornings." Goldilocks then asked, "What are y'all doing?" (Did I forget to mention that Goldilocks was Southern?)

"We're celebrating!" said the man.

Goldilocks was puzzled. "How can you be celebrating if there's no music and no games and no party hats?"

All three of them chuckled, and the older of the two women explained. "Oh, there are all sorts of ways to celebrate! You can celebrate with cake and games and party hats. You can celebrate with speeches and parades and banquets." Then the woman then looked at her two companions and said, "*And* you can celebrate by sitting quietly on a beautiful day with two of the people God has blessed you with. That's the kind of celebrating we're doing."

Goldilocks thought about this. "Oh, I think I know what you mean. Sometimes I sit on the porch with Grandma or Grandpa, and I'm so happy that I feel even better than I do at parties!"

The younger woman smiled and said, "Yes, that sounds a lot like how I feel today."

Goldilocks smiled back and then looked at First Church itself. It was a simple structure, modest in size and more plain than ornate. She had never looked at the church this closely before, and she decided she liked looking at it.

"Does this church belong to you?" she asked.

All three of them smiled and shook their heads. “No,” the man said, “it doesn’t belong to any of us. It belongs to God. It’s *we* who belong to God ... and to God’s church.”

“That’s true,” said the older woman, “but there’s more to the story of the three of us and this church. Would you like to hear the whole story?” she asked Goldilocks.

“Oh, yes, please,” she replied and promptly sat on the grass next to the bench.

“You see,” said the woman, “I had never seen or heard of this church until a few months ago. I belonged to another church in another town – and I still do. I’ve been a member of that church for a long time. Over the years, I enjoyed the people, and I was glad to be a part of that church. But, in some way, it just didn’t feel ‘right.’ It felt as though something was missing.”

“If it didn’t feel right,” Goldilocks asked, “then why did you stay?”

“That’s a good question! I think somehow I knew that I was supposed to be there, that if I stayed something would happen that would change everything. ... And, guess what, I was right! Something came along and changed so many things that, here I am, on this beautiful day, sitting and celebrating with two people I hadn’t even met until this year.”

“Oooo, tell me what happened!! I mean *please* tell me what happened!”

The older woman laughed and said, “I will! You see, one Sunday morning, I was in church and someone read from a letter that a man named ‘Paul’ had written a long, long time ago. Even though this Paul had written to other people in a city called Corinth, I felt as if he was talking directly to me. And he was talking about whether or not my love for God and for God’s creation was genuine. Do you know what ‘genuine’ means?”

“I, uh, yes ... I think so. Doesn’t it mean that something is real, so that genuine love is about how you show your love and not just about what you say?”

“Oh, my,” said the woman, “yes, you *do* know what it means!! You have so much wisdom for such a young girl!” Hearing this, Goldilocks blushed and grinned simultaneously.

“So I heard Paul asking me about the genuineness of my love. Then he went on in that letter to talk to me about sharing what I have so that there could be fairness and balance between me and other people and between my community and other communities. After that, I didn’t hear anything the preacher or anyone else said that morning. (And, I have to confess, that’s not the only time I haven’t paid any attention to the preacher!)

“I went home after the service. For the next several days, I kept reading and rereading what Paul had said, and I kept thinking about genuine love, sharing, and fairness and balance. And then I knew what to do. I knew I had to share with other people much, much more than I’d ever shared before.”

Goldilocks frowned slightly. “When you were growing up, didn’t your mother tell you how important it is to share what you have with other people? My mother and my grandparents and my teachers – they all tell me it’s important to share, and fun, too. Did your family forget to tell you about that?”

“Well, no, *they* didn’t forget, but I think *I* forgot over time, as I got older and as I actually had *more* to share. You see, I think I got scared, scared that if I didn’t make sure I had everything I needed and wanted, I would be very unhappy and lonely. I think I was scared, too, that somehow I didn’t matter – that I wasn’t important – if I didn’t have lots

of money and lots of things. And, guess what I've found out now that I'm sharing more?"

"Do you feel less important now?" asked Goldilocks, hoping the answer was "No."

"Well," said the woman, "that's the funny thing. I feel less important and more important all at once. I feel less important because I realized that, no matter how much I have, I'm still just one small person on a big planet, but I feel *more* important because I've seen what a difference any of us can make if we try to do what God asks us to do. So I think we're all less important than we think we are in some ways, and we're all far more important to God and to one another than we can even begin to imagine. Does that make sense to you?"

Goldilocks thought for a long time before responding. Finally, she said, "I'm not sure. I'll have to think about that some more."

At this point, the other woman and the man on the bench, who had been listening intently to the older woman's story, looked at one another, smiled, and then nodded their heads. The younger woman then said to Goldilocks, "I have a story, too. Would you like to hear it?"

Goldilocks hesitated, because it was getting late and she needed to help make lunch back at her grandparents' house. "Yes," she said, "I would, but I need to get back to Grandma and Grandpa's house."

"All right," said the younger woman, "I promise to keep my story short."

"You see, I'm a member of *this* church, and I've been worried about it for a long time. I've been worried because we never seemed to have enough money to pay the bills and to do the ministry we'd like to do. One day, I told my mama how worried I was, and she told me I needed to stop worrying and get some faith! I told her, 'But, Mama, I do have faith!' 'Well, then,' she said to me, 'you better start remembering that faith and quit worrying. Don't you remember the story of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness? Don't you remember that God provided all those people with bread from heaven – they called it *manna*. God told everyone to gather enough manna every morning for what they and their family would need for that day. Now some people had so many folks in their families that they couldn't gather enough manna before it all melted in the sun. So those people were worried like you're worrying about your church. But you remember, don't you, what happened, day after day?' I said, 'Yes, Mama, I remember.' She said, 'Good, then you remember that even though some people weren't able to gather enough manna on their own, they still had enough to feed every last man, woman, and child in their families, because God provided them with enough. Daughter, you know that your worrying isn't going to bring any manna into your church; it's God who'll bring the bread you need. Trust in God!'

"So I took my mother's advice. I tried to quit worrying and to trust God more. And while I was trying to do that, this man sitting here next to me, came to my church and said God had sent him."

The man on the bench laughed. "I don't remember saying that God had sent me. I remember saying that I *thought* God had sent me!"

“Well, yes,” said the younger woman, “but you were pretty confident about that.”

“Yes,” he said, “I was. I was confident.” Looking at Goldilocks, the man asked, “Would you like to hear how I got to be here in this bench with these two women? I promise to keep my part of the story short, too.”

“I’d like to hear it, but it’s getting awfully late.”

“OK,” he said, “I’ll make it quick. I’m the one who introduced these two women to one another. Through some friends of mine who knew them, I heard about their feeling touched by God to do something different in their lives. This woman, to share who she is and what she has more generously, and this woman, to have more faith that, despite appearances, God would provide enough support for her church and its ministry. So all I did was invite the two of them to my house one Saturday morning. I fed them breakfast, and then let God take care of the rest. And God has taken care. God has brought these two women and these two churches together, so, just like Paul wrote long ago, they are all sharing the abundance they have to meet the needs that they have. And what they’ve found is that, together, they can get closer to that ‘fair balance’ that Paul wrote about. So that no one has too much, and no one has too little. With God’s guidance and help, we really can reach the point where it’s all just right.”

During the man’s part of the story, Goldilocks’ grandfather had come over and joined her next to the bench. When the man had said, “Just right,” Grandpa took Goldilocks’ hand and whispered, “We need to leave, my dear one.”

Goldilocks nodded to the three people on the bench, thanked them for sharing their stories, and headed for home with her grandfather. They walked in silence until they were nearly home. Then, Goldilocks stopped walking and turned to look at her grandfather. “Grandpa,” she said, “do you believe what that man said? Is it really possible that everyone could have enough? Enough love, enough food, enough of everything we need?”

Grandpa took a deep breath and said, “Yes, my precious one, I do believe it. I don’t know how it’s possible, but I trust that God is at work in every single one of us, trying to make that dream come true. Not too much, not too little, but just right.”

With tears in their eyes and hope in their hearts, Goldilocks and Grandpa climbed the steps into the house, still holding hands.

Amen.

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