

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Matthew 25: Visiting the Prisoner
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September 1, 2019

Genesis 39:19-23; Matthew 25:31-46

This week we conclude our series on Matthew 25 and our focus is on visiting the prisoner. By now this scripture should be very familiar to you. As we hear it yet again this morning, I invite you to close your eyes while I read it and listen for God speaking to you. These words are Jesus' last discourse before the final days of his earthly life. In today's scripture, the image of Jesus shifts from shepherd to king, and we are reminded that no power can match the power of the reigning Lord. And we are reminded that loving God and loving others as oneself is set forth as the linchpin for life in God.

I think we'll all agree that Joseph, in our reading from Genesis, is a good man. And while God's sovereignty and God keeping God's promises are key points in Joseph's story ... we can imagine ourselves visiting Joseph in prison. Because Joseph is a good man, and a sympathetic character. And as our scripture from Matthew talks about giving food to the hungry, giving something to drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, giving clothing to the naked, and taking care of the sick... we can pretty-well wrap our heads around that, at least from a distance.

But what about the person who is hungry because they spent all their food money on booze? What about the person who is naked because they gambled away their clothes? What about the person who is a stranger because they were kicked out of their home? What about the person who is sick from using dirty needles? It becomes a little more challenging. And what about the person who is in prison? Often, when we think of prisoners in the Bible, we are sympathetic toward them. We think of Joseph, Samson, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul. We think of those who were imprisoned for their boldness of faith and speaking truth to power.

But today, in the United States, that is not why people are in prison. People are in prison for committing crimes, and most of them are guilty. Some of the crimes seem rather petty by comparison, and some are quite ugly. Some of the prisoners seem rather sympathetic, and some are not very nice people. If the United States' prison population were a city, it would be the 5th largest city in our country.¹ But rarely, if ever, do we think about prisons or prisoners unless we know someone who is incarcerated. Yet despite prisoners being shut away from the world, God does not want those in prison to be forgotten. God forgets no one, and so we are to forget no one. We are all God's children. And God loves all of God's children. Today I really want to push us... because I need to push myself. Those in prison are part of the needy.

Forty-three years ago, my life changed dramatically. One evening I had a 7-hour conversation with a man I knew slightly but liked, and it left me feeling uneasy about his current mental state. The next day, he committed a serious crime, called the police to report himself, and has been incarcerated ever since. Obviously, I became a key witness in his trial. I was only 23 at the time, and I was not prepared for how this shook my world. When I went to check on him, I learned that not one person had reached out to this man.

Not his friends, and not his family. And so, I made a promise that this man would not be forgotten. It was the first time I really felt God calling me to something.

I visited him every week in jail for a year until he was sent to prison ... and then I wrote him regularly and visited him as often as I was able. I learned that we are all fragile ... that we all have a breaking point ... and that some people have absolutely no one to offer them a bit of compassion. And I was reminded again that we are all, indeed, God's children. As the years go by, my friend has shared in my meeting my husband, having a family, going to seminary and being called to this church. He knows of my passion for ministering with people with disabilities, and he will sometimes send me articles on the subject. And I remain his only link to the outside world.

Today's scripture is a reminder to me that in the past few years, I have not been very faithful in keeping the promise I made ... and I am the worse for it. **Loving those who are undervalued is not only a key expression of our love of God ... it is a vital demonstration of God's love for us.** We cannot understand God's love for us if we don't continue to share it with others. And we do it with "real-life, this-world" deeds. And sometimes those deeds can be as simple as writing a short note.

Our daughter, Katie, is opposed to the death penalty. And so, she went to Michigan Law School and now works as a federal attorney whose only clients are on death row. Her goal is to have the death penalty removed, case by case. Let's be honest, she serves those whom society considers the "least of the least." I have to say, I am very proud of the work she does. Though I am not exactly thrilled with some of the circumstances ... she is following her passion and her beliefs. But even more than that, I am proud that she sees beyond the crime committed and seeks to know the person she is representing.

While still in school, Katie did an internship in New Orleans, and lived in Sister Helen Prejean's office. You may remember Sister Helen as the nun portrayed in the movie, "Dead Man Walking." One of my favorite quotes by Sister Helen is, "**We are not the worst moments of our lives.**" That is how our daughter relates to her clients, and I believe that is exactly how Jesus is directing us to live and reach out to others.

I've said it here before: We are not commanded to like each other. We are commanded to love each other. Each and every one of us is a child of God. And we are called to see Christ in the other ... and let the other see Christ in us. That is what Matthew 25 is about ... and this passage offers relief from the pressure of having to have all the answers before being able to act. When you serve the needy, you are doing it unto Christ. And you see the Christ in them. And they see the Christ in you. And that includes those in prison. Just ask Jesus.

¹ CNN, April 21, 2019

(To learn a bit about prison ministry, visit: crossroad.org or prisonfellowship.org)