

Year A Christ the King
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46
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Last Monday, a young man came to the door of the Harold House, where our church offices are. I happened to be the one to go to the door. At first glance he looked like a rather menacing character. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and his arms were covered with tattoos of various dark and ominous images. But his face told a different story. He had a warm smile, and his eyes were kind. He told me he had just walked a mile from the hospital where his mother was about to have surgery and he was looking for a place to pray. I invited him in to the prayer room where he told me his story.

When he was much younger, he had been pulled into a gang where he had started using drugs and become involved in things he would never have done on his own—essentially living a life of crime. He eventually ended up in prison, and while serving a two-year term he came to know the Lord through someone who came to the prison to share the message of the gospel. It changed the course of his life. When he was released, he made a fresh start in a new place and with a very different outlook on life. He is now continuing to live drug-free, happily married, and on fire for the Lord. His deepest desire is to tell other young people about the freedom he found in the saving grace and love of Jesus Christ. He longs to tell them there is another way, apart from the gangs, the violence, the drugs and the crime, where they can find true love and acceptance, and the peace

and contentment that eludes them. He longs to tell them that in Christ they have a future and a hope, that Jesus can make them whole and take away the pain that eats away at them inside.

Pointing to his tattoos, he explained that he could have had them removed, but he felt they bore witness to the life he had come from. They give him credibility in talking to those who are still trapped in that lifestyle; so they will know he speaks as one who understands. They also demonstrate to those not in that life, how far he had fallen and what a dramatic change of life he had experienced. They were part of his story of coming to Christ so the tattoos would stay. He was in no way defensive about this—rather he was celebrating the way the Lord had essentially illustrated his witness. Now, every time someone asks about his tattoos, it's an invitation to bear witness to the transforming power of the Lord. Although I must admit he hadn't waited for me to ask!

After we prayed together for his mother's surgery and gave thanks for all the Lord had done in his life and would do through his witness, he left to go back to the hospital to wait for his mother. I gave him my email and hope to hear from him again to learn more about his story and help him to find the opportunity to share it with others.

The reason I share this story with you today is to show you what can happen because one person gave of his or her time to go to a prison regularly to bring the good

news of Jesus Christ. I don't know if they did a Bible Study or just went to visit with those in prison and share the message of the gospel. The point is that God used their faithfulness to advance the kingdom of heaven. One person whose life had been overcome by evil was saved and restored to a life of wholeness, and the joy of living for Christ.

It's only in retrospect of his visit that I found myself wishing I could know more about the details of his story. But I do know that because of one person's faithful prison ministry, this young man's life was changed so dramatically, that it is now his heart's desire to be an instrument of change for good in this lost and hurting world. God only knows how many people will have their lives transformed through the saving love of Christ, and come to live in the kingdom of God, because of that initial faithfulness of just one person. The multiplication effect continues to grow exponentially by each person's response in faithfulness as this young man goes out to tell his story and those who hear him are transformed in Christ and tell their story. God is the one who brings about the change in a person's life. But he uses our small acts of faithfulness to accomplish these great things that have an impact beyond our imagining. It all starts with that seed of faithful obedience to the call of Christ to respond to the needs of others in His name.

The prominent message in Matthew's gospel is about the establishment of the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ as the King who reigns over that kingdom. The picture in our gospel brings to mind the vision in Daniel 7:13-14 where God, who is referred to in the vision as the Ancient of Days, is seated on the throne. Daniel then says, "In my vision ... there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of

heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." Daniel's vision is outside of time and pictures the establishment of Christ's sovereignty over God's kingdom in heaven and on earth. The picture given by Jesus in this illustration of the day of judgment, is one where Christ is on the throne pronouncing judgement over those who have come before him. The image of flocks the disciples, who were his audience, would have pictured, was a mixture of sheep and goats. Unlike the fluffy white sheep of Europe, the middle eastern sheep looked very much like the goats. They lived and grazed intermingled with one another and were very difficult to tell apart without examining them more closely. The only time they were separated was when it was time for the sheering of the sheep.

The list of criteria for being declared righteous was given by Jesus 4 times in the telling of this prophetic parable. Repetition in scripture is a way of saying, "Pay attention, this is important!" "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." This list brings to mind the words in Isaiah 58:7-9. Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will

quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help and he will say: Here am I.” The call is to live like Jesus and to create a community of believers that live out the principles of love and compassion that are characteristic of the Kingdom of God. We are to live as if we are in heaven while we are still on earth as if we are preparing to live there for that is our true citizenship as believers.

Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry literally, but his greater purpose was to bring people into a relationship with God so that they might live under the principles and reality of the Kingdom of Heaven. We can't tell someone about the love of Jesus to fill their inner, spiritual hunger until we have fed their hungry belly. They will be too distracted by their physical hunger to be able to receive the greater gift. They will feel like empty platitudes overwhelmed by their immediate need. But to stop at feeding their physical hunger without addressing their hunger for God is meet a temporal need and fail to address an eternal one.

That young man had been removed from the dangers of the life he was living addicted to drugs and living a life of violence only temporarily by sending him to prison- which is often taking him out of the frying pan and throwing him into the fire. What altered his course was an encounter with Jesus Christ. It was the change in the inner man that saved him from whatever he faced in prison and that set him on a different course for when he got out. He moved to a different location where he was no longer around the people he had known before who would try to pull him back in, and he started again fresh.

The story of the day of judgement is not a call to put a band aid on the problem but to change lives. This is the transformation that Paul is speaking of when he writes to the Ephesians. He calls them to live lives that demonstrate the transforming love of Christ as a witness that will lead to the transformation of others for the glory of God.

Reading from the Passion translation in verses 17-19:

“I pray that the Father of glory, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, would impart to you the riches of the Spirit of wisdom and the Spirit of revelation to know him through your deepening intimacy with him. I pray that the light of God will illumine the eyes of your imagination flooding you with light, until you experience the full revelation of the hope of his calling—that is the wealth of God's glorious revelation that he finds in us, his holy ones! I pray that you will continually experience the immeasurable greatness of God's power made available to you through faith. Then your lives will be an advertisement of this immense power as it works through you! This is the mighty power that was released when God raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to the place of highest honor and supreme authority.”

This is the kingdom living we are called to be participating in and the power at work in us when we are faithful. These simple acts of faithfulness and mercy aren't dependent on wealth, or some unique ability or exceptional intelligence. They simply require a heart of compassion and a willingness to bear witness to the hope and faith that is within us. But in the hands of the one who is the King of the universe and God of Glory, these simple acts are used to accomplish great things.

Amen