



Thoughts on the Journey...

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The first time I brought volunteer work into Southeastern Correctional facility for inmates to do, I clearly remember the sound of the gate slamming shut. It wasn't the first time I heard a gate close, but it was distinctive in the sense that it was a gate of incarceration. Everything sounds different in a prison: buzzers, metal on metal, intercoms, footsteps and voices echoing in the air in this sterile environment. Prisons were not meant to be warm fuzzy places and I would say they have captured the whole internment motif.

In one of our two hour volunteers sessions, the conversation turned to what the men missed most about being on the 'outside'. I can't recall everything that was mentioned, but there were two things that clearly stuck with me: they missed not being able to see the stars because of the outdoor correctional lighting and they missed the sound of silence. It was comments like these that reminded me that they were human beings that were capable of understanding the gifts that God has given us. *Stars at night and the need for silence* made me realize that God still resided within each of them and that was the very thing that needed to be tapped and fed.

That particular year, I was teaching 5th grade PSR (CCD) classes on Sunday mornings at St. Mary in Lancaster. Thinking of a service project that we could do during Advent, I decided that we could make Christmas cards for the inmates. It was a simple gesture that would teach the children one of the corporal works of mercy. Two thousand cards was quite an undertaking for 5th graders and the limited time we had in class each week. So, I had to streamline the process. I wrote a poem about Christmas and prison and God's love for all, drew a Christmas tree on the front of the card, and made 2000 copies. What did the kids do to help? It was their job to put the adhesive gold star on the top of the tree. It was definitely the finishing touch. We managed to complete our project on time for Christmas and the men received their cards. This is not the end of the Christmas card project adventure. It continues three years later at a Holy Communion service at the prison. Stay tuned for the rest of the story!

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus continues talking to his disciples about the coming of the Son of Man in glory. Jesus stressed the corporal works of mercy as the essentials for inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven.

'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'

Jesus continued by telling his disciples that, at the time of judgement, those who have lived these acts of mercy will reap the joy of eternal life, because '*whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me.*' He went

on further to emphasize, '*what you did not do for one of the least ones, you did not do for me. And these will go off to eternal punishment.*' Jesus made our Christian mission clear.

Sometimes when we hear the corporal works of mercy, we zero in on the works that make us feel most comfortable and avoid the rest. We come up with reasons why we can't engage in efforts to live the love that Jesus calls every one of us to live. Perhaps prison inmates are the most forgotten on the list of corporal works of mercy because, in the minds of many, they are people who are considered the least deserving of God's love - and they are probably the people who need God's love the most. Let's face it, if the love of Jesus is based on who is deserving, we would all be left out in the cold.

Now, the rest of the story...

Three years after the 5th graders made Christmas cards for the inmates, I attended one of the Holy Communion services at the prison chapel. When the service was complete, they had cookies and conversation. One of the inmates approached me and asked, "Mrs. Gettings, do you have a minute?" With this, the gentleman pulled out the Christmas card from his pocket (with a now crinkled star on it) and said to me, "I have carried this card in my pocket every day since I have received it. It's the only Christmas greeting I have ever received. It was the best gift I have ever gotten because it brought me to the Lord." Due to prison protocol, I was not permitted to hug an inmate, but if I could, I would have hugged him as Jesus would have hugged him. This is the poem that was contained in the card:

*Oh star upon the Christmas tree, you symbolize a love
That was wrapped within the Heart of a babe and sent from
heaven above.*

*The light of this love is bright enough to light a darkened soul,
and bring hope to men who are taking steps toward long and
difficult goals.*

*The warmth of this love is warm enough to melt a heart of
steel, to burn its way through prison bars and to help the broken
heal.*

*This love is not reserved for just a chosen few; it's a love that
was specifically brought to this world and personally given to
you.*

*So the star upon this Christmas tree is the symbol of God's
love for man, He calls you now to receive your gift; come take
it while you can. sg*

We never fully know the rippling effects of our actions, but Jesus does. When we follow the Lord and put flesh on God, the Kingdom of God will grow. Our Savior knows when we serve all his people with love, they will come to know him. We who serve will come to know him more deeply, because Jesus will reveal himself in the faces of the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the ill, the thirsty, and the imprisoned. Advent is upon us... make a Christmas card for an inmate as one of your gifts to Christ this year.