

## Pastor Letter: Reaching the Lost (9/11/22)

As I struggled to bring this week's scriptural passages together in one common theme for Sunday's sermon, I was also preparing to lead in some spiritual formational exercises that would spiritually unite the Kairos team that would soon be participating in our semiannual 5-day weekend experience in the Lake Erie Correctional Institute in Conneaut, Ohio. The subject I chose was the title of this week's Pastor's Letter. This theme also fits well with Friday night's spiritual exercises with the Kairos inside team.

During last week's local area ministerium meeting, one pastor was sharing about one of his newest parishioners and her ministry in the county prison. This woman had found Christ in her recent incarceration, began attending their church services once she was released, and had received a personal calling to reach out to other imprisoned women. This woman had experienced the grace, mercy, and love of Christ in her darkest hour and wanted to give other women the same spiritual blessing in their own troubled lives. I have witnessed this same scenario many times during my ministry.

During my first pastorate, a woman from outside of our congregation had led a weekly Bible study for 5-6 women for many years in our Church. After leaving the morning Bible study one day, one of my parishioners stopped by my office for some pastoral counseling. In tears she asked, "Why do I finally understand the Gospel message now that I am dying of cancer?" She had suffered from the disease of Lupus for many years but now she had also developed stage 4 cancer. When I shared this story during her memorial service, her children responded by asking if the woman who led the Bible study in our Church could start a weekly study in their home. This home Christian gathering still meets today. Christ seems to show up in our darkest hours.

All too often we tend to dismiss God in our daily activities as long as we feel we are in control of our self-centered lives. It is only when we encounter earth shattering trials that we really turn to the Lord to help us out of those dark and scary pits of despair. God's judgment may even be the source of those gloomy moments of anguish and hopelessness in order to usher us back into a relationship with our Lord. The prophet, Jeremiah, prophesied about a moment such as this concerning the disobedient nation of Israel, "At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse— a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them," (Jeremiah 4:11-12). This hot wind is a metaphor for an approaching foreign army that will destroy this nation, ransack the Temple, and haul the people away into captivity.

Most 12-Step programs realize that an addict must endure a greater suffering and pain of the results of their addictions before they are willing to endure the anguishing hardships of the recovery process. These programs also realize that it takes a greater power than the addict to be successful in this recovery process. The addict can not accomplish this process all alone. They also receive a human sponsor to help them during their dark hours of temptation. Recovering from human sin is the same process.

The woman who started prison ministry in the local county jail and those men and women in the Kairos Prison Ministry have experienced a personal encounter with the risen Christ, want to share that glorious moment with all those who will listen, and tell especially those who are incarcerated. Like the woman who started the ministry in the county jail, many Kairos volunteers have also spent some time behind prison bars. Those who have been held captive by prison bars as well as those who have known the

shackles of captivating sin make the best messengers for the good news of the Gospel and personal salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The apostle Paul shares with his apprentice in the faith, Timothy, his own personal story of salvation. Paul writes, "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence," (1 Timothy 1:12-13). Paul's introduction into the faith journey was very much different than that of his student, Timothy, but both were led to serve the Kingdom of God.

Paul also describes his prior unscrupulous life in order to provide an example for those sinners who feel they are unworthy of Almighty God's grace, mercy, and love. Paul pens these words, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life," (vv. 15-16).

This is the Christian message that those in prison ministry carry into share with those who are shackled by sin and living behind prison walls, that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost." Those incarcerated individuals are experiencing some of the darkest moments of their lonely and troubled lives. It is truly amazing to witness the miraculous transformation that takes place when a prisoner encounters a forgiven and repented sinner, experiences the reflected light of Christ into their darkness, acknowledges the love of God, accepts the forgiveness of our risen Lord, and embraces the good news of the Gospel message for the first time. Even behind locked prison bars and walls, they feel the love, peace and freedom of Christ.

The prophet Jeremiah, the apostle Paul, the pastor Timothy, and even many of us have experienced the light of Christ, the forgiveness of sin, and the hardship of serving Almighty God. Reaching out to the lost with the message of salvation is not always easy or successful but when those lost souls are restored to the Kingdom of God, there is great rejoicing on earth as well as in heaven.

May Almighty God grant you the courage, opportunity, privilege, and joy of sharing your own experience of our risen Savior and the true Gospel message of salvation with a lost soul this week.

Pastor Larry