

Preacher: Ed T. Bond
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Pilgrim Meditation - July 14, 2019

Scripture: Matthew Chapter 25: verses 35-46

“For 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; naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.

Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give you something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison and come to You?”

Then the King will answer and say to them: “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even to the least of them, you did it to Me”. Thanks be to God.

When I signed up to be a summer lay ‘preacher’---I knew what I wanted to talk about---my experience as a language arts ‘tutor’ in the Massachusetts State Prison system. I didn’t realize it would be so difficult for me to narrow my focus on such a seemingly simple subject.

When I was a volunteer at the Bedford VA Hospital a few years ago --it was pretty straightforward---show up at 8 AM on Sunday, go up on the ward where the long term veterans are housed-- the veterans who suffer from all manner of severe physical and mental illnesses-- and who will live out their remaining days in the hospital---until they pass away.

Many were unable to speak and those who could were sometimes delusional. I would push them in their wheelchairs through the network of tunnels connecting the many buildings all the way to the Chapel...then I would attend the service...and push them back...I think it’s about a mile round trip. It was sad: very little interaction, less conversation and a lot of medication. I felt a need to try and make “more of a contribution” than just pushing wheelchairs...not as a greeter at Lahey Hospital, but in a more challenging environment ...where I could use my experience and the skills learned from my various business positions: not working on creating business plans or promotional programs, but how about basic communication skills, public speaking, reading and writing?

I saw a brief write up in the paper, probably the local Minute Man...and attended a Church service at a UCC church in Concord...a church that had a long history of involvement in volunteer activities at MCI Concord. I heard a very moving sermon related to prison ministry and attended a meeting afterward...I was welcomed and assured that YES I would definitely be a help in assisting inmates who were working to earn their GED certificates...the equivalent of a high school degree. I did nothing immediately...but as I started looking ahead and thinking about ‘not working anymore’...(some people might use the term ‘retiring’) I thought maybe I COULD do some good work in the prison environment.

But really, what was I thinking? Helping criminals, why would I want to do that? Why not be a Big Brother, or help homeless people or mentor young adults starting out on a business career? Individuals in prison were there because they were tried, convicted and sentenced... they had their chances...they could have gone to school, paid attention, worked hard, got a job, right? And did anyone really want my help?

But I decided after I did stop working... to take a big step and make this my "GIVE BACK" project. I attended an orientation at the Concord Library. I went to a second orientation. I read, filled out, and signed a lot of paperwork. The paperwork got lost. I filled it out again, signed it again...I mailed it in again. I learned that in the unlikely event of a hostage taking situation, the policy of the Massachusetts Dept. of Corrections prohibits negotiating for the release of hostages. I filled out a form that advised DOC personnel how long I could be held as a hostage before I would likely require medical attention...I remember checking the "FIVE MINUTES" box.

I was heading into an environment that was totally unfamiliar to me. I wished I had paid more attention and watched a few of the prison movies shown on late night TV. I was more than apprehensive, but I had been assured by other volunteers at the orientation meetings that the risk was worth the reward...not the reward for me...but for someone else ... someone who truly wanted a second chance. Someone who was willing to work to earn a second chance to learn...someone who genuinely wanted to get an education that could help them build a new future.

So I signed on and became a HI SET tutor at the Dept. of Corrections Facility in Shirley MA. (HI SET is the new name for the GED program). You would never know it, but as you head west on Route 2 the Shirley facility is on the right hand side, almost completely shielded by forest...but there are over 1500 men incarcerated there. Our students are black and brown men...African Americans and Hispanics...not a surprise to anyone who has even a minimum of awareness and interest in the many and increasing number of articles and information available regarding the inequities of the United States prison system. The subject of incarceration in the US is getting a lot of attention these days. Partly from a racial discrimination perspective...Blacks make up 13 % of the US population...they are 40% of the incarcerated population. The United States has the largest prison population in the world and since 2002 the highest per-capita incarceration rate. Even so called progressive states like Massachusetts lock up people at higher rates than nearly every other country on earth.

Since I started college back in...X...the date escapes me now...as an English major... and had a background as previously mentioned in developing effective communication skills, as a 'language arts tutor, I am working with students on basic sentence structure, punctuation, vocabulary, reading and writing. I learned very quickly on Day One the challenges I faced, and the challenges my 'students' faced. I had photocopied an article from the Globe and I asked each student in turn to read a paragraph. The first reader read most of the words...but would skip a word...he did this two or three times...and I asked him: "Are you seeing those words OK...you're skipping over some of the words". He looked at me sheepishly and said "Well, when I was in school and trying to read, my teachers said if you see a word you don't know... just skip over it and keep going". Another student in my group then spoke up: "Yeah, me too, if we saw a word we didn't know...we just skipped it". I said "where'd you go to school?" The answers were "Boston and Dorchester". I consulted with Natalie ...(who is a real teacher with a Master's Degree in Education, not a part time/volunteer 'tutor' like me)... could this 'word skipping' be a new vocabulary building strategy employed by the beleaguered Boston School System? She didn't think so.

Another example, one of my students was working in the construction industry in Boston, had a good job, married for ten years, his wife became ill, diagnosed with cancer, passed away. Toward the end of her life, he was given time off to care for her...when he went back to work, he was required to go through the new 'on boarding process' ... new employees and anyone coming back from a 'leave' had to fill out all the typical employment, insurance, W-2 forms etc most companies require. The challenge he faced, even with his long and successful employment history, was that he didn't know how to read and write. He was too embarrassed to go through the process and reveal his lack of education. Instead he didn't go back to work. With the loss of his wife and no income...it was easy, unfortunately for him, too easy, to get

into drugs and then into dealing drugs. Bad decisions, bad choices, dead end choices. Arrested, no previous record, no real income, of course no money for an attorney. Tried, convicted, sentenced, mandatory 5 year sentence. Am I saying he was unjustly convicted? No. He acknowledges his poor decisions, he owns his mistakes. Am I asking if he was provided an equal opportunity to get an education and the chance to become self reliant? I'm just asking the question.

Are these convicts conning me? Maybe they are. Maybe they're trying to play on my sympathies...trying to set me up and take advantage of me later...we were warned about that in the orientations. After all they may be 'students' but they're being tutored while they're inmates in prison. So that's what I doing, Monday and Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 8:30. We call them 'students' but they're convicted criminals serving 1-5, 5-7, 10 year sentences. Like I said...I work on basic sentence structure, spelling, when to indent, how to speak and write in a clear, easy to understand way. How to fill out a job application. How to develop the basic communication skills to get a job and keep a job. How to be more knowledgeable than when you came inside and how to better prepare yourself for life when you're outside and no longer under the 'care' provided by the Dept of Corrections.

I suppose I agree that everyone has the opportunity and the responsibility to 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps'...but it's tough when you don't have any boots or straps. It's tough when you never learned how to read a map, it's tough when you don't know what a comma is used for...and it's really tough when your teacher...your teacher... tells you to 'just skip it'.

In closing I would refer you back to today's scripture...and ask you to ask yourself do YOU have time to put toward helping the 'other'... the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the mentally ill, the immigrant, those imprisoned?

I signed up to help educate people, in a new program in a facility where no program existed. The students come on their own, they don't get any 'good time' credit for attending...they demonstrate to me that they are motivated learners who ---for a lot of reasons---some certainly of their own choosing---never got something every single one of us here has... or is in the process of getting... an education...a first rate education. And I'm pleased to be able to say that along with all of you today, Kim and I have two successfully educated young adults in attendance this morning.

In my time as a tutor in the Shirley facility, I can honestly say that all my students have made progress. I do feel that yes, I am helping to make a difference. But the person who is REALLY getting an education...and a view into a world completely closed off to most of us...is me.

Thank you...and
AMEN