



Homily

By

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Please join me in saying the Prayer for the Gift of the Holy Spirit printed in your bulletin after the Collect. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy his consolations, through Christ our Lord. Amen

Today we are marking Prison Ministry Sunday. Because it is during this Lenten season of repentance and reconciliation, we want to heed the words of Jesus when he said in Matthew, "I was in prison and you came to me ...Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." It can not be more clear. He asks us to forgive others; to love our neighbors – even prisoners -- as we love ourselves. As you know, this is not an easy thing to do. Last year at this time, Val Hymes shared with us her passion for Prison Ministry. This year I've been asked to talk about my experiences with children of prisoners.

Children with parents in prison are "invisible." No government entity is responsible for them. Few police departments record their presence when they come in the middle of the night to handcuff and take away a mommy or a daddy. Mothers and fathers often deny having children because of the fear that they will be taken away from their home. The trauma, the shame, the fear, anxiety, anger and loss, can send them on a spiral of destruction. Statistics show that 70% of these children will have problems in school, the community and will go to prison themselves.

In our first reading in Samuel this morning we heard "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart". This is why since 1995 there have been 21 Episcopal dioceses offering summer camp opportunities to children of prisoners. The goal of Camp Amazing Grace here in Maryland is to provide an oasis of love for children 8 – 12 years old whose parents are incarcerated. Val Hymes and her husband Don created the brochure in your bulletin and a website that provides camp information.

Pat Arey, our Deacon Intern at St James last year, was a chaplain at camp last summer and has accepted the call to be the Camp Director this year. Pat has said, "What we have learned is that these children are diamonds in the rough. All we need to do is polish them and they will sparkle. At times, we saw glimpses of their brilliance. "



Our Rector Bill was our 2006 camp chaplain. He said, "This was one of the toughest ministries I have ever performed. Clearly, I saw the presence of Christ in each of their lives. I believe the seeds have been planted and that their lives will be changed. My concern is that unless, by God's Amazing Grace, something positive happens in their lives, we clergy will be visiting them in prison or officiating at their funerals."

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus healed a man born blind. Jesus brings light into a dark world. The man answered, "one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." And Jesus said: "I am the LIGHT of the world. I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see, may see."

In our 2nd reading of Ephesians, disciples are called to be a people of the light forsaking all the works of darkness. "For once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are LIGHT. Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." Our camp philosophy is to help these children see the light by demonstrating unconditional love to campers who are in a sense blind because they may not have been offered this loving gift by their family, teachers or peers. For many of them, there has never been a gift given without something expected in return. Unconditional love was not always easy because several of our campers used violence as a way to communicate – for the boys it was hitting, for the girls it was very mean words that usually resulted in hitting.

Annie Coble is a 17 year old on the Vestry at St Margarets Parish in Annapolis. She was a first time counselor last year. I want to quote from a heart warming letter she wrote to her parish after camp. "I like to describe camp week as the hardest yet best week of my life. I broke up more fights than I have ever seen, I carried campers around the swimming pool who have never been in a pool before, and I pointed out the Big Dipper to children who have never seen the stars. I also made a difference in more people's lives than I can ever imagine and hopefully I have played a part in changing a life or two for the better." Our own Katie McGlaughlin has been a counselor for 2 years and I expect she will agree with Annie's assessment. These young counselors helped heal some of the spiritual blindness affecting these children.

In Psalm 23 this morning we heard the familiar: Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for YOU are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. As the Camp Director last summer with 29 campers and 46 volunteers at Claggett, I often needed the comfort of God's rod and staff. I definitely agree with Annie that this one was of the hardest and best weeks of my life. The staff volunteers came from parishes all around the diocese for this Grace-filled ministry. One common bond that we had was our growing love and respect for the campers. We thought that the children would be the greatest benefactors of the camp but I know that the staff gained as much as the campers did. The campers opened up, trusted in us and in just one week we became a family and a true community. Annie Coble expressed it well in her letter: "We shared laughter and tears, while the hugs and the fights were constant, the camper's faces often glowed with happiness. Every now and then, one of their hands would slip into mine and I would hold tightly – telling them through my touch, I will be here for you."



One of the primary reasons for the success of this ministry is the gifts of time, talent and treasure from 40 of the 117 parishes in the Diocese. It may seem like this ministry is centered here at St James because there are so many of us involved. In addition to Val and Katie that I already mentioned:

- Sharon McGlaughlin has helped plan and lead camp week for 2 years and last year was the Staff Director.
- Jim Bradner donated shirts for all of the campers and staff both years.
- Liz Rozenbroek and Earl Buffaloe provided music in 2006,
- Our Rector Bill was the chaplain in 2006 and we are hoping he and Pam will be able to experience camp again this summer.
- Melissa Zerbe was the camp nurse in 2007.
- Shay Hall, Judy Coxon and Jeannie Zseltvay helped with camper registration on Sunday,
- Jeannie, Shay, Margie Mack and Yvonne Finne helped create the camp canvas bags.
- Judy and her husband supplied personal care kits for all 30 campers in 2007.
- Jeannie and Ron did a lot of driving around to find the best price for the 30 camper sleeping bags donated by St James and I know this was not an easy task.

When I consider all of the gifts given by members of this congregation, I am humbled.

I have often wondered how I would hear God's Plan for me. I am very goal oriented and passionate about achieving excellence in all that I do. When I take the time to listen, God's Plan is clear. After being at camp in 2006, I realized that this was a ministry that could benefit from my leadership and organizational skills. So when Val asked me to lead the 2007 camp, God gave me a serious nudge in that direction. I am a living example of the saying "What I am is God's gift to me, What I do is my gift to God". In the words of today's hymn, Amazing Grace, "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see. "

Well, sharing my passion for Prison Ministry would not be complete if I didn't talk about Mady, Sevin and Joy. While I was helping with crafts in 2006, I really connected with three 9 year old Baltimore girls. They have very different personalities and family situations but their mothers were all in prison. Since my 2 children are in their late 20s and I am not yet a grandmother, I realized that spending time with these 3 girls would fill my yearning to be around young children and give them another role model. I applied and was accepted as a Big Sister in Baltimore and we now spend time together on monthly outings. Those of you who attend the 9 am service have seen them help me usher when they came to my home for weekend sleepovers.

We have visited several museums together including their very first train and subway rides when I took them from Baltimore by train to DC's Natural History Museum. They LOVED pretending to be commuters on the Metro. Last fall I took them to the Baltimore Maritime Museum in the Inner Harbor. If you have young children or grandchildren, I strongly recommend it. The girls explored, climbed, touched and tried Everything ! Their favorite was definitely the WWII submarine. They really enjoyed the 3 tiered bunk beds with less than a foot of space between them. It was wonderful to watch them behave like carefree children away from their responsibilities and challenges of a home life with their mothers in and out of prison.



Let me paint an image for you: last May I searched the internet and found a Baltimore park where I could take the girls and my dogs for a picnic. Well, we couldn't find the park. After driving around and searching for nearly an hour, we finally decided to have lunch at a church with a lot of grass around its parking lot. We set out our blanket and our picnic lunch. The girls walked the dogs on their leashes being pulled every which way since the dogs wanted to chase rabbits and other neighborhood dogs. Then it started to rain, POURING rain! We ran to my car, I put down the back seats of my Subaru, spread out the checkered table cloth and the girls climbed in to eat their lunch. The dogs and I stood under the lifted rear door trying to stay dry. When we had finished our sandwiches and watermelon, we picked up all the food and two wet 50 pound dogs joined the girls in the back of the car. Yes, you guessed it! After both dogs had a big shake, Everything smelled like wet dog! When I drove Mady home that afternoon, she said: "Miss Linda, I will remember this picnic FOREVER!" Amazing, we overcame several challenges and yet we had a wonderful time. I don't think I will ever forget this picnic either. I am giving these girls problem solving skills, life lessons, and a vision of a different way of life. They are giving me wonderful memories.

Mady and Sevin are very bright and I can help them be the first members of their family to go to college. This is something they may not have the opportunity to do without my support and encouragement. I have come to know their guardians and siblings and feel like I am part of their extended family. My daily prayers include a request that God's light will continue to shine through me when I am with these girls.

I want to close with another quote from Annie's letter. Needless to say, it touched me deeply. Annie expresses God's impact on this ministry better than I can. "God helped these children grow and change into something they can be proud of. I know this because I saw it. God was able to give these campers confidence and strength so they could swim for the first time and play well together. These abilities and skills are something the children are proud of, I know because of their smiles. The chance to feel proud of themselves is something we wanted to give these children, not just an oasis of love, and I know God helps us do just that."

Please pray for our campers, their families and the many volunteers from parishes all around the diocese who come together to share their time, talent and treasure in this most Amazing ministry.

My cup runneth over!

Amen.