

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:35-40

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, 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.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Being the Church Administrator for LTUMC, I have a unique advantage of reading the scripture readings and liturgy for the upcoming Sunday service. I try hard not to read them prior to the service so I may fully participate on Sunday mornings. This Sunday is Easter Sunday and I won't spoil anything for you but Marcus asked me if I would give my input. I couldn't say "no" to Marcus. Instead of my nightly devotional and prayer time I prayed for an open mind and fresh eyes while I was tired. In reading the Benediction (Unison) for this Sunday, I felt God nudging me to write a devotional about Rick.

While in Dallas, I worked for a large software company and Rick was a teammate who transferred from Seattle to Dallas. We became fast friends as we were always sharing what we learned with fellow teammates. Rick had remarried and had a blended family. He was always tired and often took a nap under his desk over his lunch hour. He was across from my desk so I knew not to disturb him. One day, Rick was at his desk in the morning but did not take his nap over lunch. He returned with a Dallas police officer to get his wallet and no words were exchanged. My heart sank as I knew this could not be good.

About two or three days passed and another co-worker reached out to me saying Rick had turned himself in for an unimaginable crime. I could not

believe it! I immediately judged him and felt betrayed. How could he have done the crime he did?! He went to trial and was convicted and was given a very long sentence. I quickly went from being great work friends to a strained and untrusting relationship. It took me about two months to come around and stop judging him. I often prayed but was still bitter. Finally, God nudged me to read Matthew 25:35-40. I did and immediately felt guilty for judging Rick. Who was I to be the judge and jury for Rick? That's God's job. I asked God for forgiveness and to put myself in Rick's shoes.

I asked my coworker for Rick's address in prison. She gave it to me and I witnessed her walking away from her friendship with Rick. I wrote Rick and I apologized for abandoning & judging him at his lowest point. Our friendship grew through letters as his family, friends and co-worker abandoned him. He asked if I would come visit him in prison and I shook all over. Here I thought I was doing what I could but God had more in store for me.

Rick put me on his visitation list and I got the courage to go visit him; a 2+ hour drive away from Dallas. I waited in a long car line to have my car inspected, then to park and to get in another long line to be checked in. I will never forget the first time I was buzzed through the barbed wire gates. The sound of the slammed gates behind me is one I can still hear and it has been five years since I last saw Rick. Gulp! I felt trapped, scared and alone not knowing what to do. I made my way across the yard in the Texas summer heat lifting my heavy feet. God, are you sure I'm supposed to be here? I remember asking. Another nudge and up the stairs I climbed to take off my shoes, belt etc. and a pat down. This was worse than going through a TSA line at the airport. I had to hand over my driver's license and they kept it during the visit. Gulp! Now I was really scared – no driver's license?! I was instructed to a numbered slot and waited forty-five minutes for Rick to show up. His hair was shaved to a military style cut and he looked emaciated. Thank goodness for my roll of quarters where I

purchased snacks at the vending machine. The snacks were poured out into bowls for him. Our 2-hour visit FLEW by!

Over the years, Rick saw me date and get married and even welcomed Matt to go visit him. Matt soon came along and I remember his first time going through the same gates and being slammed shut with the fear of the unknown on his face. Our letter writing, phone calls and visits increased. Due to Rick's good behavior, he was able to have contact visits which meant we could give him a hug at the beginning and end of the visit.

Sometimes we take for granted what a hug can do for someone. We watched Rick go from a bitter person to a child of Jesus Christ. We were honored and proud to attend his graduation from a master's program in theology. We send him some food through the commissary when we can and we are always thanked immediately. This is a friendship of 24 years and growing. Matt and I get excited when we get a letter from Rick. We know he does not have a lot of contact to the outside world and we pray for him often. We just got a thank you letter yesterday.

PRAYER: Gracious Jesus, thank you for opening our hearts to be compassionate to Rick at his lowest time and to sing his praises for turning to you. Thank you for the gift of forgiveness which allows us to give without judging and to walk in someone else's shoes. Thank you for dying and rising again for us. Amen!

~ Submitted by Saunders Grommesh for the Thirty-Sixth Reading of Lent.