

## HOW DO YOU GIVE A CUP OF COLD WATER WHEN THE WATER WORKS HAS BROKEN DOWN?

Matthew 25: 31-46

Mathew sets this parable at the last judgment. All the nations are gathered before Jesus, the Human One, to receive the verdict that will determine their eternal destinies. They will be sorted out just like a shepherd sorts out the sheep from the goats, sheep on the right and goats on the left. There's a lot of bleating and baaing confusion as these mingled critters untangle themselves and stumble into their designated queues. Their cacophonous confusion is compounded when the King announces to the sheep, "You sheep are the blessed ones—brothers and sisters you are on your way to glory! And here's why..." Then the King reels off a recital of compassionate deeds—a recital well known to us after 2,000 years, but shocking to those sheep. The King recites the times they were compassionate to Jesus in his times of deep distress. These shocked sheep protest, "Master, what are you talking about? We never saw you in distress!" Now Matthew delivers the parable's punch line, "Oh yes you did! Whenever you were compassionate to the brothers and sisters who were forsaken and forgotten—you did it to me."

So--all you sheep gathered here for worship, you get Matthew's punch line. You're here because you know in your souls that a cup of cold water given to the thirsty is a cup of cold water given to Jesus. You get that. And praise the Holy One that truth is tattooed on your souls!

But listen up sheep! Don't nod off in a self-congratulatory snooze. Because there's another truth embedded in this parable—a truth that answers this question, "How do we give a cup of cold water when the waterworks has broken down?" The answer to this question is justice! When the waterworks breaks down we work, we pray, we organize for justice to reconstruct waterworks that will deliver pure, cold water to our thirsty brothers and sisters and thus to Jesus.

What is the road map that guides us beyond giving cups of cold water to rebuilding the waterworks of justice? What is the path that leads us beyond an exclusive focus on personal acts of compassion to its necessary complement of doing justice?

I want to offer you a road map and invite you to the path of doing justice. This road map and path have emerged from my engagement in prison ministry. But this path is no different from yours if you have started on the journey for justice from ministries of housing the homeless, feeding the hungry or caring for the sick. I'll illumine the map and point you to the path by telling you a story about a friend of mine and Paul Benz' who is serving a life sentence in one of our state's prisons—Darrell Massey. Before I share Darrell's story I want you to know that I have asked Darrell's permission to tell his story and he has graciously granted me permission. Darrell is thirty-nine years old and is eighteen years into a life sentence. He's a single dad with two youngsters—Darrell Jr., age eight, and Reneka, eleven. I've known Darrell for almost eight years through my weekly visits with the Concerned Lifers Organization at the Monroe Reformatory—visits that Paul Benz frequently makes as well. Last summer Darrell was the master of ceremonies at the "Justice Summit," a public forum at the prison on public safety and

restorative justice put on by the Black Prisoners Caucus. More than one hundred outsiders attended the summit, including legislators and members of the King County Council and Seattle school board. One of the presenters was John. About a year earlier John had been released from prison after a long sentence and is doing wonderfully well in his transition to a life of freedom and responsibility. After Darrell introduced John as a friend during the time they were incarcerated together, John said, “A long-time ago I used to know Darrell by his prison name of “Mad.” (To get the point of this story, it’s important to understand that many inmates go by nicknames, not their given names.) As soon as John finished his presentation about life on the outside, Darrell stepped back to the podium and with riveting fierceness announced, “John is right. I used to be known as Mad. Mad was my name on the streets before I fell. Mad was my name when I first came to prison. Mad was who I used to be. But I’m not that man anymore. I’m no longer Mad. Now my name is Darrell Massey. I am the son of...and he named his father. I am the grandson of...and he named his grandfather. I am the father of my son Darrell Jr. and my daughter Reneka. And I am doing the very best I can to be a father they can be proud of!” Wow! I reached for my handkerchief to mop the tears dripping down my cheeks. My heart was flooded with that old gospel song, “There’s a new name written down in glory. And it’s mine. Oh yes, it’s mine!”

I don’t know all that led to Darrell’s glorious transformation. But I do know some of the sheep who came to him in prison with cups of cold water brimming with compassion and the promise of redemption. Some of those sheep were incarcerated themselves--Darrell’s prison elders and peers who themselves had been transformed and carry on amazing ministries inside the walls.

About now some of you might be thinking, “That’s a glorious story of how the sheep’s cups of compassion to one of the least of the brothers and sisters led to Darrell’s transformation. So let’s all sing a couple of verses of Amazing Grace as a testimony to these faithful sheep and their Great Shepherd, pray the benediction and get on with our day.”

Not yet! You have just heard about the cups of cold water—the personal deeds of compassion. You haven’t heard yet about the broken-down waterworks and the call to do justice. Do you remember that Darrell has two children, Darrell Jr. who is eight and Reneka who is eleven? About a month ago the Department of Corrections (DOC) informed Darrell that he was on the list for an out-of-state transfer to a prison rumored to be in Oklahoma or Arizona. Try to wrap your minds and hearts about what this transfer will mean to an eight-year old son and eleven year-old daughter who want to stay connected to their father and visit him whenever possible. The hopeful news highlights the torrent of letters requesting DOC to stop Darrell’s transfer. These individual cups of cold water are hugely significant for Darrell and his children. But these cups of cold water by themselves don’t speak to the larger dimensions of this perverse public policy because Darrell’s dilemma is not an isolated case. About 1,200 Washington inmates are incarcerated out of state. 80% of them are parents, each with approximately 2 children. That’s almost 2,000 children who are cut off from meaningful personal contact with their fathers. The outcome of this perverse public policy stares us in the face: If you are the child of an incarcerated parent, your risk of being incarcerated is more than five times higher than a child whose parent has never been incarcerated. Fellow sheep, we are

confronted by a broken waterworks that individual cups of cold water, important as they are, can never rebuild! Fellow sheep, we are confronted with the call to seek justice for those 2,000 children. Act on this call today and ask your legislators to support the bill that will stop DOC from transferring inmates who have demonstrated positive relationships with their children.

Take another step with me on the path to justice by examining an additional part of the broken waterworks. Currently, there are about 93,000 children younger than eighteen whose parents are incarcerated or have been released but remain under DOC supervision. If you are the son of an incarcerated parent, you have a 50% chance that you also will be incarcerated. Let's do the math. There are about 46,000 boys in Washington whose parents are incarcerated and under community supervision. We can expect that about half of these boys—23,000—will offend and become incarcerated.

This is a conveyor belt that inexorably moves the children of the incarcerated to prison when they become adults. It should come as no surprise that DOC's strategic plan calls for expanding the prisons to house 6,000 more persons by 2017. So by 2017 we can expect to incarcerate 24,000 people—that is a staggering 97% increase over the 1996 prison population.

Fellow sheep, we are confronted by a broken waterworks that individual cups of cold water, important as they are, can never rebuild! Fellow sheep, we are confronted with the call to seek justice for these 46,000 boys who are hugely at risk!

Often when I am preaching on this theme, some earnest sheep come up afterwards and say, "Darel you have certainly presented a compelling challenge. But my calling is to rebuild that part of the waterworks that provides housing or health care or restores the environment." Here's my response, "God bless you for doing justice in those parts of the broken-down waterworks. Keep it up! But as you follow that calling I want to encourage you to let the Spirit transform you with the mind of Christ—the mind of Christ." Frankly, at that point these dear sheep usually look at me like I'm a Bible thumping video evangelist, promoting an intellectual Viagra that will boost their IQ's by 20 points. But the exhortation to put on the mind of Christ is straight from Paul the apostle. Putting on the mind of Christ means we are gifted with holy imaginations that connect the dots of justice and compassion so that in our hearts we perceive connections and relationships that are oblivious to our sin-darkened imaginations. Jesus' holy imagination connected the dots of justice and compassion with all sorts of people that the religious establishment of his day never considered to be "eligible" candidates.

So fellow sheep, put on the mind of Christ and allow our holy imaginations to connect the dots of justice and compassion as we look at the state's budget. We all want the legislature and governor to target more money for housing, health care and hunger reduction, education and environmental protection. But look at the competition for those dollars. In 2007, the annual average cost of incarcerating an inmate was \$31,000. The annual average cost for ill and aging inmates is \$57,000—and this inmate population is growing because of the long-term sentences that prior legislatures and governors have demanded. DOC's biennial operating budget is \$1.7 billion—the third largest operating budget in the state! Fellow sheep, let our holy imaginations connect the dots and advocate

for justice for the broken criminal justice system by providing education, vocational training, mental health and chemical addiction treatment for people while they are in prison and transitional help in housing and job training after they are released. Fellow sheep, let us stop the revolving door of recidivism--45% of people released today will re-offend within three years of their release.

We all want more money for housing the homeless and today we will be advocating for a \$100 million increase in the Housing Trust Fund. Fellow sheep let our holy imaginations connect the dots running from the Housing Trust Fund to the legislature's 2,000 bed expansion of the prison at Coyote Ridge at a cost of \$184 million. This is the largest non-transportation public works project in the state and the largest prison construction project in the country.

Fellow sheep, we are confronting the powers and principalities of a political culture that screams, "Get tough on crime!" This culture perversely promotes competition among legislators and governors to outdo each other in being tough on crime. During the past 15 years sentences have been lengthened, mental illness and chemical addictions have been criminalized—filling our prisons to overflowing. Then, because of budget pressures, legislators and governors slashed prison programs for education, vocational training and treatment for mental illness and addictions—so that almost half of people who are released will re-offend within three years.

Fellow sheep, it is time to bear witness that being tough on crime is being dumb on crime!

Fellow sheep, it is time to throw the reverse switch on the conveyer built carrying our children to prison!

Fellow sheep, it is time to follow Jesus whose campaign platform for his public ministry declared, "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to proclaim release to the prisoners and deliverance to the captives!"

Fellow sheep, continue offering cups of cold water to the Darrell Masseys that the Spirit brings into your lives.

Fellow sheep, allow the Spirit to transform your imaginations with the mind of Christ so you connect the dots of justice and compassion as you repair the broken waterworks.

Amen.

A message given at Faith Advocacy Day in Olympia Washington, January 29, 2008 by Darel E. Grothaus, Interim Executive Director, Washington Association of Churches.