



A Season of Hope, Joy and Healing

December 5, 2014

Dear Friends,

Even after five years and thousands of appointments spent working with the families in our community, the loneliness we encounter at The Place of Refuge still catches me by surprise. So many of the individuals we counsel come to us having carried private struggles in isolation for many years. Even among those who are connected to local churches, those who stand right beside us on Sunday mornings, with whom we join our voices in song, the loneliness is all too often a tower of hurt.

Recently in prayer, I asked the Lord how He would have me understand this reality better. He put in my heart to search out a story that would make the truth clear. Someone pointed me to the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote to a friend in 1944, admitting his struggle to work out “who Christ really is for us today.” The answer, for Bonhoeffer, was a matter of life and death. I see Bonhoeffer writing at a small wooden desk, or lying back on his tiny prison bed, enclosed on all sides by walls of steel and stone, smiling. Bonhoeffer was a pastor, a German Christian, imprisoned by the Gestapo, writing from his cell in Nazi Germany near the height of World War II, less than a year before Berlin’s fall to Soviet forces—and his own execution.

A young woman, I’ll call Ruth, of mixed Jewish and Hispanic heritage, spoke to me recently in a counseling session in a very powerful way. As a health care worker in a local social agency that helps individuals who require high levels of care, she encounters many clients with serious mental difficulties; others are in need of affordable housing; while others suffer from chronic illness, including HIV. As a single mother, she came to us during a normal time in her life when she needed supportive counseling for normal everyday challenges, such as handling work stress and building a relationship with her teenage son.

Her life changed dramatically when her son was tragically murdered only a few blocks from their home. In the three years since that day, Ruth has been transformed by her faith and her relationship to Christ, as we at The Place of Refuge have walked with her to process her grief. In our last session, Ruth seemed more talkative than normal. She had a new energy and vitality as she shared her story:

“...by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:78-79)



“I recently decided to attend a one day retreat for HIV-positive people, sponsored by a local group of nuns. Ever since I was a child, I always felt compassion for others, maybe because of my own trauma. As you know, I had loving parents, a nice home with brothers and sisters, the whole thing. But, during a brief time apart from my parents while my mother was ill, I was placed in the home of a family friend where I was sexually molested. This turned my world upside down. And yet, I never stopped wanting the healing for others that my faith brings to me. That never stopped. While I was on the bus to the HIV retreat, a woman next to me looked at me and asked if I am *affected or infected*. I was silent, taking time to identify with the infected woman before I could begin to answer. I thought, this is my experience with Christ; He took my infirmities and in exchange, healed me.”

If Ruth had merely painted herself as a victim, very easily, she might have broken a long time ago. But she has chosen to be a witness of hope, a woman of remarkable strength, not weakness—delighting in pity, mercy, forgiveness and love.

Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and many, many others, Ruth experienced the marvelous truth of the healing that Christ longs to bring into our lives and the lives around us. Her story brings home to us that even today, we can live in the truth of the incarnation. Jesus chose to be infected by our infirmities—in order to heal us; he chose to be affected. He is “a man of sorrow acquainted with grief.” Ruth is one of the kindest women I know. Despite her great loss and grief, she lives to serve others as she follows the great Healer of our lives. We have so much to be thankful for this holiday season!



We are indeed truly grateful that you have allowed yourself to be affected by the suffering of those we serve at Refuge and for your financial support of our mission. This year we have touched the lives of 144 others whose stories mirror that of Ruth. Please, won't you consider a year-end gift to help us keep our doors open? We are nearly to our goal, but we still face a critical need to raise \$28,000 in new pledges of support by the end of the year.

It is your gift that makes it possible for us to continue helping people like Ruth answer the question: “Who is Christ for us today?”

Thank you! And may your holiday season be truly blessed!!

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Elizabeth Hernandez.

Elizabeth Hernandez, D.Min.
Executive Director