

## 18 September 2022: I Timothy 2:1-7 (Proper 20)

On the way to Reidsville State Prison, I didn't know what to expect. A Deacon-friend of ours invited Geri and me to the closing service of a prison ministry called Kairos. That word is Greek and indicates a time of momentous importance. Our friend has served on Kairos weekends for many years. The weekends consist of an intense time of teaching, instruction, and fellowship, led by a group of 'civilians'—clergy and laity from outside. The inmates attend by invitation only, chosen by the prison chaplain and warden. Before entering the razor-wire topped, many gated facility we went through security inspection and instructions of what we could and couldn't do.

Eventually the 15 or 20 outsiders were escorted through the prison into the prison library where the weekend retreat occurred. We sat in folding chairs. Presently the library doors opened and in filed 22 prisoners, escorted by guards. The men were tall, short, medium; old, young, middle aged; Caucasian, black, Latino, and Asian. We were told beforehand that among them were drug traffickers, extortionists, conmen, sexual miscreants, the brutally violent, and murderers. We were told some would eventually be paroled and others would die in prison. The pastor in charge of the weekend looked at the men and asked, "Who is the Church?" As one voice the prisoners responded, "We are the Church!" He asked again, and the men responded louder. A third time, "Who is the Church?" They thundered: "We are the Church!"

In a prison housing hundreds of convicted felons who had done despicable things to themselves and others—there is the Church. I am not naïve. So called, jail house conversions can be fake, one more con job to boost a sociopath's ego or get something they want or just to occupy their time. Prisoners can be even more two-faced than the rest of us, believing something sincerely today and forgetting it tomorrow. Yet, if even one of those prisoners continued to journey closer into Christ, even just inches, then the Church is truly present because Jesus Christ constitutes and defines the Church. Christ lives in every struggling person who struggles, even unsuccessfully, for holiness.

The men were given the opportunity to share their experience of the weekend. There were no theatrics, and only a few tears shed (by them). But there appeared to be sincerity, especially when the men talked about what hit them the hardest. Almost all said that receiving notes from Christians outside prison—people they did not know—and handmade cards and pictures from anonymous children blew them away. They said before the weekend they considered themselves worthless, human disasters who had made willful tragic mistakes that wounded not only their families, loved ones, and their victims but their communities and themselves. They said they couldn't believe anyone would take time to write them or draw a picture, they couldn't believe that the Kairos team would give up their weekend for the likes of them. One older man said that he had carried the guilt and shame of a murder for decades but now he no longer needed to carry it alone: the Kairos team said they would carry it with him, and he asked for everyone's prayers.

Paul wrote, *God our Savior...desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all...(vv. 4-6).* That's a curious word, "ransom." *Christ Jesus...gave himself a ransom for all.* There are two obvious conclusions: First, we are of priceless value to God, because ransom is paid only for what is most cherished. Second, what is most cherished is all humanity, regardless of what we have done or not done because *God...desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* The truth is God loves you not despite your sins but in your sins. When we surrender our sins to God, we are restored because we are God's cherished children, you are the joy of God's heart.

Jesus Christ defines the Church which means Jesus Christ defines you and me. Jesus' mission is to do God's will, that *everyone...be saved and...come to the knowledge of the truth* which means this is our mission; it means there are no outcasts, no one is irredeemable, no one is disposable; it means our sins, even our most heinous acts, words, and thoughts, can make our lives a hell or when surrendered to God are the raw material for restoration, rebirth, and renewal in Christ. It means we help others carry their burdens of guilt and shame until they no longer carry them, until all is surrendered to Christ. This is the truth of God in Christ Jesus, who desires everyone to be saved. May this collection of un-convicted sinners answer the question too: Who is Church? We are the Church! Who is the Church? We are the Church! Who is the Church? We are the Church!