“The Lord Has Forsaken Me”
Eighth Sunday In Ordinary Time 2017

Reflection By: Deacon Paul Hursh

“The Lord Has Forsaken Me…” (Isaiah 49:14a) I visited a man in the Browning Unit of the State Prison Complex this week that, by all accounts, could speak these words with all sincerity. …and who would be surprised? However, Derek did not speak such words, even though he awaits a death sentence for a capital offense. If you imagine that ‘Death Row’ of the State Prison Complex in Florence, Arizona is a dark and foreboding place, then you are correct.

Personally, I find the “Special Management Unit II” (SMU II – as it is alternately known) is the darkest place that I have ever entered. Having said this, it may surprise you that, I have also found the light of God can penetrate this darkness and that one can experience the grace of God, and even joy, despite a sentence of death.

After sharing this Sunday’s Gospel regarding who and what we are to serve – “God or Mammon” – Derek and I discussed what touched us about this scripture. We agreed that one important point was the fruitlessness of worry. “Can anyone by worrying add a single moment to
our life-span?” (cf Matthew 6:27) Derek is awaiting a death sentence by lethal injection, but it occurred to us that every person is born with a sentence of death from our birth. – no one gets out alive. This may feel like a morbid thought, but if you ponder on it awhile you may come to the realization of just how precious is our time on Earth. Should the precious time remaining be spent gathering treasures on earth? (cf. Matthew 6:19b) “Is not our life more than food and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25b) So, given the preciousness of life, what are we to do with the life we are given? Is there something God is calling us to do?

When I posed this question to Derek his response was, “I engage my fellow prisoners in a bible study.” Imagine that – bible study on death row. …and he adds… “I sit with someone who is going through a difficult time.” I asked him, “What sort of things cause difficult times for men on death row? Isn’t it difficult 24/7/365 in the SMU?”

When someone loses a loved one on the “outside” it is particularly hard, especially if they can’t go to the funeral. One reason given for not allowing a prisoner to attend a parent’s death is if the body was cremated. (Go figure…) Then he chuckles, “sometimes it’s the small stuff, like receiving a package from a family member and it wasn’t everything they wanted or asked for. I told this one guy, to be thankful for the things they enjoyed and to share the other gifts with their fellow prisoners.” “Yea,” I said, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” Then I shared my other favorite euphemism about complaining about what we receive free of charge… “Yea, some people will complain if they are hung with a new rope.” I immediately thought better of this, but it was too late, Derek almost fell off his chair laughing.” See there is even humor in the SMU. He added his quip in the form of a question – “Why do they only use sterilized needles for administering the lethal injection?”

Our conversation ended with the administering of Holy Communion and a final story from Derek. Recently the death row prisoners are now being allowed out of doors in the yard for short periods. This was something that had not been allowed in the past, but thanks to a lawsuit lodged by The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) it is now being allowed. During a recent time Derek and six of his fellow prisoners were playing basketball early in the morning before sunrise. As the Sun began to rise, there was one of those beautiful Arizona sunrises. He said that they immediately stopped in their tracks and could only marvel at the beauty – a gift from God that they had not seen for years. How often am I immersed in the beauty of creation and don’t give it a second thought – take it for granted. Has He not much more provided for you, O you of little faith? (Matthew 6:30) Yes, the light of God can penetrate even darkness of men destined to die. "God bless us, every one!”

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1 Tiny Tim (A Christmas Carol – Charles Dickens) is known for the statement, "God bless us, every one!" which he offers as a blessing at Christmas dinner. Dickens repeats the phrase at the end of the story; this is symbolic of Scrooge's change of heart. Are we ready for God to change our hearts?