

August 28, 2022 sermon

I think that rightfully many of us come to church because we need our spiritual cup filled. We are buoyed by the music, by hearing the word of God through scripture, preaching, and prayer, by tasting the grace of God at communion, and by receiving a blessing to go back out into the world, filled with the Holy Spirit.

I wonder, though, if Jesus would agree that that's the only reason we come to church – that church is only about getting our own spiritual cup filled. Because today's readings seem to tell us that church is a place where our cup overflows toward others.

Church is a place we remember the ones who are often not remembered, like the ones Jesus mentioned today in the gospel: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, or like the ones mentioned in the book of Hebrews today: strangers, those in prison, those who are being tortured. And not only that, but church is a community where we intentionally reach out to and build relationships with the poor and those who are marginalized, including those who are in prison.

Tomorrow, August 29, our One Parish One Prisoner friend Jeremiah Winchester will be released back to home detention, or Graduated Re-Entry, in Bellingham after 11 years in the Monroe Correctional Complex. Because our reading today from Hebrews 13 invites us to remember those who are in prison as if you were in prison with them, our OPOP team invited Jeremiah to write a letter of introduction to you, so you can remember him and get to know him. I'll read his introduction, then invite members of our OPOP team to share parts of the letters and emails they have received from Jeremiah, so that we might remember and do as Jesus taught us.

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Who is Jeremiah Winchester? (Written by Jeremiah)

I was born on December 19, 1970, to Glen and Noma Winchester on a little farm on Blaine Road. My childhood was loving and secure with a seed of faith, well-planted and watered in a loving Christian home by my mother, who was a Sunday school teacher, and my hard-working father, who had a deep reverence for the Lord. I grew up on a farm, between Merietta and the airport, raising dairy replacement heifers and horses. It was very rural. I rode my horse to Merietta school and tied him to the hitching post. You may have met my family as we organized and ran the Highland Games in Ferndale for over 20 years, until my mother's passing and the end of the games in 2015.

I spent my teens commercial fishing with my father, and at 17 I had my first son Jesse. I joined the carpenter's union when my second son Jordan was born two years later. I spent years in the local refineries and built many malls, apartments and houses in Whatcom County. On June 26, 2000 I broke my neck on the job and my life changed. Four surgeries and far too many pain pills

led me down a cowardly path of self-destruction, drugs and crime that ended many times in jail. I had neglected that seed of faith my parents worked so hard to cultivate. All this time my sons remained incredible young men! Good grades and team captains in many sports. They lived truly good and moral lives into their twenties. There are some incredible miracles surrounding my sons I would love to share if anyone asks.

It was not until 2007 that I started to wake up to the destruction I had caused. I started to make changes, started a clean and sober house, built a business that my son and I operated and worked with my son as a bond recovery agent. I sought change but not God.

On November 22, 2011 my son and I lured a gang member who jumped bail. I was recognized and shots were fired. The gang member was shot in the leg, I was shot in the face and my son was shot twice in the back through a bullet proof vest. My son died, I went into a coma and the gang member escaped to Mexico. In the next 4 months I was charged with attempted robbery, convicted to 20 years, and my other son took his life. My sins had found me.

It was in this brokenness that God the healer found a broken and contrite heart that he did not despise. I, for the first time, truly gave what was left of my life to a loving father who still saw something of worth in this wretched sinner.

In the past 11 years I have truly dedicated my life to the Lord and to restoration of the damage I have done to His creation. Some of my accomplishments in prison are obtaining an AA degree in business management (and you'll hear from Carol about his GPA), writing the curriculum for a program called CTAB (change thinking, attitude and behaviors) which is now statewide required programming, while facilitating many other change programs and mentoring hundreds on men over the years. I earned trust of staff and administration and was allowed to teach staff and inmates trade skills in carpentry, metal fabrication and welding as I worked as the prison's machinist/carpenter in the maintenance department.

I have truly dedicated my life to my Lord, restorer and healer and to the restoration of his lost children. I have found that with my reputation and past experiences, many broken men relate to my story of change and faith.

With the investigations into my case, recent new evidence has come to light that has resulted in my release 9 years early and I expect to have my name cleared of the charges this next year. While I was seeking a loving Father he was always working behind the scenes to restore my life and restore my relationship to Him. I was never alone, forgotten or discarded, it just took a long

time to heal the damage I had done to myself so that I would accept His love and plan for my life.

I am not sure what our Father has planned for me but I hope He blesses my desire and efforts to create a non-profit in honor of my sons. All I am sure of is that whatever happens from here, my life is no longer my own and my plans must be approved by the one who holds my life in his hands.

My OPOP team has been such an incredible part of this journey. In my struggle to turn my pride into humility and sincerely find the Fathers will for the life He has restored to me, I have received answers to questions in prayer, signs and confirmation that can only be described as miracles, through the letters and love from my brothers and sisters at Christ Lutheran Church. Many times I have to pray and listen to make sure the path that looks good to me is actually the path my Father has planned. This entire experience with my OPOP team has been filled with the Spirit's confirmation and answers to questions only known between me and my Father. I am so excited to learn why such a loving Father has introduced me to such a loving group of his children. His plans for us all never cease to amaze me now that I am paying attention to the daily miracles he rains down on us all.

With excited expectations and love in Christ. The sinner Jesus loves, Jeremiah

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We have not yet met Jeremiah, yet we are already bound to him as friends in Christ, and we will be able to meet him this week when he is released to graduated re-entry (GRE). There is so much else we have learned from Jeremiah that our OPOP team would like to share. Here are some excerpts of the letters and emails Jeremiah has sent to us each personally:

Susan:

After my one-week blackout, I will be allowed to go on an outing with sponsors to get hygiene [products] and clothing. I was hoping to make a day of it with any of my OPOP team that would want to. I feel it would be a good way for us all to spend some quality time together and get to know each other. Maybe stop and visit over a real cup of coffee and some of the tasty food I always see on commercials. I would feel better stepping out into crowded stores for the first time with a few members of my team by my side.

George:

I am not allowed to reopen my business until I am off GRE, but I am blessed with a past as a journeyman carpenter and operated a successful fabrication/machine shop. My father, brother, and a friend with a business, all have building projects and auto mechanic projects for me to make some money while on GRE. However, I need carpentry, mechanic and metal fabrication tools to work with. Any advice or ideas on starting over would be appreciated. In faith, hope and love through Christ our Lord, The sinner Jesus loves.....Jeremiah

Tom:

May 20, 2022

"I have gained through this all, I am sure, that my passion added to the eternal debt I owe to God's creation. I am sure I will find strength to truly be used as one of God's special tools to restore his children. Jesus loves me...and if He still loves me I better love Him back by loving his lost children and doing all I can to bring restoration to His creation I hurt."

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"I feel that as I am already a union carpenter and I still have some good years left I should take this established path to start with."

May our prayers and actions support Jeremiah in his journey.

Carol:

Carol, Thank you for your letter. I completed my AA Degree in Business Management last year, at the top of my class with a 3.93 GPA. I plan to attend Whatcom Community College for a few personal goals and personal interests.

I was born in Bellingham to wonderful God-loving parents. I broke my neck on the job in 2000 and 4 surgeries, too many pain pills and depression brought me into a cowardly downward spiral. Now, I look forward to understanding how the Father plans to bless us in this journey.

In all faith, hope, and love in Christ Jesus. Jeremiah

Liz:

After I wrote to Jeremiah about my father working for the Whatcom County Parks many years ago as a carpenter when the parks were first being built, he wrote me:

"It is pretty cool having your family being an important part of so many great parks and making family memories possible for so many families..."

Thank you for sharing with me! I got all excited as I read your letter... no one here (in prison)

knows anything about Hovander Park, Silver Lake or any of the other things we share about Whatcom County. Thank you for bringing my thoughts home for a minute. You brought me joyful memories. I believe we will be good friends.”

Rich

I mentioned to Jeremiah in an email that we have a boat. This was his response.

"Did I tell you that when I was in my teens, my father took my whole family on a boating trip all over the San Juan Islands for months, camping on so many hidden state parks. 5 of us in a 14-foot motorboat. It is one of the greatest memories I hold."

Becky

Written in a letter early on in our pen pal experience.

"You are all so kind & feel genuinely sincere. I was not at all comfortable with this OPOP idea & it took a lot of pressure from two men I had mentored who released to OPOP Teams. Then Alvin reached out to me. I'm glad I gave in. I am truly feeling God's hand may be in this & we may find mutual & genuine friendships through this experience. God willing."

Pastor Jana:

"I have learned that God sends angels in many forms to fit every unique need of his very different children. I also know that God performs his greatest miracles with participation of his obedient children. You are all angels sent by the Father and the miracle is not what you have done for me but the way God has shown me through you that when I let go and let God... He always has a plan ready in the works to touch my life with love. Thank you for being the message and confirmation."

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Next Sunday, Jeremiah (and possibly his father) will hopefully worship with us at Christ Lutheran. Because in prison Jeremiah converted to Orthodox Christianity, he might choose not to come forward for communion, and he may choose to find a local Orthodox Church in the future. After worship next Sunday our OPOP team will meet with him altogether. We ask that our whole congregation welcome him, but not overwhelm him – think about what it must be like to be out of society for 13 years coming into a community that you don't yet know.

Mostly, we ask that you pray. Let your cup overflow with love toward the sinner who Jesus loves, Jeremiah, and to all those whom Jesus asks that we remember. Amen.

Song of the day – if you don't know it, listen to the music and join in when you are ready