

The Inlook-Outlook Letter
Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (April 2010)

As so many of our prison members and attenders have been taken far from us or otherwise are unable to attend our prison meeting, we at St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting compose this 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers and will always be so. When we *look into* our hearts we see God and this benefits our *outlook*. This edition examines God's words in Matthew 25: "*I was in prison and you came to see me*"

"I Was in Prison and You Came to See Me"

(Matthew 25: 36)

In the picture parable of The Last Judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46), the responsibility of the Christian towards suffering humanity is outlined in no uncertain terms: To live a good life, to achieve perfection (to become the 'sheep' in this parable) is to carry out daily six simple tasks: Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, and come and see the prisoner. These facts are repeated four times in this biblical story! Repetition is a sign of the crux of a teaching in an oral tradition like that of the early Christians.

When the sheep in the parable are told they have lived a good life by doing these things, they are puzzled because they cannot remember doing these things for God. God's spokesperson, the Son of Man, then explains to them: *...in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me* (Matthew 25: 40). To do service to those most in need is the same as serving God.

Though the number of tasks are six, there is really only one: And that one task is to never, ever stop examining ourselves in God's light as long as we live. We are reminded that in so doing we become instruments of God's Kingdom of *saving justice* on earth (Paul's letter to the Romans 3: 21). When we go through this process of self-examination, how can we not fail to notice it is we who are hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, sick and in prison? All of us in our prisons **hunger** for meaning, **thirst** for the Holy Spirit that eludes us, feel **naked** in our secret terrors, **sick** in our soul and require a visit, and want to **come and see** the light of God. Do we not have to *come* from where we stand now in our ceaseless efforts to get ahead under our own steam and limited resources, to a better place where we *see* at last God's presence and infallible guidance? (In Hebrew mythology the verb 'to see' meant to experience God first hand.)

When we worship together in prison, all the usual distinctions of human society (inmate/outmate, rich/poor, black/white/Hispanic, Catholic/Protestant/Jew/Muslim, man/woman) disappear. And this is how it should be: St. Paul reminds us such distinctions mean nothing to God (Paul's letter to the Galatians 3: 28). In the quiet worship hour we find freedom from the cares that envelope us around like the walls of a prison, and we find strength in solutions that come new to us in the silence. The words of Jesus in the Gospel of John come to mind: *If you make my word your home, you will come to know the truth and the truth shall set you free* (John 8: 32). Making God's word our home means doing God's work as described in the story of the Last Judgment above. When we do so we become transformed and are free at last, whether in or outside an actual prison.

In worship a Friend recently shared his understanding of the transforming power in him, his coming to see the work of God in himself. He likened it to weeding a garden. He recalled fond memories of his grandfather, a fine gardener who required his young grandson to weed the garden. It was not a job the

young man liked. His grandfather said something like: “You just have to get down on your hands and knees and start pulling, otherwise the lovely things that we like to eat quickly become overpowered by weeds.” He now sees his job as weeding his garden within, in order to increase the produce that gives life and diminish the weeds that take it away. He says there is always some weeding left to be done. We are never finished; we have never 'arrived', but what a good life we may live in the process of weeding! We get down on our hands and knees and get our hands dirty.

When we don't pay attention to the weeds in the garden that is our life, the result is shown in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), which incidentally precedes the tableaux of the Last Judgment. In this parable, a master leaves money ('talents'-a talent was equivalent to a dollar in biblical times) to each of several servants while he is away on a business trip. Some of the servants invest the money and make good returns; their efforts have increased their master's resources. One servant however, perhaps fearful of losing the money, buries it for safe keeping. When the master comes home, he is pleased with those servants who have been productive, and he gives each more responsibility consonant with the capabilities he has shown. However, he takes away the money he gave to the servant who simply hid it and gives that money to the others who were productive. In conclusion Jesus declares: *...to everyone who has will be given more...but anyone who has not, will be deprived even of what he has* (Matthew 25: 29). The parable of the talents is the last spoken parable of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. This suggests its importance in Christian spiritual teachings.

At first it may seem cruel “to deprive someone even of what he has”. The servant who did not do anything with the money the master entrusted to him, was afraid. He is like us. We are often afraid to stick out our necks. So, we can relate to this poor man and may feel sorry for him. However, what Jesus is describing is not a master taking something from a servant, nor God taking something from us. Far from it, it is **we** who do not want to get our hands dirty, who do not want to follow grandfather's advice, who by our inactivity will see our lives little by little taken from us. A little effort put into weeding every day, can produce a bounty of the good produce that is required nourishment for our souls.

Incidentally, in the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, this process of weeding is called 'taking an inventory' (It is in the 4th and again in the 10th step of the 12). It is inspiring to note this process of 'weeding' or inventory-taking harkens back to the earliest teachings of the Christian faith: The Last Judgment picture parable and the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. It is about making sure our life is lived in service to and making a difference for others. When we do this we increase the good in the world. And as a Friend once pointed out to me, there is only one little letter, one vowel, separating the words 'good' and 'God'.

May God bless you always. **Anybody who wishes to receive the 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' may request a subscription by writing to the address below.** Be sure to let us know your complete address. You will be put on our mailing list and receive a monthly copy at no cost. Also, please feel free to write us with your comments, suggestions and contributions to the Letter: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292 , Canton, NY 13617.**

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