

Christ the King (A) – November 20, 2011
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
Patrick Gahan
Matthew 25:31-46
We Can Be Changed...through Mercy!

Someone would shout from the front of the drugstore, "The trash truck is coming! The trash truck is coming!" Pharmacist Bill Needham, who would be in the middle of filling a prescription, would immediately put down the pills he was counting, race over to the coffee pot, fill up three cups with hot coffee, shove six sugars, three creamers, and three stir sticks in his pockets, and race out the double-glass doors of the *Corner Drug*. Just as he reached the sidewalk, the garbage truck would rumble up to the curb. Bill would invite the guys to step off the truck, take a break, and enjoy a cup of coffee. He knew the prescription the guys on the trash truck needed. They needed to breathe in the rich aroma of fresh coffee for a moment instead of the sour smell of our garbage. They needed a prescription of mercy and recognition, and for thirty years they received it in front of Llano's *Corner Drug* right from Bill Needham's hands.

They were not alone. One night in the mid-1960's Bill was called out to the pharmacy to make up some emergency medicine for a person in town who had become terribly ill. He was bone tired, but just as he was finishing the task, he noticed a large *Trailways* bus broken down just across the street next to the Llano County Courthouse. Bill looked a little closer and noticed that the bus was full of African-Americans, who were filing forlornly off the bus. It was the 1960's, and bone-tired or not, Bill knew what he had to do. He walked over to the bus and invited the Black folks to use the restroom at the *Corner Drug*. The truth was that the drugstore did not have a public restroom, only a tiny private one for Bill and his employees. Nevertheless, Bill knew the medicine the people needed, the medicine of mercy and kindness at a time in our country when such medicine was in short supply.

Bill was just a regular guy, trying to cull out a life for his family in small town Texas. He was an Episcopalian, who never missed Tuesday Morning Men's Bible Study or his *Cursillo* reunion group. He was nothing fancy...just faithful. He was my friend and he died last week.

Late in his life, the *Kairos* ministry was his passion. He and his buddies would venture into the *Ferguson* unit to bring the good news of the Gospel through *Cursillo*. The *Ferguson* unit is not a prison for petty hub cap thieves; no *Ferguson* is reserved for violent offenders. Undaunted, Bill went in again and again. He knew in his heart of hearts that those "boys", as he called them, needed a dose of mercy and love, for that is the only way they would heal and get well.

I have to believe that last week as Bill's body was failing, his heart laboring, and he was gasping for his last breath that he heard Jesus' unmistakable voice ring out in his ears:

'Come, Bill, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then Bill answered him, *'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'* And the king will answer them, *'Truly I tell you, Bill, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'* **Matthew 25:34-40**

According to Matthew's take on the story, this is the last thing Jesus says to his disciples before the chief priests and elders construe a frantic plan to execute him. About the same time, an unknown woman suddenly appears uninvited at a dinner party and anoints Jesus for burial, which incites Judas to betray Jesus that same night for thirty pieces of silver (**MT 26:1-15**). Jesus knows his end is coming and fast, so he tells his disciples how his healing presence will fill the world even after his crucifixion. Surprisingly, Saint Paul, Jesus' most loquacious follower, would make this concise statement some twenty-five years after Jesus' resurrection: *For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment. 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'* (**Gal. 5:14**).

Here again is the wonderful algebra of Christ's message: When we step out and love those who are broken and sick and imprisoned and easily overlooked by all of us busy people, we not only become an antidote for them against the ugliness of life, we also begin to get well ourselves. You know by now that the word "salvation" means to "get well." When we invite Christ into our lives, we get healthy all over and we are then expected to extend his healing prescription into all the dark places. Only by giving ourselves sacrificially to others, like our Lord, can we stay well.

Bill went to a very dark place at the *Ferguson* unit sometime before he died. He went right up to the meanest, most unapproachable young man in the prison. Bill looked him in the eye – which is taboo in the prison. Bill put his hand on the inmate's shoulder – which will get you killed. And then Bill said to the man, "God loves you and so do I." A life was changed on that day, and it was one amongst many.

How do I know? Well, we held Bill's burial last Saturday in the Llano High School auditorium...and it was packed.