

In 1970 at Princeton University, a social experiment took place that looked at time and peer pressure. Psychology students studied how students of the Princeton Theological Seminary would conduct themselves when asked to deliver a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The students were to give the sermon in a studio a building across campus and would be evaluated by their supervisors. The researchers were curious about whether time pressure would affect the seminary students' helpful nature. After all, the students were being trained to become ordained ministers; they are presumably inclined to help others.

As each student finalized his preparation in a classroom, the researchers inflicted an element of time constraint upon them by giving them one of three instructions: "You're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago...You'd better hurry. It shouldn't take but just a minute." This was the high-hurry condition.

"The (studio) assistant is ready for you, so please go right over." This was the intermediate-hurry condition.

"It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn't be long." This was the low-hurry condition.

As each student walked by himself from the preparation classroom to the studio, he encountered a 'victim' in a deserted alleyway just like the wounded traveler in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This victim (actually an associate of the experimenters) appeared destitute, was slouched and coughing and clearly in need of assistance. The seminarians were thus offered a chance to apply what they were about to preach.

Remarkably, only 10% of the students in the high-hurry situation stopped to help the victim. 45% of the students in the intermediate-hurry and 63% of the students in the low-hurry situations helped the victim.

The researchers concluded, "A person not in a hurry may stop and offer help to a person in distress. A person in a hurry is likely to keep going. Ironically, he is likely to keep going even if he is hurrying to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan, thus inadvertently confirming the point of the parable... Thinking about the Good Samaritan did not increase helping behavior, but being in a hurry decreased it."

Though it's been over 50 years since that study, all of us are often in a hurry going places, doing this or that. But when we open our eyes to see the people in distress that God, not researchers in a study, put in our lives, it's worth thinking about the difference we can make.

Mike Robinson, who lives near the famous San Quentin prison in California, in the 1980s found himself compelled to become a part of his church's prison ministry program, but at first, he wasn't sure what to expect and was understandably nervous.

But ever since that first trip, he's kept going back to minister to people whom society forgets about. However knowing that they were created in God's image and needed love and hope, he decided to try to do something about it.

Specifically Mike went to assist the inmates there who at the time could not attend the regular Sunday service in the prison chapel. These inmates were unable to leave the hospital area because they were HIV-positive. They were confined to the hospital and nearby exercise yard. Little did Mike know what a profound impact this would have on his life.

Not even the beauty of that first morning could suppress the anxiety and fear he felt as he approached the parking lot near the main entrance. He wasn't quite sure what to expect. A few minutes later, his partner arrived, and they proceeded into the main courtyard of the prison.

The prison chapel is the first building inside. They stopped there to sign the visitor's log, then proceeded to the hospital. On their way, he noticed a large man in prison denims with tattoos around his neck and up and down his arms. He approached Mike's partner and gave him a big hug. After the greeting, he turned to Mike and said in a rather intimidating voice, "Who are you?"

The anxiety Mike felt earlier was nothing compared to this. In a kind of nervous, high-pitched voice, he responded, "I'm Mike."

Mike's partner explained that Mike was with him, and they came to do the church service in the hospital. Then the inmate said, "Come here!" and he gave him a big hug. When he left, Mike asked his friend "Who's he?"

"Big D," his partner replied. "He's the choir director for the chapel."

Mike thought to himself, "Wow, what a way to be greeted to San Quentin."

As they proceeded toward the main cell blocks and through a large exercise yard to the hospital, a large group of inmates waited to enter the dining hall. As they passed, noise and confusion overwhelmed Mike. His fear increased.

As they walked into the cell blocks, Mike was hit with a strong, unfamiliar foul odor. The lighting was a subdued yellow and the surroundings depressing. At the end of the hallway a large metal door led into the hospital. Mike's friend knocked and showed his ID through the window to the officer inside. When the door opened another officer escorted them to the exercise yard. After two more locked doors, they were in the "yard" outside of the hospital.

The yard has no grass or flowers. It's simply a slab of cement surrounded by high cyclone fences. At the end of the yard adjoining the building is a gun-walk above the yard where a prison officer paces back and forth with a rifle, watching the activities of

the inmates. At one end of the yard is a makeshift handball court where several inmates played. On the side of the yard next to the cyclone fence are several stainless steel picnic tables. Several inmates gathered there playing dominoes and cards. Numerous other inmates were walking from one end of the yard to the other, then turning around and walking back to get exercise and relieve stress.

As they entered the yard, several inmates greeted Mike and his friend. Two of them ran to retrieve the garbage can on which they set up the altar. It consisted of a small box containing a cross, two candles, a small altar, and wine and Communion. They placed a white linen cloth below the box and inserted the candles and were ready to begin the service.

Seven inmates joined them. They read the Gospel and asked the inmates to respond how they felt about the reading. The inmates talked about the Scriptures and discussed how the Gospel related to them. The interpretations that evolved were incredibly moving and gave tremendous meaning to the readings.

The participants asked for prayers for their loved ones. Some asked for guidance and understanding. Others asked for improved relationships with fellow prisoners and prison officials. Then they prayed together for each other.

Mike noticed the depression that engulfed one of the inmates. He could see fear deep in his dark eyes. The man seemed lost. He was very thin. He looked as though he hadn't shaved in days. His teeth were badly decayed and his hair was unkempt. Mike sensed that he was very will.

When it came time for the sign of peace, he approached him and said "peace be with you," but sensed he was far away.

When the time for Communion came though, Mike says he watched a small miracle unfold. He gave him communion under both forms, placed his hand on his shoulder and tried to look in the inmate's dark, fearful eyes. He reminded him Jesus died for our sins. And as the man received communion, his eyes lifted to Mike's and he saw a faint smile begin to appear. A sense of calm came over him, and he seemed at peace with himself.

As Mike left, he looked back on the inmate who seemed so lost. He now saw him walking across the yard with a coffee cup in his hand and a smile on his face. He seemed as though he was at peace.

Mike says he couldn't find the words to explain the feeling he had as he left San Quentin that day. All he knows is that the anxiety and fear he had when he arrived were now gone, and he also felt at peace. He realized that the whole experience was not about him going to San Quentin to "give" to someone else, but was about him going to San Quentin to "share" the spirit of God with others. That which he gave was returned to him one-hundredfold. When the peace calmed that inmate, Mike too lost all the fear

about being there. All that mattered he said was the spirit of God that they shared together.

In a sense, all of us can be like that inmate. It's what sin does to us. We can end up in our own self-created prison if you will; behind the walls of shame. Sin like it did to that inmate can rob us of life. And little by little it can cause us to be lifeless like the man left for dead on the side of the road. As the Gospel tells us, robbers strip and beat the man; sin humiliates us and takes so much from us. But in this story of the Good Samaritan, we have not just a story about doing good for others, but a story of what God does for us, a challenge in our first reading of what we can do to maintain health, and a commission from our Lord to give the love that we've been given.

As a starting point, think of the Good Samaritan in terms of Jesus, and the man in terms of humanity. He goes from Jerusalem, high up, the city on the hill, to Jericho, a city near the dead sea in the lowlands. It's most famous for being conquered by the Israelites as the walls came down while the horns were blown. Jesus' audience would associate Jerusalem with heaven and Jericho, down hill, as a city of sin. It's where Bartimaeus is also found the blind man whom Jesus cures. While robbers attack him, on a deeper level we can again think of sin attacking us. It robs of us life; it changes us into people we don't want to be. And the starting point to healing is to looking at ourselves to be honest about what has changed, or where we might be at. A person can become addicted to something like alcohol, or inappropriate images of the body on the computer, or pride, or power controlling people in their family or at work, or money. The response can be blindness to these things, or an awareness of them but being either dismissive or stuck in shame. When we look though at what is going on, we can begin much like an alcoholic seeking help says who they are - an alcoholic - and then reaches out.

The good news though is seen in Jesus. The priest and levite come who are representatives of religion, but they don't bother to heal the whole person. The Samaritan, who is of course very different from the man left on the side of the road, and yet he not only stops, he carries him to the inn, and pays for his lodging and says I'll be back, take care of him and if there's any added costs I'll pay those too. And this is why mercy can never be spoken of enough. Like that prisoner who was so forlorn who came to live when he received Communion, so it is with the sinner who opens up to our Lord. The problem is so often as humans we can be caught up in worrying about what the neighbors will think - yet God only thinks one thing - love - and once we get past worrying and the shame associated with sin, we can find that peace and healing. God calls us all to the banquet and comes to meet us where we are at like the Good Samaritan. So if you are caught up in something, or trying to avoid thinking about something, or struggling with feelings of self worth, know that God is there to pick you up because His love for you knows no limits. He pays the price with His Body and Blood, which is then given to us out of His infinite love.

As we are made healthy, we need to continue to seek out God's love and mercy by staying connected to Him. We do this through frequent reception of the sacraments, but

also by taking to heart the words from Moses in our first reading - to listen to our conscience and the commandments of the Lord. Our response to forgiveness and health is to learn from our mistakes, to stay healthy by being close to our God, and learning why we say no to some things and yes to others, leaning what caused us to sin and trying to grow from that as we grow in holiness.

And lastly, Jesus tells us to go and be like that Good Samaritan. That's what Mike did by going to San Quentin. And all around us is need - we just have to open our eyes, ears and hearts. Jesus does not tell us to love just those who are easy to love. We are called to love one another as Christ has loved us. We must love other people even when it's tough. Think of the parent loving their child when they rebel, or giving so much to help them reach their potential, or of people who go on missionary trips to help the less fortunate, or those who forgive those who treat them with cruelty. All around us if we open up our eyes are people who are like that inmate Mike brought Communion to and talked with, and people like that man in the Gospel left half dead. Sometimes it's us. But other times it's the person suffering in silence due to fear, or loneliness or keeping something hidden inside out of shame because they think no one will understand. What power we have because like Mike, we can bring Jesus to people through being there for them by listening, forgiving, giving them a hug, and journeying with them through their challenging moments.

Johnny Cash is perhaps the most famous visitor to San Quentin, and he visited and performed at various prisons over his career. He also testified before Congress in 1972 on prison reform. His younger brother Tommy said of him that he identified with them and many had served their sentence or were rehabilitated but still there and he felt empathy for them. He wanted them to have a little bit of hope, something Cash needed as he too turned his life over to God, aware of what sin and bad choices had done to him in his life and knowing He needed God to become the man he wanted to become. But he took what he had been given and passed it on giving hope to people. Think of that moment in Shawshank Redemption when Andy gets beer brought in for his fellow inmates; in that moment they felt human again. And Cash did that for so many, including one inmate doing 15 years for burglary, a guy named Merle Haggard who played in a prison band after he heard Cash and was inspired to try to better himself, having turned to armed burglary to support his four kids when his music career wasn't working out. Merle went on to become a country legend, but also got more serious about his faith, allowing God into his life to heal him. Hopefully on our part we do the same. Because while we can look good on the outside, inside all of us are hurt by what sin - our own and that of others - does to us. Jesus though sees this, and does something about it. May His love set us free, and may we take that love and do the same for one another.