

Prayer and Faithful Action

A homily offered on behalf of Dorcas House
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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Scott Richardson +

In the name of God; Creator, Christ and Spirit. Amen.

As many of you know, I've spent a considerable amount of time on the road this year telling other parishes and missions about a ministry where the promises of God are fulfilled. This is a ministry where David drops Goliath daily, where the Lord is indeed the refuge of the oppressed, where threatening storms are stilled, where the salvation of God is very near, where peace, mercy, truth, goodness, glory, and prosperity are the normal reality for children who, except for us, might never hope for any of that.

It occurred to me that, as this preaching mission comes to an end, at least for now, I should share with you what I've been saying to others. Before I do that, let me first say that the people I've visited have been as warm, kind, and generous as anyone could possibly be. It's a bit gauche to invite yourself into someone else's pulpit. I wouldn't have done it if it weren't for a good cause and I'm deeply grateful for the reception I received.

The congregations I visited – Pasadena, San Gabriel, Palm Springs, Claremont, Malibu, Rancho Penasquitos, Del Mar, City Heights, Poway, La Jolla - are all steadfast in faith, committed to the demands of Holy Scripture, and, therefore, deeply caring about the link between prayer and faithful action. Our Jewish friends use the words Tikkun Olam to describe this reality, this vocation – Tikkun Olam: to repair the world.

The Episcopalians I've met along the way demonstrate a deep and abiding commitment to Tikkun Olam. We have been blessed and, rather than turning inward, we've dedicated ourselves to healing prayer and healing action. If we never do more than we're doing right now, I'm confident we can still expect to hear the blessed words of the Master at the end: "Well done, thou good and faithful servants." But, having said that (and believing it wholeheartedly), I've spent the last six months asking thousands to do even more.

I've traveled on your behalf - I always take a few minutes to tell about Saint Paul's - and on behalf of Dorcas House, our foster-home in Tijuana that provides full-time care (housing, clothing, food, education, medical attention, and lots of love) to over forty children whose parents are incarcerated in Mexican jails and prisons. The cathedral congregation took on primary responsibility for this ministry three years ago. We got involved because we felt the need to match our words with our deeds and our prayers with our action.

Here's how it happened: our Canon for Hispanic Ministry first visited Dorcas House to share the Guadalupe Art Program with the girls there. When she returned she told me about their plight; after ten years of solid work, the original founders had come to the end of the road. They were tired. Other demands and desires pressed in on them. Unless new sponsors could be found, the house would close and the children would be

dispersed. I immediately sent a vanload of bleeding-heart clergy and sharp-pencil business people down to do an assessment. They came back to say that, in their opinion, we not only could do this but we must.

A team of dedicated leaders emerged to make it possible. But, from the very beginning, we planned to expand the base and invite all people to share the joy and the burden of Dorcas House with us – hence the preaching mission. This was intended to be a ministry held by diverse disciples. Everyone, I trust, can agree that children in distress are especially beloved by God and deserving of aid and support. The people of this diocese and beyond have been valued partners in this healing ministry of love and service. So I've gone out to say thanks and to encourage those who haven't gotten involved to consider several actions: learn more about this ministry and pray for the children, consider visiting the house to offer direct love, and finally, when possible, offer material aid.

Now why would anyone be moved to do any of those things? A couple of brief items regarding Dorcas House. Social and family systems differ markedly from country to country. It's hard for some in the U.S. to get this but, until recent reforms passed, children in Mexico often went into prison with their parents. The founders of Dorcas House were troubled by this so they rented the small, barely adequate facility we still use, hired the remarkable Sylvia Laborin as the director, and sent her into La Mesa prison to ask parents to consider an alternative for their offspring. In the first year, eight children moved across the street and into the home.

The ministry grew from that faith-inspired vision of a better possibility, a better outcome, for young people who would otherwise endure a kind of hell that's mostly beyond our imagining. You may recall that there were two riots at La Mesa prison last year. Two dozen people were killed. As the riot unfolded, our children, just fifty yards away, huddled against the back wall of the back building to avoid flying bullets, tear gas, and smoking embers. They prayed that their family members would survive the chaos. That is the social milieu in which our children live.

As people committed to the vows and values of baptism – justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being, seeking and serving Christ in all people – we feel compelled to respond. We're putting our money, our prayers, and our labor behind the conviction that a better end is not only possible for these kids but required by the God we worship this morning, demanded by the God we love and serve. In our opinion, Christian worship has little meaning unless it commits us to transforming the globe in the name and spirit of Jesus. When the whole world shines as brightly as our Lord on Easter morning then we can put down the load – but not until then.

So, to that holy end, we've established excellent procedures to safeguard the donations we take in; 92% of the money we raise goes directly to the ministry. There are no paid employees in the U.S. – all of us are volunteers. Teams of trained medical professionals (nurses, doctors, pediatricians, dentists) make regular visits to the house to supplement the treatment the children receive from the Red Cross of Mexico. A counselor was added to the staff, the only male serving there, to help manage the cases of children particularly traumatized by their parent's lapses.

And here's the part I'm most proud of – we're making great progress in the area of education. Did you know that 80,000 children in Tijuana are currently unable to attend

school due to economic constraints? The demand for space is too high and the resources too scarce. It takes our house-mothers several days to get our kids enrolled; they're more than willing to endure the lines and the long wait. Our children did not attend school for the first two years the house was in existence, then they weren't particularly welcome there because they come from a *casa hogar*, a foster-home; there is stigma attached to that.

They've done so well the school now sends neighborhood children to Dorcas House for afternoon tutoring. Last year we sent a young woman off to college – the first time that's ever happened – another matriculates in August, and still others are applying now. All that was made possible because many people, including hundreds from this cathedral, did what they could to help. We rely on that and we deeply appreciate the assistance.

So that's what I've been saying to people when I'm not here. At this point in the sermon, hastening to finish, I always tell one last story. It concerns Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian, martyred by the Nazis in 1945. Bonhoeffer despaired over the complicity of the church in the affairs of the Third Reich. It boggled his brilliant mind; the church supporting the rise of the Nazis! In his despair he finally came to believe that all that he had left were prayer and faithful action. That was all he could count on.

Prayer and faithful action. That's where we started, isn't it? That's what our denomination does so well. I tend to believe that, when all is said and done, that's all the church ever has. When the hymns die down and the sermon manuscripts turn yellow and the coffee runs cold, all we can count on are prayer and faithful action. You not only get that, you live it. So now I want to thank you: for your grace and patience in my absence, for your ministry, your witness, your generosity, and your pursuit of Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world. May your good work continue and may it continue to be blessed by the One in whose name these words have been spoken. Amen.