

## God's Forgiven Fellowship ----- Matthew 25: 31-46

10/25/15 for CUMC

Grace and peace to you, and Greetings from the inmates in the SCC jails who also are worshipping together today.

PRAYER – Lord, Help us to open our hearts and minds to the healing of your Spirit. In Christ Jesus' name, Amen.

There is a children's book called "You Are Special" by Max Lucado. It's about a village of wooden people called the Wemmicks, They are all made by the same woodcarver named Eli. They did the same thing every day. They gave each other stickers. That's what they did all day – sticking stars or gray dots on other Wemmicks. The pretty Wemmicks with smooth wood and nice paint, the smart ones that knew big words or those who could sing pretty songs – they got STARS. If they did dumb things, if they didn't have smooth paint, or if they were angry - they would get gray dots. The main character Punchinello received so many gray dots, that other Wemmicks would just come up and give him another dot for no reason at all. They would think – "He deserves a lot of dots. He's not a good wooden person." He would just hang around other Wemmicks who had a lot of dots because he felt better around them. One day he met a Wemmick named Lucia, who had no stickers at all! Lucia said they wouldn't stick to her because she went everyday to see Eli. So Punchinello went to see the wood carver. Eli explained to Punchinello that his stickers would fall off when he understood that he was special because Eli made him and Eli doesn't make mistakes. As Punchinello left his time with Eli, one of his gray dots fell to the floor.

Those gray dots are stigma. A stigma is a mark of disgrace. Disgrace is two words – Dis is Latin for REVERSE. GRACE is mercy and pardon. So disgrace and stigma are the opposite of GRACE.

Some of the most stigmatized people in society are those who are incarcerated or those have jail in their history. This includes mentally ill and drug addicted people. Stigmatized folks are like the ones with gray dots. They usually have a lot of gray dots because once you have gray dots, it's so easy to get more! It's so difficult to climb out of shame and stigma.

Here's the thinking of most Wemmicks (and most humans as well) - People with stigma like arrest and incarceration don't seem to be good people. If someone just can't stay out of jail they must not be a worthwhile person. Certainly NOT someone for whom we would give a Star sticker.

Here are some things about people with gray dots (this is especially true of people in jail)

- 85% of incarcerated people have suffered significant traumas such as sexual abuse and domestic violence, or multiple traumas such as abuse and neglect since childhood.
- A large percentage have personality disorders due to childhood trauma.
- Behaviors change due to trauma to protect oneself from future trauma.
- Stigma begets more stigma. Gray dots attract more gray dots.

In our passage from Matthew 25:31 - Jesus does a great switcheroo in putting his face on the hungry, the naked, the sick and incarcerated –who he calls “the least of these” his brothers and sisters. The ones with all the gray dots!

Jesus’ orientation to the helpless came from knowing the Hebrew Scriptures that declares God as the defender, protector, rescuer, provider, savior and refuge of the poor. So Jesus, entered into the madness of human existence and claimed solidarity with the condemned when he said, “When I was in prison, you visited me.”

So Jesus here is speaking to his disciples concerning the values and ethics of God’s reign. Jesus asks if the disciples were participating in liberative acts that led others toward a more abundant life or if they instead participating in enslaving acts that led others to suffering and death. He’s asking us if we gave more gray dots to those with gray dots, or if we helped them so that the gray dots might fall off.

Many years ago I prayed to the Lord that I might know Christ better. Shortly after that, the Lord sent me to the jail! Watch out what you pray for!

After I became a chaplain, crime intersected my family. A family member had become a victim of a crime so abhorrent to me that I struggled to get my mind around how this could have happened. The perpetrator was arrested and was housed in the jail, in a building near the building where my office was. Believe me, I thought of numerous ways I could get to him, to hurt him. In my position as a victim, I could not sustain any kind of thoughts of compassionate justice toward the perpetrator. I cried, I mourned, I screamed at God “WHY?!” I pleaded with God for HELP! I hated that man for what he had done. I hated having the stigma on my family member – VICTIM. Yet, I wanted debilitating stigma to be stuck to the perpetrator for the rest of his life! Which meant we would carry the stigma as VICTIM as long as he carries the stigma as FELON.

Throughout the years following, we have found healing through relationships with supportive people and with God. Our gray stickers of VICTIM stigma began to fall off. This actually began with the family member who was the victim, being unwilling to accept a VICTIM stigma. Instead she helped the rest of us climb onto higher ground, to let go of our hate. The miracle in my life was that God brought compassion in my heart for this man. Spiritual healing for me came through the conviction of my own meanness and desire to punish instead of restore him.

I needed to step out in faith that God loved us. God could hold it all. Nothing could change the harm this man had done to us. I could either live in bitterness, hate and fear, or live my life praying for healing and hope for him, as a human being. This was hard! *Real forgiveness* is difficult! Look what it did to our Lord, Jesus Christ? Forgiveness literally took his life. But death brought victory through Christ's resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means hope and restoration! Through faith we are given a new beginning. So, it is in building hope and restoration for the prisoners, the poor and the sick and mentally ill that we cease to be VICTIMS and they cease to be OFFENDERS. We are God's forgiven family.

I'm sure of one thing that changes everything – that it's within relationships with one another and God, that we can find healing and are able to see ourselves as valued children of God. That's when the gray dots start falling off. When someone believes themselves to be valued children of God, worthy of love, able to dream big dreams, have confidence to make changes, live as part of a forgiven community ...That is someone for whom gray stickers and stigma won't stick!

If healing from trauma, pain and fear is found in healthy relationships that draw us to God, -- then jail is created to be the opposite –Jail is one BIG GRAY DOT – a place of aloneness and a mark of failure. Jail is a world of gray static isolation; a desert of loneliness, fear, division, loss and pain. People in jail live 24/7 in fear of those they don't trust, endure hours of waiting, hours of mind-numbing dead time in cells and on bunks, waiting for medication, waiting for meals, waiting for showers, waiting to get off the bunk or leave the cell, waiting to use the collect call phones, waiting for something to invade the monotony and dispel the madness for a while!

This is the setting in which Art and Spirit comes. Into units where hope is desperately needed. The Spirit of God through Art and Spirit workshops bring color, fellowship, laughter, storytelling, prayers, music, artistic expression, new perspectives, healing relationships and hope. These volunteers help break down the barriers of dissension and mistrust.

The message is clear to the prisoners --- People make mistakes but it doesn't change their value God's beloved creations. In CIC Ministries' Bible studies, worship services and Art and Spirit classes, inmates are treated as just people- children of God without stigma or bad marks.

The result is art that powerfully depicts the conflict and pain, the beauty and diversity of the human artists and the hope within them. *Can you sense the gray dots falling away?*

Art and Spirit volunteers, as well as all CIC volunteers, come into the jail as wounded healers. We are in the business of our Creator –helping the inmates to find their value to God and worth to the community, so that their gray dots fall off.

One other word on gray dots... Those who associate and work with those with gray dots – they will get gray dots by association. There is an amount of stigma attached to those who work with prisoners. We are called “inmate lovers” and “bleeding hearts”. Doors close in our faces because we are told that criminals deserve prison, not redemption. I understand because I once believed that too.

Henri J.M. Nouwen, the Catholic priest known for contemplative writing wrote a book called *The Wounded Healer*. He said, “Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being hurt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: “Who can take away suffering without entering it?”

Punishment and stigma will never promote healing and wholeness. Healing will begin when prisoners, families and victims can find grace through faith, support and nurturing relationships. Your congregation can help prisoners find help and faith by supporting CIC’s work and your jail volunteers. There is an event coming up called Lydia’s table where you can learn how to help even without going into the jails.

None of us want gray dots. None of us want to be stigmatized. May we act towards one another as God’s forgiven family. We can live free of stigma and help others to find hope when we remember, *People are special because God made us and God doesn’t make mistakes.*

**Let’s pray:** Lord of the least of these, Thank you that you came to us to seek, to serve us and to save us when we were lost. Help us to know your heart and follow in your steps, to give of ourselves to those in need. Help us to not neglect you, in your distressing disguise as a prisoner, mentally ill, addicted and homeless. Help us to not stick gray dots on you, but to help, save and defend you and your loved ones. Give us courage and generosity to draw others into God’s forgiven family.

We pray for the sake of your love..  
In Jesus name, Amen.