

Title: "I go there to give them a better way."

1Cor 9:16

In Bible study we've been studying the letters of St. Paul to the Church of Asia Minor. St. Paul tells us that, as baptized children of God, we have been given a mission here on Earth. We have been called to share the Gospel with a world steeped in sin. Let me read the vs 19 to 23

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. To those under the law, I became as one burdened by the law. To those ignorant of the law, I became as one without the law To the weak, I became weak, I became all things to all men so that... I might save some. I do this all for the sake of the Gospel.*

Several years ago I met a person named Nathaniel Johnson. Nathaniel ran a prison ministry. Nathaniel would visit inmates in the local prison counseling them, and more or less teaching them to turn their lives around. His primary goal was to share the good news about Jesus Christ and how a relationship with Jesus could change their life. Nathaniel, himself, was an inmate 18 years ago, serving 5 years in prison. He told us of his early life as a gang leader and about his last time in prison, for selling drugs. As a result of his last imprisonment he had lost everything... his money, his family his wife. He had come to the point where he had nothing. He had hit rock bottom. But then at this lowest part of his life, after he had sunk to the lowest of lows... after he had lost everything... he came to know Jesus. He told us how a relationship with Jesus changed his life. Because of Jesus He gave up the gangs. He gave up the drugs. Because of Jesus he got a second chance in his marriage. God restored his relationship with his wife. His life with Jesus change him so much that after he was released... he returned to prison. He returned to prison to minister to those he left behind. I was totally fascinated by his stories.

Many gang members got involved in a gang at a very early age. They join a gang for the protection it gives, for the power it gives. In the gang areas of the city, many times it is: "eat or be eaten." I was fascinated by Nathaniel. I wanted to know "How do you share the gospel to people who are part of a gang?" "Why would they want to give up the security, the protection, the power of their gang? He sat there and thought for a moment. Then he said, "many of the kids join gangs while they are still young. Many feel that there is no other way. If they don't, they are beaten up or killed." But that's not the only reason. Many of them come from poor families. Many of them come from broken families. When they join a gang, they are part of a group. In fact, they consider "the gang" to be family. For many of them, this is the only family, the only loyalty they have ever experienced. This is why kids join gangs. This is why they stay in gangs. It's family!

But then Nathaniel said, the problem is that is that even if they join a gang, there is still a chance they will be beaten up or killed. I read in a news article that many gang members do not expect to live past the age of 25. For that reason, they live only for today, for the now. Violence is all they know; violence against their enemies, violence against their friends. Take what you can. Hurt those who hurt you. And that is the problem with a gang. While it is true, they have a family now, but the whole idea of “family” gets corrupted. In fact, all the good things about “family” gets corrupted. Things like “loyalty” in the gang setting become cruel perversions of the real thing, cruel perversions of what true relationships and love stand for. Far from being a loving family, life in a gang can be harsh and cruel, even amongst the “family.” What’s worse is that in a gang “Life” is still seen as meaningless. No higher purpose. No call to love.

So, I asked Nathaniel... quite naively, “So why do people stay in gangs?” “If it is so bad, why don’t they leave?” He immediately answered, “They see no other way.” “They see no other way.” Simple as that. All the bad things which come with a gang lifestyle, for them, that’s just the way life is! You do your best to survive and then you die. They stay in this lifestyle, they stay with the drugs, they stay with the violence, they stay in gangs, because “They see no other way.”

Then Nathaniel said something which sent a tingle down my spine.

“I go there to give them a better way.”

THAT WAS NATHANIEL’S MINISTRY!

That was Nathaniel’s ministry to the inmates at the prison!!

“I go there to give them a better way.”

“I GO THERE TO GIVE THEM A BETTER WAY!”

And then he was quick to say, it’s not me who does the work. “It isn’t MY way which saves them.” It was the gospel. It is Jesus. As it says in our epistle lesson from 1Cor 9:16

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, To those under the law I became like one under the law To those not having the law I became like one not having the law To the weak I became weak, I have become all things to all men SO THAT I might save some!*

So that, I might save some through the Gospel. For Nathaniel He became a prisoner to win the prisoners. Even though Nathaniel was free, he had served his time in prison, he was free to do whatever he wanted, free to start his life over, build the life which he wanted, even though he was free he went back to prison... to help those he left behind. Nathaniel became like a

prisoner to bring a message of good news to those lost still in prison to offer them a better way. He went back to prison to give them a better way. And there are many who now thank Nathaniel for bringing that good news to them so that THEY could FIND “the better way.”

This is precisely what God calls all of us to do. There are people out there who are in a prison. There are, in fact, people out there who are in a prison but they don't know it. It's not a prison with cement walls. It's not a prison with guards. It's an invisible prison, whose bars imprison the soul. They are in a prison of sin. The people of this world live in a prison of sin. And I am not talking about those who imprison themselves by willingly engaging in sinful actions. Rather I am talking about those who suffer in this world because this is a world of sin. I am talking about homeless people, jobless people, people dying in meaningless accidents, people suffering from broken marriages, broken families, children being born into families which are broken, people living in the fear of war the fear of an economic depression. I am talking about anyone suffering from the sinfulness of this world. Because all these bad things are all consequences of sin in this world. Bad things happen because this world is a prison, a prison of sin. But the good news is that because of Jesus God has provided a better way.

God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that whoever believed in him should not perish but have eternal life. Through faith in Christ, “the sufferings of this world” does not define you. It does not have the last word on your life. joblessness, homelessness broken families economic depression war, does not define us. The sinful things of this world, do not have the last word on us. You have a meaning, a purpose which extends into eternity. Through faith in Christ, you are not alone. You are loved. You are loved by God. You are part of a family which extends into eternity. That is the great news which God has for the world. God has provided the better way. The sad part is that not everyone knows this “better way.” There are people who stay in this prison of sin, because they know no other way. For them, life is simply “dog eat dog” and then you die. For them, that's just the way it is. They see no other way. They see no other way. It's as simply as that.

This is where we come in. Just like Nathaniel, we have been called to let people know there is another way. And you don't have to be a great preacher to do this. Many times, we show the world in our actions. When people spend their time and money to help others, by visiting the bereaved or by sitting with friends in a hospital... we show the world a better way. Likewise the faith of the family waiting for the surgeon to come out makes a powerful witness to “a better way.” When people share with those experiencing hardships, experiencing loss after a storm... when we share with them so they know that “they are not alone” we show the world a better way. Likewise, the hope of the people rebuilding after the storm because they believe that God is with them, witness to the world “there is a better way.” When our people do these things in the name of Christ we show the world a better way. The people of this world need to encounter a better way. God is calling US to show them a better way. May God use each and every one of you, to teach someone else a better way. Amen