

When Jesus looked out over the crowd, his heart broke. He had compassion for them because they were confused and aimless. He was ready to act to give them good news, healing and a kind of freedom that would open up their responses in the world. As he moves to act for them, he does something unexpected. He does not require that they confess their wrongs before he shows mercy towards them. He does not ask them a series of questions to discern their awareness of what needs revision in their lives. Religious leaders of the day may have expected such things to precede a measure of divine goodness. Jesus posture of compassion is frowned upon by some religious leaders.

Seeing the great numbers that need mercy, Jesus turns to his disciples and points out the need of the masses. He tells the disciples more kingdom workers are needed on the ground. He asks them to pray that God would send helpers for the time is right. The mission of the Church is visible. The mission of the Church is ready to begin.

To their surprise, the disciples' prayer is answered swiftly, and the answer turns out to be them. The disciples are the ones who will become the workers in the kingdom of God spreading grace and mercy. They will be calling attention to Jesus and the new world Jesus is initiating. They have not only been called to understand Jesus in their thinking, their calling includes embodying Jesus with all that they do. As Jesus sends them out he reminds them of the key to their mission. Jesus called them worthy and asked them to follow him. The disciples who have already experienced the generosity of Jesus, are to go out and exhibit the same generosity for others.

We gather around the Word today because of this great throng of disciples who have answered the call, followed Jesus and enacted divine mercy. Do you remember the people from your life that acted as a messenger of the grace of Jesus Christ for you? Can you recall when you were you shown undeserved mercy? Did someone accept and love you and not require you to meet a list of stipulations? Who was God using to enact mercy, acceptance and love?

The disciples were surprised it turned out to be them. Were you enfolded into a Christian community and invited to join the kingdom work? Were you inspired by the works of one caught by God's love? Were you changed by that message of grace to act with mercy and generosity for others?

Today I have a story of a man who as a youth was captured by the mercy of God. He then made sure he was trained in ways that would help him act with mercy and generosity. I like that he heard God's call at a young age, and that he had a clear mission and purpose in life, and that he knew what he did would be risky.

Clarence Jordan was a person who embodied the mercy and grace of Jesus. He was born in 1912 to a prominent white family in Talbotten, Georgia. The American south he knew growing up was one of racial segregation and prejudice. As a boy, Clarence was sensitive to the hypocrisy evidenced by these injustices, especially when they intersected religion.

At age twelve, Clarence joined a local church after a summer revival. During Sunday School they sang how people of every color are precious in God's sight, you may know the lyrics, "Jesus loves the little children of the world." But if that was true, Clarence wondered, why were all the black children in his neighborhood treated so poorly?

In his childhood home, Clarence's bedroom window looked out on the Talbot County Jail, only a hundred yards off. Coming home from school, Clarence would stop by the prison yard, and soon he befriended the cook and the chain gang workers. In those conversations, he learned about "the stretcher," a frame used to fasten a man's feet to the floor while his arms were pulled toward the ceiling by a block and tackle. It was a torture used almost exclusively on black men.

Clarence was also curious at church. He noticed the prison warden sang bass in the choir. One time at worship, the warden sang with abandon, "Love Lifted Me." That same night Clarence was woken by moans of suffering from the prison. He realized as he heard the cries that a black man was on the stretcher and the man who was pulling the ropes was none other than the warden who only hours before had sung his heart out to God. This knowledge both bothered young Clarence and propelled him toward a way of life that paid attention to the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew.

Clarence Jordan first studied agriculture at the University of Georgia. He joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps but in a few years he heard the words of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount haunting him. He resigned his commission

and enrolled in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He fell in love and warned his future wife before they married that he saw his work as a concern for racial justice and radical Christian living. He wanted her to know the risks he was willing to take so that black and white peoples could be equals.

After inner-city ministry and doctorate studies in the New Testament, Jordan met Martin England, a former missionary. They shared a concern for the agricultural crisis after the Great Depression and a belief that the Sermon on the Mount could be embodied for practical life. In 1942 they purchased land near Americus, Georgia which became Koinania Farms. Koinania was a Greek word used in the Acts of the Apostles to refer to the earliest gatherings of Christians. Clarence wished to create a new community following the way of Jesus.

The property they purchased included eroded land and unusable farm buildings. With lots of hard physical labor, they repaired the broken farm buildings and observed neighbors to learn the local farming techniques. As they built up the soil they also began to build a community that was in contrast to the entrenched segregation of the area. They brought in a local sharecropper as part of the farm staff. They ate their meals together, white and black, a practice which was noted by the locals.

It wasn't long before the farm was visited by the Ku Klux Klan. The leader announced, "We don't allow the sun to set on anybody who eats with (blacks) niggers." Clarence saw that sunset was approaching. With a humor that diffused so many other tense interactions through his ministry, he shook the man's hand vigorously. He said, "Why, I'm a Baptist preacher. I've heard about people who had power over the sun, but I never hoped to meet one." The man began laughing. The sun set without incident.¹

The community grew in population, a mix of black and white people, and in success in farming. The Koinonia community made a living by selling the produce of their land. Peanuts and pecans were part of that produce. The Ku Klux Klan tried to stop them by dynamiting the farm stand they used to sell to locals. One local businessman who sold supplies to Koinonia was dynamited like the farm stand. Fear rose up among other local businesses and they boycotted Koinonia Farm.

Still the farm continued their non-violent ways and invited people to come to the farm. Stubborn like most saints for justice, Jordan put up another stand. It got blown up, too. Crosses were burned on their property. Tracer bullets were fired on guests, children and Clarence. But then the word went out farther about the ways of this community, and people in the country began to support the farm.

A key leader of the Southern Baptist Convention gave support in a visit. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, came to stay, took a midnight turn at watch duty, and was shot at for the first time in her life. Support for the farm grew in the country. Since the use of a farm stand to sell was not an option, the Koinonia Farm turned to mail-order ads to sell their produce. Their famous slogan was this, "Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia."

Jordan's idea was that God is changing people and the world right now. He sought a way to reach people so that they would not only hear the word, but find a way to live out the faith and become the kingdom of God in real time.

Listen to Jordan's take on the final word of Matthew compared to how we know it. We read, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Jordan writes, "As you travel, then, make students of all races and initiate them into the family of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Clarence Jordan was truly changed by Jesus' message of grace which he first was aware of at the age of 12. He also knew that in order for this message to be heard, people had to have an opening where the message could break in. He used humor to disarm people and create that opening.

Jesus sent the disciples out with specific instructions. The goal is to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ so that the gospel can be received by another, taken in by the other, and become a part of that one's life. The disciples were to be for another person the story of Christ.

Clarence Jordan was able to do that with his whole life. But did you notice, as he enacted the kingdom of God, it resulted in not only support but also confrontation. The kingdom of God confronts us with welcome and hospitality.