

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

February 2, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

## WHY I AM A PRESBYTERIAN

### I Corinthians 13

The old joke says that a Presbyterian is someone who drinks too much to be a Baptist but does not have enough money to be an Episcopalian. So how about you? Why are you a Presbyterian? Does it have anything to do with your drink of choice or the balance of your checking account? How fascinating to know why any of us is a Presbyterian.

The truth of the matter is I am a Presbyterian by choice. Of course, we are all Presbyterians by choice. But I suspect that almost half of us did not grow up Presbyterian. Many of you made that decision later on in your life. Perhaps you could sport a bumper sticker that reads, “I wasn’t born a Presbyterian, but I got here as fast as I could.” I arrived in the land of the Presbyterians in my mid-twenties. I have never regretted it for a minute. Oh, maybe a couple times during certain Session meetings.

But then I consider the alternatives and I quickly fall on my knees and thank God I am a Presbyterian. An heir of John Calvin, a

member of the Reformed tradition, a perennial loser in church softball. Some people can tell you the exact moment they became a Christian. I, on the other hand, can tell you the exact moment when I knew I would become a Presbyterian. You could call it an Epiphany, a moment of illumination, a long-awaited homecoming.

It was my first semester at Austin Presbyterian Seminary in the spring of 1972. In a course on the book of Acts taught by Dr. John Jansen, a student asked a question. Dr. Jansen began his answer with these immortal words, “It seems to me.” Now that may not sound very dramatic, but that was the moment. You see, I was not used to religious leaders saying, “It seems to me.” In my background, religious leaders said things like, “Thus saith the Lord”, or “The Bible says,” or “Listen and I will tell you the truth.” Their answers seemed to have a veiled threat, “Believe it my way or hit the highway.”

I was astonished that a religious leader would admit that his answer was subject to debate or that others might have a different and defensible opinion. Dr. Jansen’s answer acknowledged the complexity of the truth, that multi-faced diamond which refracts the light in diverse ways. I became a Presbyterian because I knew deep in my heart that all our perceptions of the truth are limited and

partial. All our truth claims should include this phrase, “It seems to me.” I bless the memory of Dr. John Jansen, the one whose words of grace and truth paved the way for my becoming a Presbyterian.

Now you are quite aware that many Christians are not familiar with this phrase: “It seems to me.” In the Corinthian letter the apostle Paul confronts a group of folks who had never used that phrase. These were Gnostics, the dogmatically self-righteous people who considered themselves intellectually and spiritually elite. The Gnostics saw no grays, only black and white. They figured they had the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In fact, the Gnostics felt they had esoteric knowledge of God, a sort of secret cat-scan of God’s mind. And they made life miserable for Paul, challenging him at every point.

So how does Paul deal with these dogmatic Gnostics, these know-it-all Christians? In I Corinthians 13 Paul points to our limited knowledge of God. He says, “Our knowledge is imperfect.” It is like a child’s reasoning, quite elementary, like a kindergartner thumbing through Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary. A young child will perhaps recognize the pictures, but a lot of the words will go right over her head. That’s how much we understand God—just the pictures.

Indeed, our knowledge of God is like the reflected image from a polished metal mirror. Craftsmen in Corinth fashioned the finest mirrors in the Mediterranean area. Their best mirrors then would be our worst mirrors now. Those polished metal mirrors produced an image that was at best hazy. Paul says that “now we see in a mirror dimly”. So our knowledge of God is like the dim, obscure reflection from a hazy mirror.

As a youngster I remember staring at translucent glass bricks in my hometown church. I could detect someone on the other side, but the blurred image meant I could never identify who that person was. Similarly, we do not know God completely. We know God only as that Someone on the other side who shines through translucent glass into our lives.

Paul contrasts our current knowledge of God with two other realities. First, God’s knowledge of us. In the Galatian letter, Paul says, “Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” Paul corrects himself in mid-sentence, emphasizing God’s knowledge of us, inside and out. As the Psalmists confesses, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.” Our present knowledge of God seems simplistic indeed, like what we knew of the universe before the Hubble and Webb Telescopes. Fuzzy and indistinct, in

truth, pre-Hubble and pre-Webb. In stark contrast to God's pristine knowledge of us now and forever.

Second, our knowledge of God now is always to be contrasted with our knowledge of God in the ultimate future. Then and only then will we see God face to face. To see God, the Beatific Vision, to behold the Lamb of God—that is the promise in Jesus' Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." That Someone on the other side will surely astound us with majestic splendor. Then the infinite Other will be as close as our breath. Then at last every knee will bow and every eye will see. In that moment "lost in wonder, love and praise" we will cry out in delightful awe, "We hardly knew you."

So the question arises, "So what can we know for certain now? What can we believe with confidence?" I turn to that classic old Gospel hymn that says, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." God in Christ reconciling the world to himself—that I believe with all my heart. Everything else is "sinking sand"—open to debate, tentative, questionable. All our knowledge about God is like looking in a mirror dimly, imperfect and incomplete. So let's not get so puffed up about what we think is true.

Remember that Paul said, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” And that is why Paul emphasizes the supremacy of love over knowledge. All our partial knowledge will one day be unnecessary. Gifts of prophecy, tongues, knowledge, creeds, theologies all have a certain shelf life. So we would be ever so humble about what we claim to know. We can come down off our intellectual and spiritual high horse and focus on the one thing needful-God’s love.

One day truly we will walk by sight, seeing face to face. And in that Beatific Vision we will be overwhelmed by God’s eternal love. In the awesome presence of God we will rejoice that only God’s love is infinite. Greater than all knowledge is God’s love. Greater even than hope and faith is God’s love for us. In our best moments, Presbyterians understand this. We know deep in our hearts that only God’s love finally matters from everlasting to everlasting. “But the greatest of these is love.”

What it boils down to is this: God does not fully reveal to us all the secrets of the universe. But God does reveal fully to us God’s own heart. And God’s heart overflows with love, the love shown to us by the Son of God, Christ our Lord. Forgiving love, reconciling love, redeeming love. The bread broken for you, the cup poured out on your behalf-acts of tender mercy for you.

This is the love that overcomes the world and holds the universe together. When all else fades and is forgotten, finally there is only God's love. This is ultimately why I am a Presbyterian and I hope it is at least one of the reasons you are too. "God is love." Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

February 9, 2025

## INTO THE DEEP WATER

Luke 5: 1-11

Matthew and Mark both narrate the calling of the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. But neither explain why these laborers left their boats and nets to follow Jesus. Luke gives us an explanation in one of his most charming stories. I invite you to imagine that you were there.

Jesus takes a morning walk along the lakeshore and his winsome words attract a large crowd. Here there is no rejection, as in that not so successful sermon in his hometown. Here people hang on to his every word and press in upon him. So many people that Jesus asks the owner of a little fishing boat for assistance. Could he use his boat as a floating pulpit? And thus Peter, that strong-willed fisherman, gets caught up in the story of Jesus.

From his perch in this borrowed boat Jesus speaks to those on the shore and those wading out into the water. Peter no doubt heard every word. When the sermon is finished, one would expect Jesus to be ferried back to land. But that is not what happens. Jesus

then turns to Peter and asks him to do one more favor. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Now Peter and his partners James and John had been up all night and caught nothing. They were, in fact, in the process of washing their nets and hanging them up to dry. It had been a long, frustrating night and they were exhausted. Yet Peter senses something magisterial about Jesus, someone worth listening to. Already Peter had seen the power of Jesus’ words on the crowd. Now he feels that power himself. And so he says to this maritime preacher, “If you say so, I will let down the nets.”

At this point the preacher who offers moving words becomes the miracle worker who commands the waters. The fish come out of nowhere and are now everywhere. The text describes a “great shoal of fish” so huge they are about to break the nets. Peter calls for backup from his partners James and John who then launch their boat to haul in this immense catch of fish. Imagine the splashing, the shouts of astonishment, laughter and celebration -a fisherman’s dream come true! But there are so many fish that the two boats almost sink. This success is almost too good to be true or even safe!

At this point many would see only dollar signs. Fish were their livelihood and doubtless they had never seen such a windfall.

Perhaps you could imagine them saying, “Jesus, would you mind going fishing with us every day?” But here the nobility of Peter is revealed. With fish flopping and the boats almost sinking, Peter falls at the knees of Jesus and cries out, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Peter realizes that this is not just good fortune. This is a manifestation of God’s power and majesty.

Peter knows he is in the presence of the holy. Much like Isaiah who sees the Lord high and lifted up in the temple and cries out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.” In the presence of the holy we are all undone.

It is here that Jesus lifts up Peter with these stunning words, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching humans.” Now it should be noted that the phrase Jesus uses can be translated literally, “You will take alive many humans.” The phrase “take alive” translates a Greek word from which we get the English word “zoology”. Thus, Luke avoids the unpalatable notion of catching and gutting humans! No, that is not what Jesus meant. Bringing in people alive would be a better translation. Catching folks up in the net of God’s love could be another. Peter, James and John will now bring along others into the service of the Kingdom of God.

What is delightful about Luke's story is this: Peter, James and John are invited to leave the shallows and head out into the deep waters. There where that "great shoal of fish" will be found. Even in the daytime, when fishing was not so good as at night. There in the deep waters there is life, unexpected life, abundant life-flopping and splashing and almost inundating their boats.

Now sisters and brothers, if there is one thing the Christian life teaches us, it is this: no risk, no reward. The play it safe, hug the shoreline kind of faith seldom surprises. The predictable life brings predictable results. I wonder how many of us just hug the shoreline. Do we subscribe to this motto: "Hey, let's wade in the shallow end." Maybe that is why our Christian life is so incredibly boring sometimes. We expect little, we risk little, and we gain little. We get back exactly what we put into it. The shallows.

In the fall of 2009 the Synod of the Southwest sponsored a mission trip to meet the Christian community in China. We encountered the church in China, an amazing body of Christians who have literally come back from the dead. Or a death that the government planned for all religious groups during Mao's dreaded Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Thousands of Christians

were jailed and sent to collective farms throughout the country.

Churches were shuttered and her leaders dispersed.

After Mao died, the Chinese Communist Party allowed some Christian groups to be reconstituted but under strict limitations. It is not religious freedom but a form of regulated religion. Yet something amazing happened. Out from the underground, Chinese Christians began reopening churches. And then the adage came true, “If you build it, they will come.” And they came in the thousands.

We went to many services and were thrilled to see packed churches. Vibrant, alive, filled with the Spirit of God. And we saw something I had never seen before-a bicycle traffic jam both before and after the services. Between those multiple services held to accommodate the crowds, I saw pastors directing bicycle traffic. It left you breathless.

We had lunch with a pastor who had spent thirteen years in prison during the Cultural Revolution. After suffering so much for his faith, he beamed with joy as he gave thanks for the new life in the Chinese church, even with the restrictions. That man was sent into the deep waters. But then he witnessed a “great shoal of fish” being gathered into the net of God’s love. Teeming life, abundant life, new life in Christ-all over China.

I heard that Chinese pastor witness to this amazing truth: God provides even in an oppressive environment, with state sponsored threats. Listening to that pastor I asked myself, “Could I be that brave? Would I put my life on the life when Mao’s Red Guard threatened prison and death?” Talking with that remarkable servant of God, then in his 80’s, I promised myself that I would not be afraid were governmental pressure levied against me. I vowed not to hug the shoreline or just wade in the shallow end. By the grace of God, I vowed to venture out into the deep waters to see the wonders of God’s love, the marvels of God’s power.

Have I kept that vow I made in the fall of 2009? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. And that’s the way it goes in the Christian journey. Sometimes we bow before Jesus knowing we are in the presence of the holy. And sometimes we ignore him and his demands upon our lives. So my prayer for us this day is the following: “O God, keep me from fear that makes me hug the shoreline. Give me a strong heart to venture with you into the deep waters. And may your grace lead me always with your strong hand. Thanks be to God. Amen.”

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

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## SINNERS

Luke 5: 27-32

If the Gospel of Luke were to air on television, it would be broadcast on the Food Network. Why? Because every time you look up, Jesus is sharing a meal or talking about food. In our text, Jesus shares a meal with one of his new disciples and his friends. Levi, who has left his job as a tax collector, invites Jesus to a feast, along with of bunch of his tax collecting friends. The Pharisees are not amused that Jesus chooses to eat with tax collectors and sinners. As we will see, Jesus seems to prefer breaking bread with biker gangs rather than the stuff shirts.

Walk through Luke's narrative with me, the way the Food Network would. In Luke 7 Jesus shows his openness to all kinds of people by eating at the home of an unnamed Pharisee. Not all Pharisees were his sworn enemies. Some even invited him to dinner. But when entering the Pharisee's home, Jesus is not offered water to

wash his feet. Instead, a woman who is a sinner intrudes upon the party and bathes Jesus' feet with her tears.

The Pharisee is scandalized that such a woman would even touch Jesus. Then Jesus tells his host the parable of the two debtors, one owing a tremendous sum and the other a meager amount. Both debtors are forgiven and Jesus asks who will love all the more the one who forgave them. The Pharisee apparently gets the point.

In Luke 9 Jesus hosts a large outdoor picnic garnered from but five loaves and two fish. Everyone ate their fill and twelve baskets full of leftovers are gathered. Such a feast from so little! So like manna from heaven!

In Luke 10 Jesus goes to the home of Mary and Martha, where Martha feverishly prepares a meal for her honored guest. Meanwhile, Mary her sister simply sits in the living room listening to Jesus. When Martha complains, Jesus suggests that Mary has chosen the better portion. Here words of life trump the preparation of food.

In Luke 11 Jesus again dines in the home of an unnamed Pharisee. Do you see a pattern here? The host is again scandalized, this time when Jesus does not perform the ceremonial washing of hands before the meal. Then Jesus turns on his host and criticizes

his “pharisaic attitude”, if you will. In fact, Jesus launches into a broadside against the blatant hypocrisy of religious leaders. I’m thinking that put a damper on the evening’s festivities.

In Luke 14 Jesus is again invited to the home of yet another unnamed Pharisee. Now you can probably guess what happened. It was a Sabbath meal, a holy tradition in Judaism. A man with swollen feet shows up and Jesus heals him. Jesus explains that since the Sabbath is a day for healing, he has not violated the commandment against work.

At that dinner party Jesus notices that people are acting as though they are attending an awards banquet, coveting the places of honor. So Jesus tells an after dinner story, the parable of the great banquet. Invitations are extended, but excuses all around are offered. Now the host proposes a rather unlikely guest list: “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” Furthermore, the banquet hall is to be filled by going out in to the “roads and lanes and compel them to come in.” Has such a banquet ever been held?

In Luke 19 Jesus dines with yet another tax collector, this one with a name-Zacchaeus. This might be labeled “the happy meal”, where things go swimmingly. This chief tax collector of Jericho insists to his guest of honor that he gives away half of all his

possessions to the poor. And Zacchaeus adds that if he defrauded anyone, he promises to offer restitution fourfold. Jesus is so astonished by the utter sincerity of his host that he declares, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.”

In Luke 22 Jesus serves as the host to the most famous meal in history, the Last Supper. In this anxious final night of his life, Jesus gives new meaning to their Passover meal. Now the bread broken will remind his disciples of his body broken for them. The wine poured out will remind them of his blood shed for them. As in Psalm 23 where a table is “prepared before me in the presence of my enemies”, here Jesus dines with Judas, who betrays him.

Now this motley crew of disciples also show their true colors by arguing over who will be the greatest in the coming Kingdom. Jesus reminds his clueless followers that the true leader in the kingdom will be “like one who serves”, not one who lords it over others. Nevertheless, Jesus promises that in the coming kingdom they will eat and drink with him and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Still a dark cloud hangs over this meal when Jesus reveals that one will betray him and all will abandon him, even Peter.

In Luke 24 after his death and resurrection, the Risen Christ ends up walking incognito with Cleopas and his friend to Emmaus. Deeply saddened by the events in Jerusalem, they arrive at their home and invite this mysterious guest for dinner. During the meal Jesus reveals himself to these two amazed disciples “in the breaking of the bread.”

Later that same evening, the risen Christ appears to his disciples huddled together fearfully in Jerusalem. While they can hardly believe their eyes, Jesus asks for something to eat. He is given a “piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate in their presence.” The final meal with the risen Christ has him holding a piece of broiled fish in his hands!

As I said, the Gospel of Luke should air on the Food Channel. By my count, there are at least ten occasions where Jesus dines with others or talks about a shared meal. For Jesus, dining with someone is offering the hand of friendship and fellowship, even forgiveness. Breaking bread with someone brings reconciliation and healing.

In our text in Luke 5, Jesus offers the hand of friendship and fellowship to Levi and his tax collecting friends, whom the rest of society despised. When challenged, Jesus responds with two memorable lines. First, “Those who are well have no need of a

physician but those who are sick.” Second, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Those who imagine they need no forgiveness are not Jesus’ target audience. Those who know their estrangement from God are given what they most need-fellowship, friendship, forgiveness, healing. Sinners in need of God’s grace—that is who Jesus wants to break bread with, even to this day. The biker gang, not the stuffed shirts!

So just how important is sharing a meal? A rabbi friend of mine once summed up Judaism in this way, “God wins. Let’s eat!” The Presbyterian version of that statement goes like this, “We will not meet unless we eat!” And so it goes in our congregation: our monthly communion at the Table, our weekly fellowship time after worship, our Ladies who Lunch, our Men’s Fellowship Breakfasts, sharing food after memorial services as we did yesterday, our Deacons sending meals to our members in need, and hopefully soon our reconstituted Chatterbox meals together. And you may have noticed I love to eat lunch with you!

Our abundance reminds us of those who have far less, especially those in Africa now cut off from food shipments from USAid. In our abundance, let us always remember the needy in

prayer. “Give us this day our daily bread” moves us to pray “give them their daily bread as well”.

Friends in Christ, Jesus has broken down the walls of hostility by breaking bread with us. We are loved and accepted and forgiven as we share a meal with our Lord. And we pray that all people, sinners all, will share in the great blessings of Christ’s mercy, forgiveness and grace. May it be so. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

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## ON GETTING EVEN

Luke 6: 27-38

On January 31 Albuquerque made the national news. You may have seen it, our courtroom brawl. Defendant Alexander Ortiz was brought before a judge accused of killing his ex-girlfriend. Just then the victim's uncle Carlos Lucero and a friend jumped the railing and attacked the defendant. Soon they were followed by a woman hitting the defendant with a chair. Then the defendant's dad jumped in to attack the attackers. Finally, the bailiffs and police officers subdued everyone and took them away in handcuffs.

After being charged with felony assault upon an officer, the victim's uncle Carlos Lucero said the fight was well "worth it because he killed my niece like a coward." So that's how we made national news-a courtroom brawl all about getting even.

How many other places in our world hear that cry for revenge: Gaza and Israel, Ukraine and Russia, the Congo and Sudan. How many places in our country see that same cry for retribution: in bitter divorce proceedings, in political shouting matches, in

personal vendettas of all shapes and sizes. The desire to get even is pervasive. Chain saws and hatchets and talk show put downs fill the air. Lord, have mercy.

Even the Psalmists again and again seek retribution on their enemies. Our reading today from Psalm 37 insists that the “wicked shall be cut off”. And “yet a little while and the wicked will be no more.” Within the Psalter are repeated cries against those who hurt others. Within every human heart I suppose is a wounded soul that wants to jump over the court room railing to beat the accused over the head. Do you recognize that dark shadow within your own soul? I know that pesky demon sometimes takes up residence in mine. Maybe that is why so many take delight in World Wrestling Federation matches. Played out before us on the mat is the melodrama of revenge. retribution. and getting even.

Now we all feel a bit guilty about that anger within our souls. So we look for cover to justify our vengeance. I am reminded of W.C. Fields, that cynical old comic, who found himself hospitalized, very ill. A friend came to visit and saw Fields reading a Bible. Surprised, he asked why, and Fields answered, “Just looking for loopholes.” Are we looking for loopholes for our feelings?

In our reading from Luke's Gospel Jesus seems to close that loophole. Jesus cancels whatever stamp of approval the Bible may have given to revenge. Getting even does not appear in our Lord's vocabulary. In fact, Jesus suggests that those who live by the "tit for tat" code are living like common ordinary sinners. Pure secularists love their friends and carry an enemies list in their top pocket. Jesus reminds his followers: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that!" It's only natural to harbor bitter feelings. But Jesus insists we move beyond our natural inclinations, that labyrinth of old grievances infecting our hearts.

Jesus speaks words that were just as challenging for his first followers as they are for us today. So consider how he begins: "But I say to you that listen." You that listen, you with ears to hear, you with hearts that are teachable. Not everyone can or will hear Jesus' challenge. Not those filled with malice, not those harboring a desire for revenge, not those who take the world as it is, a "tit for tat" jungle.

But you who chose a more excellent way, this word is for you. You who are weary of nursing old wounds, this word is for you. You who are sick of wars and rumors of wars, our endless conflicts, our litigious society, our constant backstabbing, our divisions into a

thousand warring camps, this word is for you. For those with those with ears to hear, this is a word from our Lord, a word of life.

So hear it if you can, listen if you will. Brace yourself: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Love, do good, bless, pray. Even turn the other check. Offer your coat. Give away your money and your goods. Lend, expecting nothing in return. What? Can anyone bear to hear this? Has anyone besides Jesus ever come close?

What is Jesus really saying and why is he saying this? I think there are two things going on here. First, I think Jesus is aiming at transforming a hateful situation into a hopeful situation. It’s all about turning an enemy into a friend, if you can hear that. Now Jesus certainly acknowledges that wrongs have been done-hatred, violence, theft, cursing, abuse. That great wrongs have been committed is not in question. But something more vital than getting even is at stake here. Something more important than exacting a pound of flesh from your enemy. The highest good is turning an enemy into a friend of the Gospel. Can you imagine such a thing happening? Will Joseph forgiving his brothers ever happen again?

And there is a second issue at stake here: to free our own hearts from the shackles of revenge. To let go of that corrosive anger

ripping up your own spirit. To save your heart from the dark clouds of vengeance. To realize at last that getting even is never really getting even at all. It is to lower myself and make of myself merely a rod of retribution. Something so unlike One who refused to call down legions of angels against his enemies in his darkest moments. The One who finally said even as he suffered a terrible wrong, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do.”

Is this all just too much? An impossibility? Utterly irrelevant amidst crime and violence of all sorts? The truth be told, some have heard these words as liberating and life-giving. Indeed, transformative.

Take the case of Jurgen Moltmann, the author of *The Theology of Hope*. At age 17 young Jurgen was drafted into the German army in the last stages of World War II. Sent to the front in Holland, he surrendered to the British on February 15, 1945, never having fired a shot in anger. Sent to a prisoner of war camp in Scotland, Moltmann fell into deep depression, especially when shown pictures of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. His secular worldview collapsed into bitterness.

In that dark time he was given a Bible, a book he had paid no attention to. What caught his eye first were the psalms of lament,

those cries to God like “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Those psalms gave expression to his sorrow. And then he read the Gospel of Mark and when he came to the crucifixion scene, his heart stopped. He saw in the “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” a man after his own heart, one struggling in pain. Slowly that Hound of heaven began pursuing Jurgen behind that prison fence. Awakening in him a glimmer of hope, a possible new world, where God cared for him even in his forsakenness.

Soon Jurgen found himself listening to the sermons of the prison chaplain, singing in the chapel choir, even learning to pray. Eventually the YMCA sent theological professors into the camps and Jurgen began learning about the faith, especially the Bible. It was like discovering treasure out in a field.

But what was finally transformative for young Jurgen was a Student Christian Missions conference held in Swanwick, England, in the summer of 1947. A group of POW's were invited to attend and Jurgen came wearing his prison uniform. They came in fear and trembling. Listen to his description of that event: “What were to say about the wartime horrors and the mass murders in the concentration camps? But we were welcomed as brothers in Christ, and could eat and drink, pray and sing with young Christians who

had come there from all over the world. To be accepted as we were, was a wonderful experience of grace. We so enjoyed singing the hymns in English like “in Christ there is no east or west, but one great fellowship of love.”

“Then a group of Dutch students came and said they wished to speak to us officially. I was frightened at the prospect of meeting them, because I had been at the front in Holland during the fighting for the Arnhem bridge. The Dutch students told us that Christ was the bridge on which they were coming to meet us and that without Christ they would not have been able to speak a word to us.” They shared with us the horrors they experienced, the destruction of their homes, the killing of their Jewish friends by the Gestapo.

Then they asked us “to step onto the bridge that Christ had built from them to us” to accept forgiveness and reconciliation. “At the end we all embraced. For me that was the moment of liberation. I could breathe freely again and I felt like a human being once more.”

Had those Dutch students read these words of Jesus? “Love your enemies...and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” I think these Dutch students had ears that hear,

hearts that are teachable. May we hear deep in our hearts what they heard. Thanks be to God. Amen.