

REFLECTION
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When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Genesis 17

*For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?
Indeed, what can they give in return for their soul? Mark 8*

I wonder how many of you remember the years we spent trying to secure release for Linda Glazier who spent twenty years incarcerated at the Maryland House of Correction for Women as an accomplice for the murder of her two adoptive parents. Our relationship with Linda began about six years before we built The Conboy Center, which was originally named *The Children’s Center*. As I think back on those days, I remember the dingy visiting room where we sat and how we weren’t allowed to share an embrace upon greeting or departing. I remember the other women, blankly staring at their attorneys who carried briefcases of notes and court orders. I remember being shaken to the core each visit, watching the women shuffle in, heads bent low, tears in their eyes when a child ran up for an embrace. Feigning well-being— *“Oh, I’m ok. Everything is fine. How are you doing?”* We spent three years getting to know Linda— it took time to establish a genuine relationship with her. Do you remember praying for her during those years? Sending her gifts? What was allowed that is, a short list. To make a point, we prayed for her by her number. She was a “depersonalized number” in the system: #901540 I still have the prayer card we used. I keep it in my prayerbook still. I am convinced that it was prayer that provided the strength and determination that seeded our commitment to help her. It was by praying for her and *befriending her*, that we were given the strength and determination —the passion needed to do the impossible— which was to navigate a prison system intent on punishment rather than rehabilitation, secure her release— against all odds (no-one thought it was possible), and help set her up in a new life after her release. There was so much strength and determination that it didn’t end there but resulted in the construction of a million dollar building to provide a safe and nurturing child care for children— with no funds in hand.

Knowing Linda, praying for Linda, *befriending Linda*, did all that. It was a soul to soul experience. It meant having to see her reality and admit that child abuse in our society is more common than we admit. And in admitting this, we admitted that abuse cripples and destroys young people for a lifetime. *It steals their souls*. When we *befriended Linda*, we got honest and then, outraged. We advocated on her behalf tirelessly for three years.

In the process we got honest about our own lives and experiences. A number of people confided in me, that they too, had been abused as children. Floodgates opened. It was in the *authenticity of our befriending*— befriending her and each other— with genuine compassion and empathy that made it possible for us to advocate irrepressibly on her behalf until on December 26, 1995 when the Governor of Maryland commuted her life sentence (after 20 years in prison) and she was released to our care.

At the time, Paul Monas, a New York attorney representing abused children published a book about children who kill in which he wrote,

Children are born like gentle baby elephants.

When they act like alligators, something happened.

In other words, *somebody stole their soul*.

This is what today's lessons point to. They are lessons about the way it is supposed to be and the way it really is. About creation and redemption. In Genesis we read about God's promises to our spiritual father, Abraham, our SOUL FATHER. We look backwards to the Book of Genesis and read about the gift of abundant life promised through Abraham to all God's children. And then in the Gospel of John, we listen-in to a conversation that Jesus has with his disciples about suffering and the need for redemption. Notice that Peter doesn't want to hear anything about suffering—the suffering of Jesus or anybody else. The conversation shifts and focuses on these words,

What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?

Indeed, what can they give in return for their soul?

(The word in Greek is better translated SOUL instead of life.)

This isn't some non-specific warning about individuals choosing the world's riches over God. This is one of the most important passages in the Gospels. And one that has been misunderstood and diminished to a limited notion about saving a soul for the afterlife. Ignoring the reality of injustice and abuse in the world now, that seeks to destroy the people of God. Child abuse. Racism. Sexism. Domination. Isolation, Neglect, Hatred. Violence. The truth is that some of this has lodged in each of us—at least through an unwillingness to acknowledge its prevalence. In our ignorance or out of our own pain, we may even inflict pain and damage on others. By ourselves we are all lay prey to it. In our society, the very air we breath can suck the soul right out of us, all of us. None of us is immune but some get hit harder than others. And together we are called to advocate for them. This is the conversation Jesus was having with his disciples.

In Ralph Ellison's classic book, *Invisible Man*, he tells the unforgettable story of a black man's nightmare journey across the racial divide and the nature of bigotry and its effects on both victims and perpetrators. Here is an excerpt:

I am an invisible man. ...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, because people refuse to see me. Like the boilers heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything except me.

Today's lessons are about God's generous promises for humankind, Jesus's irrepressible vocation to confront suffering and death and to call together a People —the Church— to be the place where God in Christ can save souls—to heal and redeem each of us and all of us.

What can we give in return for our souls?

I'm not sure how Linda's soul really was. I do know that she got a job, got married, had two dogs she treated like children, took a trip to the Caribbean, and bought a house. She had a life for twenty years after her 20 years in prison and before she died of cancer about 4-5 years ago. She underwent so much suffering from such an early age.... But she opened our eyes, taught us what is loving and kind, and gave us a courage and a passion for justice—and perhaps saved our souls. Not for heaven, but for here and now, and for each other. I know that she changed my life.

You can look into the eyes of another person and see something of their soul.

The eyes are the window into the soul.

(Cicero, Shakespeare)

Let's take time to look and to listen to each other and to those who may have different experiences than our own. Pray for one another. *Be-friend* one another. Let's be *soul-friends* and stand with each other in the Name of Christ for the healing of souls. The mark of a healed soul, a redeemed soul, is the outward pouring of love and advocacy for others—for nothing less than the well-being and redemption of their souls.

AMEN