

“Let’s Surprise Them”

Matthew 3:13-17

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Communion Devotion

“Let’s surprise them with compassion, restraint and generosity.” This was my favorite line from the movie, *Invictus*, which portrays the life of Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa. When Mandela became president after twenty-seven years as a political prisoner, many expected him to seek revenge. His inner circle of advisors, along with family members, friends and citizens, demanded that he retaliate for the despicable treatment he and others endured during years of apartheid. He refused.

“Let’s surprise them with compassion, restraint and generosity” he said, “all the things they deprived us of.” He held firm against severe pressure to do otherwise and as a result began the process of uniting his country, which had known nothing for decades but division and violence.

Mandela’s words sound like some Jesus could have spoken. He, too, surprised people by what he did or refused to do.

I’m not surprised. After all, he came to do the will of his Father, whose grace often surprised people. The birth narratives we recently studied bear witness to this.

Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, was where Jesus was born. Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, shepherds and Wise Men played prominent roles in his birth, not Herod or the scribes and Pharisees.

Just because we prefer certainty and predictability, doesn’t mean God does, and neither did Jesus. From the beginning of his ministry, marked by his baptism, to the end of his public ministry with his crucifixion, Jesus surprised people. These two events framed his ministry and caught people by surprise.

It is obvious that John was shocked when he realized that Jesus wanted to be baptized by him. To say he was surprised would be an understatement. Matthew records that John offered resistance. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Matthew 3:14.

Why was Jesus baptized? It appears to me that he was responding to God’s call upon his life, symbolizing his obedience through baptism. “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness,” Jesus said. Jesus was moving from the carpenter’s shop to the countryside, a change symbolized by baptism, as shocking as this was for John and many others.

Another time that Jesus surprised his inner circle of disciples was the day he was crucified. So caught off guard were they that they abandoned him out of fear. I suspect they watched from a distance in utter disbelief as he died.

Why did Jesus die? Again, he was responding to the call of God upon his life. Among many things, God wanted him to break the cycle of hatred and violence that marked his culture, and Jesus did. He resisted the temptation to retaliate, instead courageously dying with love in his heart. “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus surprised even his enemies with compassion, restraint and generosity.

What is the most surprising thing you could do this week? How can you be the presence of Christ in your home, at school, at work, in your neighborhood and break the cycle of hatred and strife?

It has been a little over two years since a lone gunman by the name of Charles Carl Roberts IV stepped into a one-room Amish school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and opened fire. He killed five little girls and injured five more.

As you would expect, the attention of the entire country was focused upon this tragedy at the Nickel Mines School and these quiet, humble folk in Bart Township of Lancaster County.

These good-hearted people taught us a lot that week about the radical nature of Christian love. On the evening of the shooting, family members of the slain children visited Carl Roberts' parents and told them they had forgiven their son. They knew that the Roberts family was grieving, too, and offered to help them with their grief.

People are still writing two years later about the gracious response of the Amish to this disaster. Again, I am not surprised. This kind of response captures people's attention.

What are you going to do this week to surprise someone who mistreated you? What difference would it make in your life and theirs? Who can help you respond with compassion, restraint and generosity?

What are you going to do to surprise someone whom you have mistreated? What changes will you make in your life? How will you make amends? What will you do to begin the healing process? Who can help you?

Let the bread and wine you will hold in your hands in a few minutes help you answer these questions.