

## **“What does the Lord require ...?”**

By Dave Feick, August 27, 2017

“Kelly” is a man, just a couple weeks older than myself. I first met him one day several years ago at the Saskatoon Correctional Center. I was in the hallway between my office and the chapel when his unit came down the hall from the gym on their way back to their dorm. As he walked by, Kelly asked if I could call him down to the chaplain’s office. A chance encounter that he later claimed was a God thing.

Kelly was well known in the jail by staff and inmates. He’d been there many times for thefts and break and enters which he committed in order to support his drug addiction. This time, however, was different. He’d been charged with a sexual offense against his own daughter some 15 years earlier. A charge that he continues to deny.

After that initial meeting, I did call him down to the office to hear his story, which led to our meeting on a regular basis. Yes, he was looking for spiritual support but mostly, he was looking for assistance in finding a lawyer to fight this charge for him, in ensuring he would have a place to stay if they should let him out on bail, and to send letters out on his behalf. Some of this I could do, some I could not. He also joined a number of the chapel programs as he sought to pass the time as well as better himself. And he found the services to be helpful spiritually as well.

Eventually, his case went to trial and he would report to me how it was going and for the most part, he felt positive. Then came the sentencing day. I went to court for this and was rather surprised to hear nothing of the positive spin that he had told me about. It was all rather harsh and he was given a sentence of about 6 years but with time served it ended up at between four and five years.

Shortly after his sentencing, my job changed. Working full time for Micah and no longer as prison chaplain at SCC, I began making trips to the Saskatchewan Penitentiary in PA as part of my work. I made a point of visiting with Kelly whenever I was there. As a result, I became one of his main supports when he returned to Saskatoon on his Statutory Release at the beginning of this month.

Now Kelly is a whiner and a complainer and perhaps for good reason. He’s had some significant health issues during his incarceration and claims he didn’t get a lot of support from the medical staff there. He also faced some brick walls when he sought out medical attention in the Saskatoon community. All the while, staying at one of the halfway houses, he talked about how he was being treated by some of the other residents. A week ago Friday, after a routine search of the dorm in which he and others were staying, he was arrested for having some unauthorized meds in his bed. He says he was set up. Kelly is now back in PA and I expect I will be able to see him tomorrow when I go to visit there.

Kelly is not one of our CoSA Core members. Though his offense was of a sexual nature, because he never admitted to it, is not willing to be held accountable for it, a CoSA would not be the right place for him. Instead, I sought to support him in my community chaplain role, seeking

to connect him with a congregation where he could find the support he needed. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get to that stage of support before he was sent back.

"Dale" was one of our Person to Person participants at the Regional Psychiatric Center. I don't know how much time he has spent in prison or exactly what his charges were. When he was released about 4 years ago, the volunteer who had been visiting him sought to provide support for him on the outside, but he found himself being overwhelmed by the demands Dale was making on his time. Dale is a senior citizen with some significant health issues and lots of appointments to deal with those and other issues.

I told the volunteer about our Forward Step program and suggested it might be a place for the two of them to connect. It was indeed a much better situation as it gave them both the support they needed. The volunteer was no longer trying to provide all the help on his own, and my co-worker and other volunteers were able to step in to lighten his load. Still, the volunteer ended up dropping out of the program and out of his support for Dale because he had some personal issues to deal with and still felt that Dale was putting a lot of demands on him. The volunteer hadn't learned enough about creating his own boundaries for such a situation as much as we tried to help him with that.

For a while, my colleague, Peter took on much of the load but over time, when it came time to shut down our Forward Step program, we were able to find a way for some University students to provide some support. Once a week, they pick up groceries for Dale and visit with him for an hour or two and they all tell how much they enjoy it.

Since Peter is no longer with our organization, I need to oversee their involvement and in the past couple weeks, I've been hearing from the volunteers about needing to take a break and Dale struggling with some personal issues.

When I met with him this week, Dale was able to tell me that his addictions counselor and his psych nurse were providing more support for him but he still was feeling a bit lonely. Dale lives in a senior's residence not far from a church. We had actually talked to the pastor about whether they might be able to provide some support for him but nothing had come of it. Dale mentioned the other day that he was thinking of going over to talk to them. I offered to go and check with the pastor and had a brief visit with him and explored some ideas that might come to fruition. Before I left, Dale showed up and was able to meet the pastor and to make some connections that look promising.

Dale is a likeable guy, very personable, and it was heart warming to be able to make this connection with him this week. It is good to see him making the progress that he is, because people are seeking to treat him justly and to offer constant love and to walk humbly with him and with God.

I have to admit I'm having mixed feelings today over the fact that I was expecting an article about Micah Mission to be in the Star Phoenix yesterday. I'm told it will appear in September sometime and the reporter is using that time to try and beef it up a bit with perspectives from

offenders. But she's asking the wrong questions and offenders do not want to respond to those and so I'm a bit apprehensive as to what the article will look like.

The original interview for the article came as the result of a conversation with the reporter who, together with several of her colleagues, report on court proceedings. As each in turn reported on one particular young man who has been charged for possession and distribution of child porn, they made mention of the number of files that were found on his computer. For some reason, each of these reporters found it necessary to make reference to another person who had been found to have a similar number of files on his computer. I guess to compare the offenses and to suggest what a proper sentence might be.

But this second person they were referring to, is one of our clients, who is out on parole, being supported by a CoSA and doing well, other than that he cannot find a job. It seems that everywhere he goes looking for a job in his line of work, people know who he is and what he's done and they want nothing to do with him. How's a person really to move on if no one wants to hire him? Yes, he's committed some horrible crimes and he's done his time, but does he really need to be punished for the rest of his life? Keeping him down and out this way is only going to drive him to the kinds of self doubts that could lead him to reoffend and no one wants that.

So every time he saw his name in the paper again, it bothered him to no end and I would hear about it. So I talked to the reporter about this and actually had a good conversation with her and I put the bug in her ear saying we could use some good publicity and eventually, she called back and I hope to see the resulting article soon.

But as we continued to talk, after the interview and off the record, she mentioned how she is so tired of reporting on these child porn cases. There's just getting to be more and more. And she was actually wondering about more restorative measures and even preventative measures. How do we educate people about the need to get out before it's too late. It is obviously far too easy to access this material and it's often young men and women, barely out of their teens who get caught up in it. But there are people of all ages being arrested and sentenced for such crimes.

It seems to me that there has to be a point where a person can recognize they're getting into something they shouldn't and be able to get out with help and support without being charged. But in order for that to happen they need to know that they have the freedom to talk to someone about it. I can't imagine if one of my children came to me and confessed to something like this, but I would much rather they did and we find help for them than to learn from a phone call that the police had entered their place of residence and arrested them and confiscated their computers and phones, etc. and have their name all over the news.

I hope that two things come as a result of the upcoming article. 1) that parents are diligent in keeping a close eye on their children and teens and young adults as much as possible. I would also hope and pray that parents are open and honest with their children. Let them know that if their children find something that they think they shouldn't be looking at, but maybe can't help looking at it, that they know that they can talk to their parents about it and get some help. No matter who you are, no matter what age, if you know you're doing something you shouldn't please talk to someone, get some help, before it's too late.

A very good friend of mine and former pastoral colleague is currently sitting in a prison for some of his own indiscretions. He is realizing now that he had people in his life that he could talk to, but he did not avail himself of those resources. And so he offended and now he pays the price. So, again, please talk to people before it's too late.

The second thing that I hope for is that people will read the article and find what we do to be a good thing, and they will want to volunteer with us and help make a difference. That they will see that there is a better option than locking people up and hoping that will take care of it. As STR8 Up members have been telling us in the media this week, tougher sentences for youth are not going to reduce crime, it's only going to increase it. Youth that are caught up in criminal activity need other supports to help them overcome whatever is leading them to crime. And that is true of anyone doing something illegal. Sure, there is a place for incarceration. But too often, as has been said, prison is just a place for people to learn to be better criminals. It does not deter crime.

A significant chunk of my work these days is working with people who have offended sexually. And sex offenses cover a wide gamut as we know. And as I was thinking about this sermon over the past couple of months, it's been interesting both the stories that have shown up in the news, not only locally but across our continent, but also the stories I've encountered in my daily Bible readings.

One of the latter is an Old Testament story but it is certainly not a favourite. It's found in 2 Samuel 13, and tells about Amnon, a son of King David and his half sister Tamar. It is not a pretty story. Amnon sexually assaults his sister and no one knows how to deal with it. The story leads to another of David's sons, Absalom, killing Amnon and then living in exile for a time and eventually also being killed in a battle of revolt against his father.

And what happens to Tamar? She spends the rest of her life in seclusion, trying to deal with the trauma of it all.

What do you do with a story like that? Why is it even in scripture? Perhaps to show that even some of the wisest people in society don't always have the answers to some difficult situations? Or maybe to show that people in the OT times just didn't get it, and wouldn't listen to the wisdom of the prophets. And even some of them didn't always get it. We're all too aware of similar types of events happening today and there still seems to be no concrete answers. And there seem to be Christian people on both sides of almost every issue in our world today.

Last week, Patty talked about the cities of refuge that were to be set up in Israel. Where someone who killed someone by accident could go for protection. I was particularly intrigued by the statement Patty made in regard to a church in France that had harbored Jews during the Holocaust – suggesting that if all Christians in Europe, had done the same, there couldn't have been a Holocaust. That's a rather mind boggling statement. The church could have stopped or even prevented the Holocaust! We can only imagine what Hitler might have done had the church rebelled against him in such a way.

The same idea has been expressed in a slightly different regard by someone in Canada, that if every church or faith community in Canada were to provide support for prison inmates and former inmates, we could close some prisons. That may be a challenge as difficult to fathom as the statement Patty made. The little experience I've had with churches trying to provide that support shows that we do need a lot of thinking and training and oversight for churches that do undertake such a practice. There are those who would be taken advantage of in such a situation. We've seen that happen first hand. Those being supported need to recognize what that support would entail and how they and the faith community could work together. There need to be those proper boundaries established as we seek to do what is just, show constant love and walk humbly.

Jesus shows by example just how to go about doing this in the story of the woman caught in adultery in the NT. Like me, you probably wonder just how does a woman get caught in adultery and there is no man to be accused as well? Last I checked, it's not a sin one can commit by oneself. It usually takes two. But Jesus treats her justly, shows constant love and walks humbly and sends her on her way forgiven and not condemned.

But it seems these stories, perhaps like the story of the fall in the Garden of Eden, the woman seems to commit the greater sin. Or does she? Like Adam, men have been good at putting the blame on the women. Only in recent years have the courts started listening to the woman's side of the story and the tide turns – men being charged and convicted for their sins of abuse. In some of the stories I've heard in prison, it could be that it's gone to the other extreme, and that women are abusing that new freedom, but that's only hearing one side of the story. The fact is women need to be heard and we need to hear the stories, too, because there are far too many of them as we are learning through the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls hearings and as Isaac Block told us in the 80's when he studied domestic abuse in Mennonite homes in southern Manitoba.

We need to hear the stories and we need to find restorative ways to deal with the victims and the offenders in all of these cases.

Mark Yantzi could probably be considered if not the father, then perhaps the instigator or initiator of Restorative Justice as it pertains to the justice system in Canada. Our aboriginal neighbours have been carrying out restorative justice for thousands of years and it is a concept that restorative justice today, in part, is based on.

In 1974, Mark was a probation officer in Ontario and a case came across his desk to which he was to provide the pre-trial report. Two teenaged boys had gone on a drunken rampage through the town of Elmira. As he did his report, Mark wondered in writing, what would happen if these two young men were to face their victims and apologize and make restitution. When his report crossed the judge's desk, the judge asked what his addendum was about. Mark said it was kind of a thought. The judge asked if there was a precedent for it, but no one was aware of one. But how do precedent's get set? One was set in that case. The young men faced their victims and months later returned to each place with a cheque to cover a significant portion of the damages.

Today, Mark Yantzi heads an organization like ours, only much larger, which has a number of restorative justice ministries and he and his staff and colleagues continue to encourage restorative principles. A few years ago, one of the young men who was involved in that first case in Elmira, showed up to one of their volunteer information meetings. Imagine his surprise when he learned that his story was at the very heart of what they were doing. It's come full circle and they've made a video about it. I'd love to show it to you sometime.

Through the prophet Micah, God challenged the people of Israel to do more, to be more. Worship services and ritual sacrifices were obviously not doing anything for them. Following the examples of the other nations was definitely not getting them anywhere either. It had become a place not unlike our own world today where too many are concerned only for their own well being. Through Micah and other prophets, God challenged the Israelite people to put feet to their faith. God wanted them to treat one another with love and respect and justice.

Because of those words, recorded in Micah 6:8, our organization has taken Micah as our name. And we seek to help others to do what is just, to show constant love and to walk humbly with God and with other human beings. And to be tough on crime, one friendship at a time. I love that a big part of my job is introducing people to each other and watching Micah 6:8 happen.

We don't have a monopoly on that. There are so many ways that we can all do that today. And we are a congregation that believes in doing just that. That's one of the reasons Joanne and I didn't have to go anywhere else when we began church shopping ten years ago. The message was loud and clear and it was one we wanted to participate in.

However, if you're interested in the work we do at Micah, I can always use more volunteers.

So thank you for your interest in and support of this work. Thank you for all that you do. And thank you for providing a welcoming Christian Community for peace where people seek to treat others justly, show constant love and walk humbly with God and with one another.

Amen.