

3 Epiphany A February 26, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey,

A Chocolate Milkshake
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The Kingdom of Heaven, also called Beloved Community or Kingdom of God, can come near in unexpected ways. Like the time the Kingdom of Heaven manifested in a chocolate milkshake.

It's a story from Bryan Stevenson's memoir *Just Mercy*, which was recently made into a movie with the same title. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Bryan Stevenson, he is a lawyer who started the Equal Justice Initiative based in Montgomery, Alabama and represents people who cannot afford legal representation in courts, especially the poor, wrongly accused, mentally ill, and racial and gender minorities. His work has helped expose the prejudices and biases in our justice system and helped reform our justice system to be more equitable. His memoir is filled with powerful stories from his life's work about those reforms, but some stories are powerful because of the people who are affected by what Bryan does for others. And this is one of those stories.

It started when Bryan went to visit an inmate named Avery on death-row to find out more about him and the circumstances of his crime and sentence. But the visit did not begin well, Bryan wrote, because he was distracted by a pick-up truck in the prison parking lot. He wrote he had visited this particular prison multiple times before and had not seen this truck. It was an older pick up fitted with a gun rack and all kinds of white supremacy stickers and confederate flags. Some of the messages on the stickers were so disturbing, Bryan had to pause to collect himself. He wrote that despite living and working in the south for some time, and having seen displays of white and confederate pride, he hadn't seen anything that was quite as extreme as the truck in that prison parking lot that day.

When he entered any prison to visit a prisoner, as I am sure our KIAROS volunteers can bear witness, Bryan had to go through an entry process. By this time in his career, he was very familiar with the process that sometimes involved shoe removal, removal of all items in his pockets, signing in and showing ID. But this time, he was met by a tall, blond with a military haircut, steely blue-eyed and muscular corrections officer he hadn't seen at that prison before whose words of greeting were confrontational and hostile. Bryan calmly explained he was a lawyer there for a legal visit. In response, the corrections officer demanded Bryan undergo a strip search and only grew more hostile when Bryan explained lawyers did not have to submit to such indignities.

Bryan realized he could have called for the man's supervisor, who may or may not have helped him out. Or he could have gotten angry and stormed out, but he had driven two hours for this visit and had a packed schedule and wasn't sure when he'd be able to make the trip again. And Bryan really cares about his work. So he submitted to the indignity of the strip search, which he said the corrections officer conducted with unnecessary roughness.

After he was allowed to get dressed, the same officer then made him sign a visitor book for family, which Bryan again said he didn't have to do because he'd signed the book for lawyers. But the corrections officer wouldn't budge. If Bryan was going to visit Avery, he realized he was first going to have to submit to more insults. After signing the book, the officer took Bryan to the visiting room, but before he let him in, asked Bryan if he had noticed the pickup truck in the parking lot with the gun rack and stickers on it. When Bryan acknowledged he had seen the truck, the officer proudly stated it was his.

It wasn't long before Avery was led into the visitation room. Bryan was visiting him because he suspected Avery suffered from severe mental illness and this was not mentioned in his trial. Avery greeted Bryan with a smile and a request for a chocolate milkshake. In fact, Avery said he was really hungry for a chocolate milkshake. Because he was still shaken by what he had just experienced, Bryan was terse with Avery, and told him he had no milkshake, apologized for not having a milkshake, and if he had known Avery wanted one, he would have tried to bring him one, and would try next time. But after he said that, Avery shut down, looked away from Bryan, and didn't seem to hear a word Bryan said about wanting to help him. So, Bryan went back to the chocolate milkshake, and spoke in a kinder tone about trying again to bring Avery what he wanted. This time, Avery responded. After that, every time Bryan visited Avery, he asked if Bryan brought him a chocolate milkshake, and every time Bryan had to explain they wouldn't let him. It became their ritual. Bryan also asked about the correction officer who had given him such a hard time, and was told that officer caused trouble for everyone, so everyone tried to stay out of his way and he usually worked the night shift.

Eventually, Avery was granted a new trial where Bryan was able to introduce into evidence Avery's tragic story of loss, violence, multiple forms of abuse, and neglect starting with the death of both his parents before he was two years old, abusive foster care providers, and foster care providers who were unable to meet his special needs, especially when he was diagnosed with severe cognitive and emotional disabilities and illnesses. So instead of receiving care and treatment, before he was eighteen years old, Avery was homeless.

About a month after the trial, Bryan was still waiting to hear the court's decision, which is not unusual, and went to visit Avery to talk about the trial. He was concerned for Avery, who had been distressed to see some of his former abusers testify. Bryan was also concerned because the same corrections officer who had given him such a hard time had been the officer who transported Avery from and back to prison, and he was concerned how Avery had been treated.

When he parked his car in the prison parking lot, Bryan once again saw the pickup truck with the gunrack and white supremacy stickers. And when he entered the prison, he was met by the same officer who owned the truck. Only this time, the officer approached him with a smile and a pleasant greeting. When Bryan asked if he needed to be strip searched, the officer looked embarrassed and said, "That's not necessary Mr. Stevenson, I know who you are, and you are okay." The officer also had signed Bryan in and apologized for the way he had treated him before. He also told Bryan that he had been at Avery's trial, and he had listened to what was going on. He said he could relate to Avery because he also had been raised in foster care and had gone from one place to another so often, he felt unwanted and so angry at times he imagined hurting someone. He told Bryan as soon as he turned eighteen, he joined the military and that had been good for him. He also told Bryan he didn't think anyone had had it as bad as he did growing up until he heard Avery's story and realized how much worse it could have been. He also realized that he had anger issues he still needed to work through. Bryan responded to all this by thanking the officer for sharing this with him and telling him what he believes: that the bad things that happen to us don't define us, that we can do better, and it's important to understand where we are all coming from.

The corrections officer then told Bryan one more thing: that on the way back to the prison, he did something he should not have done. He took an exit off the highway and took Avery to a Wendy's and bought him a chocolate milkshake.

When Bryan met with Avery that day, he started, like always, by telling Avery he couldn't bring him a chocolate milkshake, but Avery interrupted him said, "Oh, I got a milkshake. I'm okay now."

When Jesus began his ministry, as we heard in today's Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus took up preaching the message of John the Baptist to repent – to change – to reorient ourselves toward God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves - because the Kingdom of Heaven is near. The ministry of Jesus, as we can see in Matthew's Gospel is very much about the restoration of the broken, of a world that had decidedly turned away from loving God and each other and the brokenness such disobedience causes. That is why Jesus healed people. It wasn't just about restoring bodies to physical health, it was a deeper

kind of healing, the kind that brings new life, and restores people to God and each other, like Bryan Stevenson bore witness to in his memoir. Restoration of wholeness for the corrections officer who suffered from unresolved anger and found healing by listening to Bryan's evidence with an open heart and found a connection that gave him a new outlook, a new way of seeing another person. A more empathetic, compassionate, respectful way. And healing for Avery when that same officer broke the rules in order to give him the one thing he'd been asking for months and months and months: what for Avery wasn't just a sweet treat to fill an empty stomach but was obviously something deeper: a small sign of love, of care, of being seen and noticed and listened to: a chocolate milkshake.

Sometimes the Kingdom of Heaven is like that. It is seemingly small acts of love and kindness that could be so easily missed if we weren't looking for them. Yet, those are those lights that shine in the dark places of our hearts, souls, minds, and in the world. They are beacons of hope, messages of love and evidence that those Kingdom of Heaven miracles that restore the broken, bring good news, and liberation to the captives are still coming near to us today. So perhaps we can listen, with open hearts, for ways our stories connect with even the most unlikely among us. And in so doing, we might find ourselves part of God's Kingdom, of restoration and healing and hope here on earth. Who knows, there are times such healing and restoration might even taste like a chocolate milkshake.