

## Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 7 Theme: **Our Incarnate God**

Title: **“I Was in Anguish and You Listened to Me”** Author: **Fr. Steven Voytovich**

The Beatitudes in Matthew 25 represent our final exam. We never know when we might be responding to our Lord Himself when we see those who are sick, suffering, or otherwise in need. Inherent in each response, though unspoken, is an attending posture toward the person who is in need, captured in the title of this piece. This posture includes total attention, listening deeply, and relating to what is being shared through our own experiences of struggle. If you look closely in the Gospel stories of Jesus meeting those who were sick and suffering, His attending posture is evident in his responses even though not always identified specifically. The following is a life example that has remained meaningful to me through many years.

J was a co-worker while I was in high school and college. J grew up in a financially sound household where love was expressed by the purchase and giving of gifts. In celebrating her college graduation, J's parents gave her the gift of a cruise somewhere in Europe. During that cruise, J glimpsed suffering that was at once foreign and devastating. She was so overwhelmed by what she saw that she eventually attempted to take her life. When I met her she had gotten out of the hospital, and was taking medication for depression. Her desire was to get better and break the roller coaster cycle of re-hospitalization that she saw her fellow patients go through.

I grew up in a household where expressions of love were not regularly shared openly. J's journey to the brink of end-of-life spoke to me as a teenager grappling with questions of the meaning of life and my purpose in being alive. I heard her desire to move forward in some respects as a call for help. For many months I would visit her at her parents' home, or at coffee shops, and as two young people we shared our life stories, our hopes, dreams, struggles, questions of faith, and attempts to grapple with each day's steps on life's journey. I can say for myself that it was so meaningful to be listened to a deep level, and I would venture to say that J would agree.

Over time, the little employee work group J and I were part of grew to be close-knit. We planned activities as a group, supported each other during difficult times. J's desire to be free of the roller coaster ride was slowly being realized. Both J and I would probably say that our parents cared for us in ways they were able to. What I gained from our sharing was an understanding, perhaps for the first-time outside my immediate family, was what it meant to care for someone, and what it “felt like” to be cared for by listening at such a deep level.

Ironically, though my parents suspected otherwise, our relationship never moved to a romantic level. Each of us at one point or another perhaps imagined taking such a step, but never at the same time. In my reflection, I would say this relationship had a deeply spiritual and healing nature. Through our journey both of us were transformed. I am thankful to God for bringing J and I together at such a critical time in both our lives.

J wound up marrying another of our little work group's co-workers, and they have two lovely children. I eventually found my way to becoming a caregiver in institutional and parish settings.

We continue to share a bond from these precious years, and my care-giving today continues to be influenced by this formative experience. Throughout my life I celebrate the relational experiences not only of being able to listen to those I am called to minister to at a deep level, but likewise of being listened to at such a deep level to as being so intensely meaningful. Especially in our age of web technology and “tweets,” such relational exchanges are rare and worthy of being treasured.

As we prepare to celebrate the Nativity Feast, let us take a moment to reflect on the word Incarnation. Emmanuel, God with us; God takes on flesh, the eternal God is represented in human form. In his book *On the Incarnation*, St. Athanasius states the following regarding why we have been made in God’s likeness: “Simply in order that through this gift of God-likeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their Maker is for mankind the only really happy and blessed life.” (p. 38) Our experience of God’s likeness leads up ultimately back to God that we proclaim on the Nativity Feast as “Abba Father.” Gal. Jesus calls upon “Abba Father” in Mark 14:36, in a moment of anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane.

This mystery of being created in God’s image offers us all the opportunity to intensely experience God’s presence with us personally in a similar way. In addition, as we interact with one another in our daily lives, each fashioned in God’s image and likeness, we are called to participate in sharing this gift with others in our lives. As we do so and are open to God’s presence, we can experience transformation and healing in the midst of moments of struggle and anguish, bringing us closer to God. This is a significant gift of the Incarnation. Let us commit ourselves to sharing this gift, especially during this most holy season, and all the seasons of our lives in Christ.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

The author argues that Matthew 25 represent our final exam as Christians. Consider this chapter, how would you do on that exam?

How does Christ’s incarnation compel us to ministry towards others?

What are the meaningful relationships in your life right now? How have they influenced your life in Christ?