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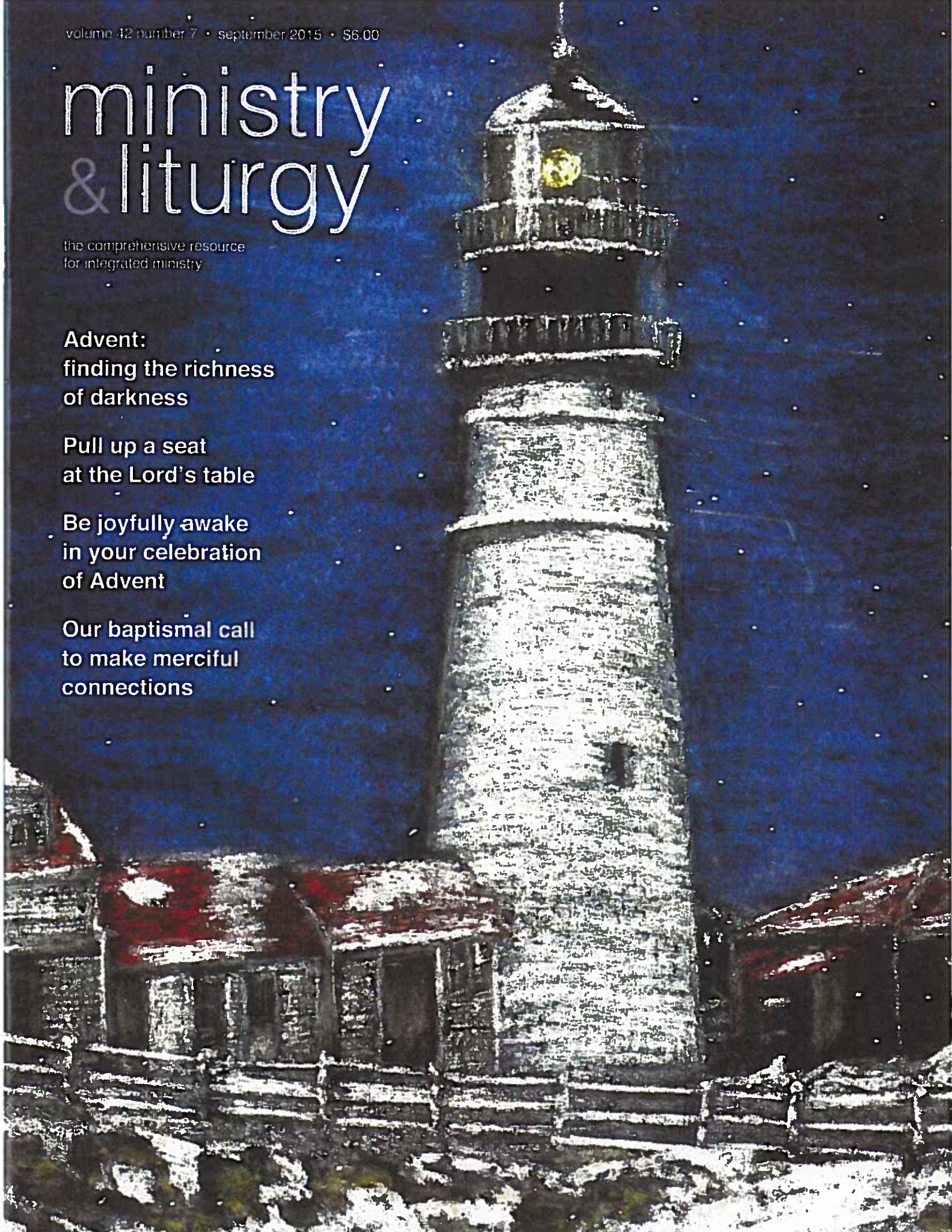
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**Advent:
finding the richness
of darkness**

**Pull up a seat
at the Lord's table**

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in your celebration
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**Our baptismal call
to make merciful
connections**



Making Merciful Connections

by Joe Grant

*Adapted and excerpted from **Good News People**, a JustFaith Ministries program for small groups and parishes that responds to Pope Francis' call for a **Holy Year of Mercy**.*

The next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" they said to him, "Rabbi, where do you live?" he said to them, "Come and see."

-John 1:35-39

You can tell a lot about people from their homes. Location, size and décor say a lot about a person's taste, habits, economic and social standing. Where did Jesus lead those two disciples who followed him out of the desert? What did he show them? Where did they stay and who did they stay with? You can tell even more about people by the company they keep.

Lord when was it that we saw you...?

-Matthew 25:37

Maria blends into the background of her neglected, inner-city neighborhood. She seldom bothers anyone as she pushes her grocery cart along the roadside, gathering cans, bottles and whatever else strikes her fancy. She is a professional recycler. Though pleasant enough in her quiet ramblings, few people ever pay her much attention. Even fewer notice her sneak behind the dumpster, by the abandoned gas station, to sort through her findings. *"Oh I'm not homeless. I have a home,"* Maria tells the inquiring social worker at the Lord's Table community kitchen. Should anyone dare venture into the bushes behind the dumpster, they would find a cardboard nest, padded with bulging garbage bags. This is her home, a place where no one comes to visit.

"And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

-Matthew 25:39

The receptionist appeared at the door, just as the diocesan workshop was coming to a close. She was brandishing a pink telephone message that read: *"Parole party at four!"* Approaching his supervisor, the presenter asked: *"Do you mind if we wind things down now?"* With a concerned look, the supervisor probed: *"Is it an emergency? Is something wrong?"* *"Oh no, it's very GOOD news!"* the presenter answered cheerily. *"A close friend of our family is being paroled today, and I don't want to miss the party."* With an obvious look of disbelief, the supervisor added: *"YOU have a FRIEND in JAIL?"* Without missing a beat, the presenter responded: *"You DON'T?"*

"And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?"

-Matthew 25:38

"These are friends from my church." The young boy hesitated as he introduced the refugee family to a school friend. *"They're not from here!"* Stating the obvious, he gestured awkwardly trying to bridge the language and culture gap separating the brightly-dressed, ivory-skinned African children from his more conventional American buddy. *"They're refugees. They came from Liberia... because of a war."* There were smiles and stolen glances among the African children. "So how did YOU get to meet them?" his friend inquired. *"Somebody from Catholic Charities asked for a family to help them settle down. I think Mom volunteered us. We collected kitchen things and blankets. Sometimes I help with homework. Their Mom makes this great peanut stew."* After another pause an African girl offers a hand to an American boy. They shake hands in an overly-formal way before the whole group erupts into giggles.

"...I was sick and you took care of me..."
-Matthew 25:36

She gracefully navigates the beeping machines, wheelchairs and gurneys, as she steps gingerly into the hospital room. *"I'm Angela...from St. Mary's. I've come to offer Holy Communion. Would you like that?"* The husband puts down the cup of ice chips he has been spoon-feeding to his frail wife. She nods feebly. With a simple gesture, a silent sign of the cross, sacred space unfolds. This sacramental opening accepts all the questions, the indignities of infirmity, the worries and wonders, the fears and anxieties in its soothing embrace. *"Lamb of God, you take away the Sin of the world."* Holding hands, heads bent in reverent submission to the cross they are bearing together, the couple responds, in pleading undertones, *"Have mercy on us!"* *"This is the body of Christ, blessed and broken... and so are you."*

"Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb..."
-Matthew 27:59

Since no one came forward when the body of a homeless man was discovered in woods by the river, the coroner sent word to Aquinas, the local Catholic high school, and the Joseph of Arimathea Society was activated. Accessing the list of student volunteers, the campus minister notified the teachers of those who would be excused from morning classes. The next day, a steel gray sky and light drizzle added a somber note to the blustery funeral. Five uniformed students huddled with their teacher at a very simple graveside, in a weedy, unmarked field. They shared in a simple ceremony, offering prayers and dignity to the passing of child of God, the son or brother of a family long-lost. The memories of an unremembered life were lowered into the earth with an unknown body. The tragic mystery of death was consecrated by the misted eyes and silent reverence of caring young people, who returned to class stretched by heartache and quiet wondering.

"...I was in prison and you came to visit me..."
-Matthew 25:36

In the parking lot, outside the county jail, a small group of college students huddles around a young woman as she marks a bright cross on the pavement with sidewalk chalk. Around the cross she adds the message “GOD IS HERE!” They are preparing themselves to visit with the inmates as part of their campus ministry outreach. After a short blessing, a young man offers these directions: *“Let’s remember, when we cross into another person’s life, culture or world, we are treading on holy ground. So, we must learn to take off our shoes, as the sign says, ‘God is already here!’ Just as Jesus was incarcerated, let’s be ready to meet Christ in this jail today.”*

How do merciful connections grow into life-changing encounters?

Though the names and some of the details have been altered, these are real stories of merciful connections that happen in the every-day lives of ordinary people across this nation. When we actively respond to Jesus’ words in Matthew 25, we put names and faces to Christ who is among us, and we give a real physical expression to our faith. Such connections certainly lead to prayerful questioning. Sometimes “works of mercy” like these result in a deep sense of gratitude. The more involved we become in these kinds of connections, the less likely we are to take even the small things in life for granted. Food, water, clean clothes, good friends, personal freedom, and health are received more gratefully and mindfully, with the awareness that these are all gifts, and they are for sharing. Such caring connections to neighbors also gift us with a broader perspective on life, as well as an appreciation for the struggles, strengths and the dignity of the Christ we encounter.

When we visit “Christ our neighbor” with a spirit of humility and reverence, we become aware that we have as much to learn and to receive as we have to offer. When we focus more on the person, and less on the problems, the differences or the difficulties, it becomes easier to see just how much we share in common. When we meet face to face, and let our lives be touched by another person’s situation, we begin to see ourselves reflected in one another. As a relationship develops and deepens, our presence and purpose starts to shift. We are no longer there simply to serve or help out. Rather, we have come to visit and connect with each other. This is the kind of relationship that can put a new frame on our lives.

How wide is your circle of concern?

Merciful connections stretch our hearts and widen our world. The problems of the people we befriend become our problems, and the joys of those who have befriended us become our joys too (and vice versa). Whether that friend is incarcerated, suffers with HIV/AIDS, is a migrant or a refugee, is homeless or shut-in, struggles with addictions, teen pregnancy or mental illness, their needs, their rights, their hopes, become part of us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we become personally invested in the life and dreams of a neighbor, and our world changes.

Can you tell when someone is following Jesus?

Some of us wear religious jewelry. Others have stickers or symbols attached to their cars. But the real marks of discipleship, those who follow Jesus in their daily living, run deeper than décor. The Gospels make clear that it is our relationships that demonstrate the depth of our commitment to Christ. Our faith is expressed in our behavior AND in our personal connections— who we know, and where we go together. Reflecting on Jesus' challenge to care for the sick, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger...it can be alarming to realize that he doesn't say: "When you get round to it.." or "If you're not too busy..." or "If you get the chance..." These kinds of connections are not offered as an option. Developing these relationships, it seems, is how we make good on our baptismal call to follow Jesus. The Gospels, the saints and the Church all teach us that this is the only way our Christianity is truly recognizable and credible, and these good connections become our "God connections."

Could you pick Christ out of a crowd?

Jesus makes clear that who we know and who knows us matters very much. Notice, he doesn't say "I am LIKE the prisoner, the outcast, the hungry and thirsty person..." Nor does he say "I am IN these people." Instead he tells us that these people are a direct connection to him. Whether we care about them (or not) whether we are known to them or not, what we do (or not) with or for them, we do directly to, with, for Christ.

"...you did it to me."

-Matthew 25:40

We human beings are built to connect. Like the pieces of a puzzle, we are not complete by ourselves. We long to belong together. Our world can be as small or as wide as we dare or care to make it. How we connect and who we connect with makes all the difference in the world and it makes a huge difference to the world in which we live. For us Christians, love is not an idea, and it is much more than a feeling. It begins with connection. In order to love someone, we first have to make a connection. We love God by caring for our neighbor. This is how we connect directly to God's mercy-full love. We love Jesus by connecting with those who can draw God's love out of us. The Good News- that we are all loved- aches to be shared. And we do this by loving God's people in real and tangible ways: feeding, welcoming visiting, forgiving, caring and connecting to one another. When we love someone we feel their aches and their pains, even as we share our own. Then, too we will know the joy that comes in the sharing of laughter and tears, and this is Good News for us all.

How else could we really know that God is mercy, except by giving and receiving and becoming God's mercy in action?

"'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'"

-John 21: 16



Joe Grant received his master's degree in divinity from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He is the Program Director for JustFaith Ministries where he created JusticeWalking (a nationally recognized JustFaith process for high school and college campuses) and EngagingSpirituality (a spiritual-deepening process for adults). He is also a cofounder of the CrossRoads retreat center. He writes a spirituality blog and has authored many books and articles on prayer, service, Scripture, and justice. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife and three children. Contact him at joe@justfaith.org