

In 2005, Christo Brand, a South African man, received a call that every parent dreads; his son had died in an automobile accident. On his way to the hospital morgue, Christo received another phone call. A friend said: "I heard about your boy. It is a terrible thing when a parent has to bury a child. I understand because I lost my own son in the same way. I wish I could give you some strength to bear this."

While you might not recognize Christo Brand, you probably would recognize the name of his friend: Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa. What makes the story remarkable isn't that the former president called to console a relatively unknown countryman; rather what makes the story incredible is that Christo Brand had been Mandel's prison guard for 12 years. By 2005 their relationship had transformed into friendship.

In 1978, the two first met. Christo was 19; Mandela was 60. Christo was required to serve as a part of conscription. He was assigned to work on Robben Island, the bleak maximum security prison where he became his warder. At that point, he had not heard of him, nor his African National Congress.

Christo was in the B section, a tougher part of the prison where the more notorious "criminals" were held. And life in the prison was hard. An ear-splitting clanging would start up at 5 a.m. to wake everyone up. The cells were cold as fridges year round. Prisoners slept on the floors with 3 blankets and no extra ones allowed, even in winter. There was racial discrimination too; black prisoners had 12 ounces of corn-meal porridge with no sugar or salt in it for breakfast and a tub of black coffee. Mixed races and Indians had 14 ounces of porridge and bread. Older prisoners like Mandela spent their days sewing mailbags sent over by the post office, repairing prison clothes, and cleaning and polishing floors.

You might think this might cause a prisoner to replace hate with hate, but not Mandela, who set Christo's young mind racing. Christo saw this quiet, dignified man scrubbing floors, emptying his toilet bucket, cleaning the exercise yard – sometimes on his knees – and tending a little garden where he grew chillies and vegetables.

One day, Christo had to escort him to the visitors' center. It was the first time he had seen him on his own. All he wanted to know was where he came from, whether his parents were still alive, and if he had any brothers and sisters. He would say, 'Oh, that's good,' when Christo told him about his upbringing on a farm.

That was the first time they talked. On the B section, no conversation was allowed with the prisoners. It was only possible while he was walking ahead of Christo and no one could overhear them. Mandela's manner was always concerned and fatherly. He thanked Christo for their nice conversation.

From then on, when Christo was alone with him he found himself drawn in. He would listen to him, and respect him more and more. He says it was impossible not to be

drawn to him, this powerful leader of men facing a lifetime of hard labor and isolation, seemingly without bitterness or anger.

This had an impact on Christo. Christo himself was a good, easy-going man. He grew up on a farm, and knew nothing of politics, or Mandela. He was somewhat sheltered from the more intense animosity between the races that was rampant in the country at the time. And because of this, like Mandela did to him, he would do the same for others. For instance, with one prisoner, when they had a conversation and the prisoner asked what he was doing after his shift, and he said he was going fishing, he brought him a piece of fish. He'd talk to Mandela when he could and ask him about his health, what he was studying. And in the 80s, when the government tried to break the spirit of the African National Congress political prisoners at Robben Island by moving some of the prisoners, Christo helped Mandela in his letter writing to get letters out of the jail to the other ANC leaders. He'd take multiple copies of the letter to deal with the censorship or it being destroyed by the security and find creative ways to get the letters out. Much of the censorship was meaningless other than to make life more miserable for the prisoners; for much of the letters were from family and loved ones.

But Christo did more than just assist with letters and show compassion. There was an incident that bonded the two for life.

On a rainy winter's day when the wind was howling around the island, Mandela's wife Winnie came to visit him. Winnie had wrapped herself in a huge blanket, knowing the 45-minute ferry journey would be hellish. Only her handbag had been checked at the embarkation office; no one had looked inside the blanket.

Christo was there to collect her. When they reached the visitors' centre he watched her take off the blanket. He was astonished to see there was a baby hidden inside. It was Zoleka, the daughter of Zindzi, Nelson and Winnie's child.

Christo told her: 'Mrs Mandela, you must leave the baby with other visitors in the waiting room while you see your husband.'

He sat behind Mandela in the visitor's booth, listening in to their conversation on the warders' phone. He saw his face as she told him that she had brought their four-month-old granddaughter.

He looked at Christo, saying 'Please, Mr Brand, 'Is it possible to see the baby?' Christo told him it was impossible, that he would lose his job. But his heart told him it was only human to find a way around the cruelty.

At the end of the visit, Christo knew the microphones were off so he went around to Winnie in the waiting room. She took 200 Rand in cash out of her handbag – much more than his monthly salary. She said: 'Please, sir, please, Mr Brand, let my husband see the baby for a few seconds.'

He told her: 'Ma'am, I cannot take your money. Please put it away.' She looked down-cast, but he went on: 'Ma'am, could I please hold the baby for a moment?'

He ushered her back into the booth, then walked through the passage on his side and held out the baby to him. He took her and said, 'Oh', and Christo saw tears in his eyes. On the way back to the cells, Mandela walked close enough to tell him: 'Thank you, Mr Brand. I know you can lose your job for that. Now it's a secret between us, just you and me.'

A couple of years later, Mandela was transferred to another prison where for the first time in 20 years he slept on a bed. Christo was also transferred. Mandela and several other political prisoners grew tomatoes, onions and aubergines in the garden, and Christo was their shopper bringing them items once a month including Cadbury's milk chocolate and toothpaste.

They remained close, and when he was finally released in 1990, Mandela reached out to him. When Mandela was elected president, Christo got ended up back on Robben Island and was now chairman of the Museum Council; the prison was no longer a prison, but a place for tourists.

Looking back on his time with Mandela, Christo says "he wrote of his long walk to freedom, and I'm proud I walked some of that road with him, an incredible journey that defines my life today."

All of us are on a long walk as well. And our freedom is from sin, made possible because of all God has done for us, in particular through Jesus who liberates us from sin and death and makes eternal life possible. This is because God is love in and of itself. And we are also reminded to journey with one another on the walk as well.

What Christo Brand and Nelson Mandela's story illustrates is the incredible power of love and mercy. Of what can happen when love dispels hate. In a country with such intense institutional racism, hate could have kept them apart. But instead both men bridged that divide and let love, not hate, have the last word.

This weekend on the Second Sunday of Easter, we celebrate as well what is known as Divine Mercy Sunday.

The feast was proclaimed by Saint John Paul II, and has its origins in revelations to Helena Kowalska, who became Sr. Faustina. She was born in Poland in 1905, the third child of a devout Christian family.

In 1925, she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, taking the name Faustina. She served as a cook, gardener and doorkeeper in Krakow and several other community convents. The sisters liked her but did not appreciate or understand her deep interior life, which included visions and prophecies. On February 22, 1931, Sister Faustina experienced a new and life-changing vision of Christ. She saw him wearing a white robe and raising his right hand in blessing with his left hand resting on

his heart from which flowed two rays of light. Jesus told her, "Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the prayer, Jesus, I trust in you."

Faustina could not paint, and struggled to convince her incredulous sisters about the truth of her vision. Ultimately she persuaded her spiritual director, Father Michael Sopocko, that the vision was real. He found an artist to create the painting that was named The Divine Mercy and shown to the world for the first time on April 28, 1935.

Father Sopocko advised Sister Faustina to record her visions in a diary. At one point she wrote that "Jesus said I was his secretary and an apostle of his divine mercy." She devoted the rest of her life to spreading the message of divine mercy and the growth of popular devotion to it.

She died of tuberculosis at age 33.

Pope John Paul II canonized her on April 30, 2000.

The Holy Father wanted to make her devotion known throughout the world, and it has a two fold message.

The first is simply never to doubt the love and mercy of God. This is what unfolds in our Gospel today. Jesus visits the apostles in the upper room. They are there in fear of what has happened to Jesus, thinking it might happen to them next, and they do not fully understand the resurrection yet. And what is Jesus' first words to them? Perhaps if we were in the position of Jesus we might be tempted to say "nice to see you again gentleman, thank you for being there when I needed you the most." But instead it is simply "Peace be with you." He shows them His hands and His side not to shame them but so they will understand. This was the consequence of evil and sin in the world; this is how much He loves them. And while it might be a painful reminder that they let Him down, Jesus offers no shame, no guilt, just simply peace. Thomas, unfairly labeled a doubter, was not there at first, and Jesus again meets him where he is at the following week. Jesus helps him past that struggle, and Thomas acknowledges Jesus as God in a bold declaration of faith, one he himself will live out the rest of his life. It's worth reflecting on that word peace. This was what Mandela offered Christo Brand and Christo offered Mandela. A peace with no strings attached. And this is what God offers us. In her diary, Sister Faustina wrote: "I am love and mercy itself. ... Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet. ... My mercy is greater than your sins, and those of the entire world. ... I let My Sacred Heart be pierced with a lance, thus opening wide the source of mercy for you. Come then with trust to draw graces from this fountain. ... The graces of My mercy are drawn by the means of one vessel only, and that is trust. The more a soul trusts, the more it will receive." So trust. Sometimes we can be in our own prisons of shame and guilt, or carry things with us. If you have been away from confession for a while, battling some sin of habit, ignoring something in your life that your conscience tells you you need to address, turn it over to God. The marks in the hands, feet and side are there because of what we did through sin. But they are signs of love. So completely trust in that love.

The second thought is to do exactly what Christo Brand and Nelson Mandela did for one another, and that is to make God's love known. In our second reading, we are "for the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments." And what is the greatest commandment? Love God with your whole heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. As Jesus told Sister Faustina that she was His secretary, that is the same for us too. We bring the love of God into the world through how we live our lives. It means encountering people like Christo and Nelson Mandela did. For just as Jesus called Thomas into reconciliation through the chance to touch his wounds, we must not shy away from the wounds of others. We need to encounter the wounds of others. Some are the ones caused by our actions or by our inactions. The apostles had to confront this. And we do too. We all make mistakes with our parents, our kids, our families, or people we know in life. It can be painful to look at the spiritual wounds we inflict and admit "I failed here by not being as loving as I should have been; by being too angry or being cold and cruel or through my gossip or inaction and not being there for this person." But mercy can transform all that. We can learn from our past as the apostles do, and become transformed by being a person of love and mercy to the people in our lives. But then we also can like the apostles leave the locked room, and engage the world. According to our first reading from Acts, they are a beloved community that had the gift of peace and were given the Spirit to reconcile the world. That is handed onto us through our confirmation and baptism. All of us have the power to bring God's love into the world by seeking out the lost, those who are neglected or hurt, by being a people who work for justice. That is the commission Jesus gives us - to look for ways to bring mercy and love into the world. And it happens in a million ways, from volunteering our time at the parish, to acts of kindness to strangers, to boxing food at Feed My Starving Children or sacrificing for others. For Christo and Mandela, it was a number of little things that added up over a number of years that made a difference, and the same is true with our lives.

At times it can be easy to become disillusioned with the world, because when we look at hate and sin, it is so easy for it to be spread and passed down. People are hated for their race; people hate one another for their religion; people exploit others for their bodies. But God does not look at the world and not have hope. God looks at the world always with love. The wounds in our Lord reminds us sin has consequence; but the risen Lord reminds us that love and mercy triumph because God did not look at us as a failure, He looked at us as people who are loved and who have such potential. And just as in a place that could have been filled with hate in South Africa, two people instead used love to transform themselves for the better, we have that same power too. But only if we use the love that God has given us. So let's open our eyes to the fact that out of the darkness that can sometimes fill our lives inflicted by ourselves or by others, God's love is always there to liberate us. And let us use that love we are given to liberate one another on our long walk to freedom, finding the freedom from the chains of sin and its consequences that are unlocked with the power of grace, love and mercy given to us by God and one another.