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Visiting the Imprisoned

One of the few directives Jesus gives his followers in the Gospels is to visit the imprisoned. With over two million Americans behind bars, you would think every parish would have a "Visit the Imprisoned" ministry. Sadly, this is not the case. It is the Catholics' most under-practiced Work of Mercy.

The lack of interest in prison ministry by Catholics and most practicing Christians in the USA has to do with our standing as good citizens. Good citizens are law-abiding citizens. USA Christians are law-abiding citizens because they see no conflict in their faith with their allegiance to the State. This was not the case for the Christian communities that produced the New Testament. Their faith in Jesus and the reign of God put them at odds with the State of the day. Outside the law, they were often imprisoned themselves. The New Testament directive to visit the imprisoned had an urgent and personal bias for many of those they visited were their fellow believers.

I consider the time I spend in jail a way of practicing this under-practiced Work of Mercy, visiting the imprisoned. I have found that the communal and social dimensions of doing time can be both the most challenging and rewarding experiences of being locked up. This was especially true after I became a priest. I used to tell people I did some of my best priestly ministry when I was locked up.

The imprisoned are spiritually desperate souls. Separated from friends, family and the way of life that most often is the reason for their imprisonment, they are seeking answers to their life problems. Being in jail affords them the personal time and motivation to seek the spiritual insights they would not find on the streets.

It inevitably happens that once I'm locked up, work gets around that the new "old" guy is different. He says he's a protestor locked up for doing good, not bad. Then the word gets around he's a preacher, too! (It matters little to the guys I'm locked up with that I am a resigned priest. To them, I'm still a man of God.) And I'm not shy about my protesting ways and the reasons I protest. Nor do I hide the fact that I am a man of faith, a believer in Jesus, admittedly a radical nonviolent Jesus. A Jesus few of them have ever heard of or thought of. It is upon his bias that opportunities for prison ministry happen for me when I'm locked up. And the longer I am in one place, the greater the opportunities.

Pottawattamie County Jail:

Back in Pottawattamie County Jail where I spent my first 40 days, I made it a point to attend all the weekly bible study sessions offered in our Mod. There were four to five a week. Most offered by volunteers from nondenominational evangelical fundamental congregations, the "Are you saved?" Jesus is my personal savior crowd. A Catholic bible study was offered every Friday where we read and discussed the Sunday readings and Holy Communion was offered in which I was most grateful to receive.

Rev. Dick Arant, the Jail Chaplain, led a weekly Chaplain's Study Hour. I was most impressed with Rev. Arant. He genuinely cared about each inmate and had their best interests at heart. And even though he came from an evangelical fundamentalist perspective, his pastoral practice was much broader and more directed to the needs of the inmates. I have not experience a lot of good jail chaplains but Rev Dick Arants is one of them.

It soon became clear that I had knowledge of scriptures and that I was a resigned priest. Individuals started asking questions about God and religion. Then some started sharing their personal stories and spiritual struggles. What impressed them the most about me was that I was in jail for what I believe, that I did not have to be there, but freely chose to be there. They welcomed my sharing at the bible studies, how I prayed with and for them. Mostly they counted my presence with them a plus. I tried to make myself available to anyone who came to me. My one-on-one time with these men was some of my best work and I was grateful for the opportunity.

Freeing the Captives:

Freeing the captives is also a New Testament directive, a sign of the reign of God. It is also a much harder thing to do than visiting the imprisoned. Mostly because the vast majority of the men I meet in jail are captive and imprisoned souls whether they are locked up in jail or free on the streets.

Scott Peck, a psychiatrist and author of *The Road Less Traveled* and *People of the Lie*, wrote about four stages of faith development. (I write this from memory. I'm not sure what book of Peck's it comes from or if I am exactly correct in wording and explanation of the four stages.) Each stage builds on the one before it except for the first stage.

The first stage of faith development is a world in chaos. In this stage, people have no control over their lives. They are in constant spiritual confusion with no real bearing or sense of security. Their understanding of God or themselves is non-existent. There is nothing they can trust either within themselves or outside themselves.

The second stage of faith development is a world where absolute trust and faith is found in black and white, two-dimension truths. It's a world where rights and wrongs are clearly known. It is a law and order world where all you need to do is follow the rules and you will be right with God. In this world, following God's laws will get you into heaven. If you don't follow God's laws, you go to hell.

The third stage of faith development is a world of doubters. These are folks who know nothing but a stage two world and they are reacting against it. The doubter's world is filled with more questions than answers. They know insecurities about themselves, about God and the world they live in but they are not the same kind of insecurity found at stage one. People often bounce between stage two and stage three.

The fourth stage of faith development are people who go beyond the world of the doubters to a world of acceptance of themselves, others and the divine as being good and holy. Their own faith in themselves and their God and religious tradition is not shaken or diminished by others who believe in different things and different truths. They are nonjudgmental. They see the good and truth in others yet they are fully vested in their own faith and beliefs.

No one is completely located in a single stage of faith development at any one time. Most of us live our lives in several stages at the same time yet all of us are in one or another dominating stage at any given time.

Peck says that at least 20% of Americans are stuck primarily at the first stage of spiritual development in a world of chaos. From my experience this percentage goes up to 80% for people in jails and prisons.

In making this assessment, I'm not putting myself above, ahead or better than others. There are spiritual dark sides for all four stages. And in my life, I've known all four stages. What this model for faith development does for me is help explain where most of the men I meet in jail are coming from spiritually.

It helps explain why many in jail embrace a fundamentalist evangelical faith perspective. And it also explains why there is a lot of what they call "Jail house conversions", because when they are set free, their newfound faith is set aside and they return to their lives of chaos on the streets.

This is not really the fault of the evangelical fundamentalist faith perspective. Truth is, nothing works well with this population. Ask any rehab or drug program and they will tell you that the percentage of people who really get cured or bring their addictive lives under control is very small.

Each and every one of these out-of-control lives is a human tragedy to be grieved and mourned their individual human tragedies add up to collective patterns that reflect larger societal illnesses. My life as a Catholic Worker has taught me if you really want to know the ugly hidden truths of any society start seeing it through the eyes of the poor and imprisoned. I've come to see each desperate out-of-control life I encounter in jail reveals our larger society's equally desperate out-of-control freefall into chaos through our addictions to war, violence and greed.

Ronnie:

I met Ronnie at Pottawattamie County Jail. He is a 48 year old black man who's been in and out of jails and rehab programs most of his adult life. The guards, the chaplain and bible study volunteers all knew Ronnie well; he was a frequent visitor. Ronnie was one of the guys I helped when store day came. He had no money on his books so I bought him a couple of honey buns and two candy bars in exchange for his vegetables off his plate. It was a fair deal. I know I can't help everybody in need but I make a point to help at least somebody. In the process, we shared a lot about our lives and situations. I told him about the Des Moines Catholic Worker (DMCW) and the hospitality we do.

I remember a bible study we attended together and the question was asked where we thought heaven was. When it was Ronnie's turn to answer, he said heaven was where his great Granny was because she was the only person who loved him unconditionally; and if there is a heaven, she would be there. His answer really impressed me.

So when he came up to me a few days before he was set free and asked if he could join the DMCWer, I took his request seriously. I thought to myself, it's a long shot. These things rarely work out. Still everybody deserves a chance especially if this is Ronnie's redemptive moment, when he was really ready to turn his life around. Ronnie knew he had to make a clean start someplace. He also wanted to do something to pay back for all the helping hands that he had along the way. The DMCWer hospitality and communal life appealed to him. I called the DMCWer folks and asked them to give him a chance if he showed up. They agreed and when he got set free, he showed up in Des Moines at the Worker.

When word got back to me that Ronnie made it to Des Moines, I shared it with the guys in the Mod. It was good news received. All went well for a couple of weeks, I'm told. Then last week I asked Fran how he was doing. She told me he missed a couple of shifts and it looked like he started drinking again. Bummer.....he may not last much longer in the community.

The Kingdom work of freeing the captives is a whole lot harder than visiting the imprisoned. It goes directly to the heart of redemption and the healing of our broken and fallen world. And even though it's a hard thing to do and rarely happens, we can't afford to quit trying. To quit trying is to turn our back on what our Easter faith is all about and leave the body of Jesus in the tomb.

Jackson County Jail:

The scene here at Jackson County is very different than Pottawattamie County. More than half the men in my Mod are Feds awaiting place in the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Many are facing long prison sentences and the time spent here is just a way station on their journey to a Federal penitentiary. Two weeks into the experience, I'm just beginning to get the lay of the land. I'm in a small unit with no more than 23 guys. I'm 20 years older than most. By now, they all know why I'm with them and that I was a Catholic priest. I am heartened by the respect they are showing me. And I know, as time goes by, I'll have my share of opportunities to visit the imprisoned here and maybe, with the grace of God, liberate a captive or two in the process.

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