



The Church behind Prison Walls: God's Radical Grace Transforming Lives

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Prison, any prison, is the last place you would choose to serve time or live for the rest of your life. The people who live there are considered a threat to society. They are there because they have inflicted great harm, loss, and misery on their victims and are deemed unfit to live freely in society. They are sent to a facility designed to keep them separated from society until they are paroled, complete their entire sentence, or die. Life inside of a prison is not a pleasant experience, and it is not intended to be. While they are not the dark, windowless, unsanitary stone dungeon Saint Paul was confined in, modern-day prisons have their own challenges for those who are serving time in them.

I serve as pastor for St. Dysmas of South Dakota. St. Dysmas is a single ELCA congregation that worships in two locations. I serve the men who attend St. Dysmas Lutheran Church inside the walls of the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. My colleague Rev. David Bentz serves the men who worship at the Mike Durfee State Penitentiary in Springfield, South Dakota. On average the combined worship attendance for the two sites is 140 men each week. The men who worship in our congregation have committed a wide variety

The New Testament frequently enjoins Christians to visit and care for those who are in prison. The conditions of prison deter many from reaching out to inmates, especially those who are convicted of violent crimes. Yet these fellow human beings are in desperate need of hearing the forgiving word of good news that God is with them and cares for them, too.

of crimes and are serving sentences that range from one year to life. Their crimes range from drug and alcohol charges to rape and murder. It is a diverse congregation in terms of crimes committed, race, age, and religious backgrounds. Despite the context, or perhaps because of it, this is the most focused and welcoming congregation I have served. For one thing, every member has looked into the abyss. They know who they are, what they have done, and that something in their life has to change if they are to break the unhealthy cycle that led to their conviction and incarceration. They have a lot of time to think because of the structure of the prison environment. Many, if not most, of the men have no outside visitors, phone calls, or letters because friends and family have shaken the dust from their feet after what the men have done. Each week, when fifteen to twenty visitors from area congregations come to worship, they are greeted as they come into the chapel with a genuine, heartfelt welcome. It is important to understand the prison system and the conditions the men live with in order to understand the power the good news of Jesus Christ has to transform these men and the environment they live in.

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When the men first come to prison, they immediately learn prison is a harsh, humiliating, and demoralizing place. Imagine, if you will, what it is like. Age eighteen or eighty, pastor, professor, or high-school dropout, the procedure is the same for everyone. Upon arrival, you are required to strip naked and your civilian clothes and any personal possessions are taken from you until your release. You are told to stand with your feet on two orange footprints painted on the floor and face the wall as you undergo a humiliating search of your body—and its cavities. You are fingerprinted, given your prison clothes complete with orange crocks, and are sent to Admissions and Orientation, A&O, which is referred to by inmates as the fish tank. It is called that because you are watched and evaluated twenty-four hours a day for four to six weeks. They are watching you to see what kind of person you are; are you aggressive, passive, vulnerable, or a loner? While in A&O, you are interviewed, watched, and in the end, a decision is made about where in the prison system you will be housed. I serve in the part of the prison where medium-security inmates are housed. There is room for approximately eight hundred inmates who live in six by nine foot cells. Most men are housed two to a cell, but in areas where parole violators are detained there often three men in one cell. Men serving a life sentence are usually given their own cell, although when the population is high, this can change without notice.

Construction of the building I serve in was begun in the 1800s, so it is not a modern facility and is not air conditioned. Summer temperatures in South Dakota

are frequently in the 90s with a few days topping 100 degrees with relatively high humidity, so living conditions in the cell halls can be brutal. Correctional officers often bring multiple uniform shirts to work with them in summer months so they can change out of sweat-soaked shirts into a dry one. Imagine living in a small cell that is your bedroom, living room, and bathroom. When your cell mate is using the bathroom, he is in full view of you and anyone who walks by. It is a violation to hang anything to screen yourself, and you can imagine the smell. There is no exhaust fan, and you are not free to leave the room. To make matters worse, there is a very large hog-processing plant just down the hill, and if the wind is from the south, on top of the stifling heat and other smells, there is a very unpleasant odor from the processing plant to contend with. If the men do not have jobs in the prison, they can be in their cells for up to twenty-two hours a day. There are only jobs for one-fourth of the inmates.

A typical cell has three concrete walls with bars with a sliding door on the front of the cell. The door is locked and unlocked from the control room. Each cell has bunk beds on one side and across from the bunk beds is a shelf with small locker for each inmate. Each locker measures twenty inches wide by fourteen inches deep by twenty-six inches tall. On the far end of the cell is a stainless-steel combination toilet/sink that faces the front of the cell. There is also a small cabinet for toiletries. The mattress is a plastic covered three inch piece of foam. The cell has one plastic chair and a small table. If inmates can afford them, they can purchase a small fan, a lamp, and a TV through prison commissary. A nineteen inch television costs \$140.00. Bear in mind that men are paid twenty-five to forty cents an hour for work inside the prison. There is no privacy; anyone changing clothes or using the toilet is in plain view of anyone walking by your cell.

On top of the physical conditions of the prison, there are other factors that make it a hard place to live. The prison is always noisy with inmates shouting at each other from cell to cell, and tier to tier. They shout at the correctional officers, at friends and foes, or, seemingly, for the sake of shouting. In addition to the shouting, there is the daily commotion caused by inmates going to or returning from work, showers, to eat, or to recreation. All this while officers are making announcements over the PA system, which are often difficult to hear and which you are responsible for following. Peace and quiet is a rare luxury inside of a prison. Men have told me they miss the ability to get away and just be alone in a peaceful place.

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The men are subject to a very rigid daily schedule, and they have very little control over what they do during the day. They wake up at a set time. The prison counts the men several times a day to make sure everyone is where they should be. At count time during the day, they must be out of their bed and standing at the

bars of their cell as the officer comes by to visibly count each them, but at night they may be sleeping in their beds. They are told when to go to recreation, when to eat, and when they go to appointments. The only control they have is the ability to sign up for Bible studies, worship services, and other religious or cultural activities offered during the week. They are not guaranteed they will be granted permission to attend these activities. They learn if their request is approved if the cell door opens at the appropriate time. It is a rigid, drab, dehumanizing, and sometimes dangerous place to live.

There are gangs in the prison. These men have a strong bond to each other, and they can and do cause trouble for rival gangs and individual inmates. They sometimes charge “rent” for living in a cell and will intimidate and threaten inmates that they don’t like or who are weak or vulnerable. The threat of physical violence is real and constant for the most vulnerable. Intergang violence flares up from time to time, and you can sense the tension in the air. Most inmates just want to do their time and would rather have things quiet and peaceful. So would most of the staff. But when tensions begin to rise between rival gangs, things become tense throughout the prison. When violence does flare up, innocent bystanders can be hurt or drawn into the violence out of self-defense. The inmates live by an unwritten but very well-known inmate code that directs how they live their lives in the prison community. For a Christian man, this code can cause significant problems since it does not necessarily agree with Jesus’s commandment to love your neighbor. Here is one example:

One of the singers in the St. Dysmas band came to practice on Thursday evening with a black eye. I asked him what had happened, and he said three men began to harass him in the chow line so he punched one of them. I asked him why he punched him, why didn’t he just walk away. He explained that had he walked away those same men would have found him later and padlocked him. I asked him what padlocking was, and he told me they put a metal padlock in a sock and swing the sock with the padlock and hit you in the head with it. He told me had he walked away they would have felt he was weak, a chicken, and would have come after him later. But since he showed what they respect as courage they will leave him alone.

For many inmates, life in prison is a crushingly lonely experience, especially for men new to the prison system. Life is so different from what they are used to on the outside. They miss their families and friends. They grieve the broken relationships caused by what they have done. They feel shame, guilt, and emotional pain as they replay the tapes and relive the crime they committed. Some cannot bring themselves to forgive themselves. Many of the men are not much different from any of us. If they could relive ten minutes of their life, they would not be in prison. They are there because of a moment of insanity, a moment of passion that drove them to do terrible things, leaving them to live the rest of their lives behind bars. It is a place of great darkness for many as they sit in their cells day after day, month after month, and year after year. For lifers, it is difficult to come to terms with the fact that they will never leave prison. They know what every single day of their life

will be like until they die, but have no idea what will be done with their bodies after they die. It is a place of lost dreams, lost joy, and worst of all lost hope. St. Dysmas of South Dakota prison ministry is one of God's instruments to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ into that darkness, shining a bright light into the dark world so many of the men in prison experience.

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As a prison pastor, I have the privilege of these deeply troubled men honoring me with their trust when they need a listening ear. Many have told me that after coming to prison they have had a lot of time to think, to reflect on their life, and have come to the conclusion that they are tired of the way they have been living. They realize their old selfish ways have caused them, their families, and their friends nothing but trouble, and they are looking for a different way to live. They are looking for a deeper meaning in life, and I have the great joy of telling them about God, who loves them without condition. I am able to tell them about God's radical love, grace, and mercy that loves even a convicted felon. I tell them about the radically loving God who waits for his children to turn back to him, and when they do turn back God welcomes, embraces and forgives. I tell them about God, who wants them to live at peace. Many of the men I talk with have never heard that message of love applied to them. They tell me church has been a place where they are judged, turned away, looked down on, and condemned for what they have done. They feel too dirty, too foul, too bad of a person for God to love them. They don't feel welcomed or worthy to be in church, and this is tragic. God's grace is radical. God is able to love men who have murdered, who have raped, who have embezzled and taken advantage of people to extort money and power. God's grace is so radical it makes people angry! It makes people angry because God is able to forgive the worst of the worst. They are angry because God forgives people that they believe are not worthy of God's love because of what they have done. But God's grace and mercy has to be that radical or none of us stand a chance whether we are in prison or not. None of us deserve God's grace, but God grants it anyway. God's radical grace is what makes prison ministry and any Christian ministry so powerful.

Because of God's radical, unconditional love I am able to walk up to virtually anyone in the prison and tell them that God loves them. There are men in prison who feel unloved and unlovable. They feel irretrievably condemned. Many have been told that by victims, family members, friends, other inmates, and, sadly, some have been told this by clergy. It is a lie. Nobody is beyond the reach of God's love. No sin, no criminal act committed is more powerful than God's ability to

pour out grace and mercy abundantly upon his children. This is what gives our ministry traction. At St. Dismas men who feel unforgivable learn that they are indeed loved and forgiven. Our congregation is named St. Dismas after the penitent thief on the cross who was executed with Jesus. In the moments before his death, he turned to Jesus and asked to be remembered. Jesus assured him that he would live in eternity with him. At St. Dismas I am able to tell the men in the congregation who have committed terrible crimes that they, like St. Dismas, will someday live in eternity with Christ.

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To get to the chapel in the South Dakota State Penitentiary, you must go up two sets of stairs. You start the journey amidst the chaos and noise of the cell halls, but as you climb the stairs that environment begins to fade away and by the time you get to the chapel you enter into a true sanctuary. It is as if you are no longer in prison. The noise, chaos, and bars are gone. We usually have fifteen to twenty outside visitors in worship with us each Thursday evening. When the visitors arrive, they are warmly welcomed by inmates who thank them for coming to worship with them and hand them each a bulletin. The men appreciate these visitors and are eager to talk with them. These visitors are a tangible sign to the men that they are not forgotten, that there are people out there who care for them, pray for them, and take time to worship with them. Some of these people drive up to three hundred miles to be in worship with the men. They are truly the presence of Christ among the men in worship. And the men are the presence of Christ for our visitors. The visitors are a very powerful piece of our ministry. As I watch people coming into worship, I see inmates and outside visitors shaking hands, smiling, and visiting. It may be the only day of the week that an inmate has had any interaction with someone that is not paid to be there. And it may be the only time during the week that they are not addressed by their inmate number, cell number, or last name. For the hour they are in worship, they are identified not by the worst thing they have but rather by the identity given them in their baptisms—beloved children of God.

St. Dismas was developed as a congregation by Prison Congregations of America (PCA).¹ Prison congregations are unable to support themselves. In the South Dakota State Penitentiary, most of the men who work make \$0.40 per hour. While they do give to the church, they are not able to support the expenses needed to have a congregation inside the prison. Under the PCA model, each prison congregation is supported by individuals and congregations outside of the prison.

¹ Prison Congregations of America is an ecumenical national organization whose mission is to plant congregations in prisons across the United States. Rev. Wayne Gallipo serves on the board of directors. For more information, see prisoncongregations.org.

These individuals and congregations support the ministry in two important ways. They support the ministry financially. During the year, St. Dysmas receives monetary gifts from individuals, from estates, and from congregations who have included St. Dysmas in their congregation's annual budget. We could not operate without the generosity of these donors. The other way people support our ministry is by coming to worship with the men. As I have said before, the visitors are appreciated a great deal. And we have many repeat visitors who come because they tell me they are spiritually enriched by the worship experience in the prison.

It is an amazing thing to lead worship in prison. We have a choir that sings every week. Our praise band leads the worship music. It is so powerful to hear the men confess their sins and then see their faces as they hear the words of absolution. The men sing like no congregation I have ever pastored, and it is not unusual to hear an "amen brother" during a song or the sermon. They are enthusiastic and focused on the redeeming word of God. We celebrate Holy Communion every week, and if there is a visiting pastor present they are invited to help distribute communion. As the inmates and visitors come forward together to receive the body and blood of Christ, they are reminded that they are equally sinful and unclean and cannot free themselves and depend upon God's mercy and grace for salvation. As we conclude the service we have a tradition of praying men out that are worshiping with us for the last time before being released. The man is called forward and we lay hands on him, pray for him, and send him on his way. And I have a little fun with him and tell him, "I don't ever want to see you in this church again!" and hopefully I won't. St. Dysmas is having a powerful impact on the lives of the men who worship with us, but our reach goes beyond our worship service.

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The men are reminded that their worship is not confined to the sanctuary of the worship service but goes out with them into the hectic, smelly, chaotic, and dangerous environment of the prison community. They are sent out as instruments of Christ whose most powerful witness is how they choose to live their lives as an inmate. Other inmates are noticing and strike up conversations with members of St. Dysmas. The men invite them to worship and often they will ask to visit with me.

An inmate once told my predecessor, Pastor Bob Chell, that when he came into prison he felt he had lost everything only to discover that through Christ he had gained everything. An inmate recently told me he grew up in a Lutheran church where the pastor's sermons hammered away at the law and all he heard was that nobody measured up and were all sinners. There was no mention of God's

grace or of God's love for him. He heard the same message in Sunday school every Sunday. Once he was confirmed, he left the church because he said if that was what God was like he didn't want any part of it. But when he arrived in prison he began to hear a much different message. He learned that God loves him, has mercy on him, and has forgiven him. He said, "Pastor Wayne, if I had heard that message as a child I probably would have remained in the church and more than likely would not be in prison today." These are just two stories I could tell you about changed lives due to the work of prison ministry. There are many more I could tell and many more on the horizon.

God's radical love, grace, and mercy are truly changing lives in the South Dakota State Penitentiary and in prisons all over the United States. This is powerful, life-changing ministry located in perhaps the most unlikely place. But it is exactly where the church is badly needed, serving the least of these. It is all possible only because God's grace is so radical that it is given freely and lavishly to convicted felons, brothers in Christ, loved by God. ☩

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