



“I See You”

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The first time I visited a prison, I was afraid. I was afraid because I thought there were people there who could hurt me. People who had committed crimes, and people who guarded them—who had guns and watched my every move. I was afraid when they asked me to go through security checkpoints where they looked inside my mouth, under my hair, at the bottoms of my feet...my body felt controlled, watched.

I had been to a detention center once before, in my teens, when a church member had been accused of a crime, and we went and visited her, talking through the opaque plastic barrier to a familiar young woman in an unfamiliar setting and a baggy jumpsuit.

Ten years later, I walked into a visiting room to visit someone I didn't know, a man who had been in prison for more than 20 years. Given my adolescent experience with incarceration, I was surprised to see a man in blue jeans and a button down, sitting calmly in the plastic bucket chairs—an open room with chairs set up so that family members could hug and hold hands. It felt so humane compared to the Plexiglas barrier and jumpsuit I was expecting. And yet, the feeling of control was there, even in that open, well-lit visiting room. There was never a moment of not being watched.

Partakers: “Creating an Alternative Reality”

As a nation, we imprison more people than any other country in the world. U.S. prisons and jails hold almost 25 percent of all incarcerated human beings worldwide, although our percentage of the global population total is closer to 4 percent. Our incarceration system is based on fear and isolation, and often does not lead to transformation. 63 percent of those who are released from prison eventually commit another crime and return to the prison system. Partakers, the organization that I work with as a prison volunteer, has been working with Massachusetts prisons for 15 years, and in that time, only two individuals in the program have returned to prison.

Since 2008, I have participated in one of 26 teams throughout Massachusetts that Partakers has connected with incarcerated students in the College Behind Bars program. Members commit to visit the Massachusetts correctional facilities in pairs and basically just have a conversation each month. For many of the incarcerated folks in the program, this is one of the only contacts they have with the outside world, so they love the opportunity to have someone to talk to. We do our best to be a supportive presence and to encourage them in the very difficult endeavor of pursuing a college degree while incarcerated. (Imagine: no computer, no access to the internet or a decent library, a harsh schedule, sometimes cellmates who are not supportive of studying...) We offer a listening ear about the papers they are writing, the projects they are working on, the ideas that are intriguing to them right now, their plans for classes for the next semester. Topics of spirituality and life's meaning and big questions come up a lot, too, and for me, it has been a life-changing experience to have those conversations, especially across divides of religion, class, race, and the many other barriers that separate us in our society.

What is powerful about the work I have been able to participate in as a volunteer visiting prisons is that unlikely sense of connection: a connection that provides an alternative to the fear-based system of control that is our prison system. By visiting imprisoned men and women and developing relationships with them, we volunteers are embracing and creating an alternative reality—a small glimpse of God's kin-dom of love.

“I See You”

One of the individuals I visited with in prison over the years was Ron. He and I had a conversation one time that deeply moved me. He told me about a program that he had seen on television about doctors and nurses who were treating people with benign facial tumors who had been abandoned by social stigma for their condition, kicked out of their homes, and forced to forage for food in the trash at night. A nurse whom they interviewed for the program described the feeling of reaching out to these individuals and simply expressing “I see you”—she wept and said that this moment of human connection was the beginning of the healing, before any actual treatment.

Ron wept, too, when he saw this, and felt how much he related to a sense of being an outsider, of being marginalized by social stigma. He felt such compassion for the suffering he saw on the television, and it brought home for him how much he wants to work to touch those who are the margins—to be able to “see them” and embrace them in their humanity. As he wrote in one of his letters to our team: “My entire desire is to be able to touch those society turns its back on, such as the homeless, ex-prisoners, the elderly shut away in awful nursing homes with no family, kids in foster care...I know what it is to lose everything and have no one...However, now I see my reason for living is to impact people’s lives.”

When I entered the prison for the first time, I was afraid. In many ways, I still am. And yet it is God’s compassionate call to courageous connection that draws me back time after time. Compassion pushes us out of our protective fear, and into an openness to the world. I show up again and again to do the unglamorous work of sitting and talking with an incarcerated stranger in hard plastic chairs in a prison visiting room. And yet the results are powerful.

Compassion: Love Without Fear

Ron once wrote to me: “I am beyond grateful for your sacrifice and empathy, and it is of more value to me than five million dollars. After having my life twice ripped apart...and over decades losing everything and everyone I ever cared about, your act of kindness restores and creates anew a belief that the imprint of God’s goodness and love resides in us all. So, thank you.”

Although Ron is thanking me in this letter, this is not because of me, or anything special that I do. It’s also not only about the specificity of prison. Ron’s statement is about the power of human connection as an expression of God’s love. Compassion is practicing love without fear, reaching across that which divides us in society. There are so many ways in which we separate ourselves from others, choosing fear over love, but we are all innately capable of fearlessness, of courage.

How do you show compassion in your lives? How do you show up with courage?
Where is love calling you? How do you say, “I see you”?

Rev. Tiffany Curtis currently works full-time as a community organizer with a start-up called Mothers Out Front, and has worked as an activist for many years in faith-based social justice contexts in the U.S. and Latin America. She is trained as a clinical chaplain and spiritual director, and she works as a spiritual director on the staff of Still Harbor in Boston, MA. She was ordained in the Pacific Southwest Region of the Disciples of Christ.

Learn more about NBA Prison and Jail Ministries by contacting prisonministries@nbacares.org.