

“When was it that we saw you...”

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I remember the first time I heard the doors lock behind me. I was a young law student. One of my responsibilities as part of my internship with the local public defender's office was to interview clients assigned an attorney in the office. The old county jail must have been built in the 19th century. It was imposing. The entrance was along West Short Street in the middle of the block in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. I remember hesitating on the sidewalk as I looked up at the huge wooden door looming like a dark cloud. I felt like Jack in “Jack and the Beanstalk” going to the giant's castle. After I entered through that door, the next set of doors opened; I stepped through, and then I heard the loud “clank.” At that point, my freedom was totally dependent upon someone else. It was a very strange and uncomfortable feeling.

But I was lucky. I could leave. I visited our client and went home. For so many Americans and many who have come into our country, that's not the case. Some are awaiting trials or hearings. Others are serving their sentences for crimes they have committed. They can't leave until they are released. That's the nature of our penal system.

Prisoner Visitation and Support

What I have discovered over the years is that there are many people who are incarcerated who have never had a visitor. According to Prisoner Visitation and Support, an interfaith network of volunteer visitors, more than 50 percent of the prisoners in federal prisons get no regular visits from family or friends while incarcerated. More than 25 percent of federal prisoners are foreign nationals and find it almost impossible to have visits from family or friends.

According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus shared the dilemma of those separated from the Son of Man. They asked, “When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or in prison, and did not take care of you?” They were told, “Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it me” (Matthew 25:44-45 NRSV). And, there it is. In black and white before our eyes. That is what is expected of followers of the Prince of Peace.

Prisoner Visitation and Support (PVS) offers us one solution. PVS volunteers provide friendship, encouragement, and a listening ear to prisoners who get no, or few, visitors. PVS visitors help prisoners maintain their self-esteem and encourage their efforts to improve themselves so they can live productive lives upon their release back into society. The commitment, including preliminary correspondence and follow-up reporting, amounts to about one day a month. The priority is to visit those prisoners who don't receive visits from family or friends and want or need visits, those who are serving long sentences, those in solitary confinement, and those on death row.

PVS is unique in that it is authorized by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Defense to visit all federal and military prisons in the United States. Although PVS is sponsored by many religious groups, PVS visitors don't impose a particular religion or philosophy on prisoners. They accept prisoners as they are and try to support their self-growth. Orientation, training, and follow-up services are provided for all visitors.

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Ministry of Presence

What a wonderful way of sharing the love of Christ and bringing a word of hope. The ministry of presence. It's what Jesus asked us to do. The qualifications are simple: PVS is looking for mature people who are good listeners and are willing without prejudice to visit anyone. Women, men, laypersons, clergy, retirees—all are needed, and if you speak Spanish, that is a real asset. To find out more, email PVS@afsc.org.

Many people have never set foot in a prison. In one way, that's a good thing! However, once you have visited someone behind the bars, you realize how demoralizing and dehumanizing that experience can be. That loud "clank" speaks volumes. Reminding those who find themselves imprisoned that they have not been forgotten is a gift that is priceless. The blessings flow both ways.

There are so many ways to serve those who have been forgotten and ignored. This is just one that may speak to your heart. If you and/or your community of faith are engaged in a prison visitation ministry, I'd like to hear about it and share your good work with others.

"Then, king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me'" (Matthew 25:34-36 NRSV).

Grace and peace,
Dean

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