



In the senior seminar class I teach at Bellarmine University, I take my students on a number of field trips each semester. We go to different locations in the city where people are engaged in social change. Among the venues we visit are a halfway house, a homeless shelter for families, a drug and alcohol rehab facility, a refugee center, and the center for health equity. It was in the latter that the director shared a story about the work they did there. It was a parable, really. It not only impressed my students, but it also so impressed me that I now include it as part of the introduction to my class each semester.

It goes like this. Two guys were fishing on a river bank. It was a pleasant, sunny day, and the fish were biting. Their day was suddenly interrupted by the cry of a baby. To their shock and dismay, a baby appeared to be floating in the water. Then, another and another. One of the fishermen threw down his rod and reel, tore off his boots, and jumped in the water. He swam toward the babies and began scooping them up. To his horror, he saw more and more babies floating down from upstream. His friend immediately took off running. “Hey! Where are you going? You’ve got to help me get these babies out of the water. Come back here!” His friend kept running, turned, and yelled, “You keep grabbing those babies. I’m gonna stop whoever is throwing them in the water!”

It is the ongoing, ever-present, sometimes exhausting work that seeks both to save and rescue those being hurt and harmed and to dismantle the systems that are causing such pain and brokenness. When working with a population that has experienced so much trauma and distress in their precious lives, one cannot evaluate success in the usual way.

In fact, Father Gregory Boyle points out in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Free Press, 2010, page 178), “Jesus was always too busy being faithful to worry about success. I’m not opposed to success,” he writes. “I just think we should accept it only if it is a by-product of our fidelity. If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones.”

Today, the task is more demanding than ever. Those working with folks who are incarcerated and who leave places of incarceration know exactly what Father Boyle is talking about. We go where the pain is and seek to share God’s mercy. We don’t judge but exhibit God’s grace. We point to a better way and keep the candle of hope burning. We celebrate when people find their way and understand that many won’t. We know that more than a few will need someone to guide them again and again back to the pathway that leads to good health, sobriety, and life-affirming choices.

We continue to need people who are willing to stand downstream delivering mercy and kindness. Visiting those in prison. Mentoring those who leave. Caring and listening. Forgiving and loving. These everyday saints often go unnoticed and understand that success is measured by faithfulness.

**Upstream, Downstream**  
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We also need people who are courageous enough to run upstream. Like the brave shepherd boy David, slinging their stones to fell the mighty Goliath. Naming the evil that perpetuates a prison-industrial complex where people get rich from others' misfortune. Challenging legislators to reform a broken criminal justice system that sends far too many people of color to prison for extraordinarily long sentences. Fighting for an end to prolonged solitary confinement. Every day, these champions of justice fight the good fight against enormous odds.

During this season of thanksgiving and the hope, peace, joy, and love of Advent, I give thanks for those who continue to jump bravely into the water and to those who boldly run upstream. Our world needs both. And more of each. May God grant peace and comfort, encouragement and fortitude, to those called to this remarkable demonstration of faithfulness.



***Rev. Dean Bucalos** serves as part-time mission specialist for **NBA Prison and Jail Ministries**, through which we support congregations and individuals as they engage in prison- and jail-related ministries, focusing on inspiration, education, and advocacy. Learn more at [www.nbacares.org/prison-and-jail](http://www.nbacares.org/prison-and-jail).*

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