



This world has an incredible ability of minimizing people. When we turn our gaze upon our communities and neighborhoods, there is only one word that can summarize the entire scope: marginalization. From playground bullies, to affluent pockets, to political beliefs, to knowing where the train tracks fall. People all around us are minimized and marginalized continuously.

Having served in a ministry capacity in a wide variety of environments, one of the most difficult places was prison as a prison chaplain. The moment that those barred doors slammed shut behind me, it was as if I had entered an alternate reality. The air was thicker, the world was greyer, and the heart was heavier. This was all quite surreal, because this prison was once a majestic abbey. I would tread through the high fences with the rolled barbed wire on top and watch a collection of men who had made incredibly poor choices shuffling in straight, quiet lines. Each allocated to their new home: housing units, or as others call them, cell blocks. As I walked among them, it occurred to me how bizarre it was that the landscape was so utterly beautiful, yet our souls were so tarnished. The chapel was a grand cathedral, the heart of the abbey. Everyday, instead of angelic voices being raised toward heaven, it was lined with dingy white plastic chairs, placed out quickly in perfect order, and filled with men who could never quite look you in the eyes.

In the state that I worked, the prison chaplain wasn't a volunteer. After finishing basic training, I filled a very odd role. I was regarded as not quite a full officer, however, much more than a mere chaplain. This resulted in everyone, fellow officers as well as inmates, quite unsure of how I fit into this world in which we all resided. To be quite honest, many of my personal conversations with God early in my placement were about how I didn't know how to fit in either.

At first, the darkness of the collective souls began to embed within mine. This darkness was not specific sins that a particular individual might have been struggling with, or any merit of judgment upon what brought these men together. It was the absence of hope. The darkest place of the soul is where hope does not reside. It was through this realization that God unfolded my purpose within me, which still is a major aspect of my ministry today. My role as a prison chaplain was to ensure that each inmate's constitutional rights were adhered to. My role as a Christian was to pour hope into the hopeless, and radiate light within the darkness.

Ultimately, when people are minimized or marginalized, there has been a process of de-valuing. The result of this process is that human dignity is stripped from them. Many of us cannot relate to the notion that we aren't even human, that we are more animal than person. It is important to understand that an individual is not created by God with this imparted upon their soul. We do this to each other, and we allow this world to do it to others. It is my belief that there are many things that cause God's heart to break, but perhaps none more than when the people of God allow human dignity to be marginalized. As Christians, we must never forget that if we are to be followers of Jesus Christ, we must love the unlovable and forgive the unforgivable.

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