

These Prison Walls

John 14:1-7

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'"

These Prison Walls

This semester I have been taking a prison ministry class at Columbia Seminary and my classmates and I have been traveling to a men's prison in Jackson, GA. for weekly pastoral visits with the inmates. Prisons are places that many of us have never visited, and most of us choose to avoid if at all possible, but this morning I would like to take you with me on one of my recent visits.

To avoid the chaos of visiting hours, I arrived at the prison by 8:15 a.m. in the morning. I check my pockets before getting out of the car, anything other than a driver's license will be confiscated. I step into the security office and through the metal detectors. The woman behind the machine asks me to lift my pant legs and remove my shoes and what by business is at the prison. She motions me inside the second checkpoint, a small room with bright orange iron gated walls. With a loud thud the orange bars slowly crank shut behind us. We wait. From behind the glass, the guard takes our IDs and the gates on the other side make a loud thud and begin to crank open. With our new red badges that indicate our destination, we walk through a long hallway, up a set of stairs, and through another barred checkpoint to wait for the Chaplain to escort us into the prison. He appears moments later and leads us into what I call the "crossroads." The Crossroads is a large chamber with orange bars for gates, just like the earlier checkpoints, except this one is more like a four way stop. Where we came in is the only way out, the other three sides are hallways into the prison. Through the bars, I can see long hallways leading in three directions. Keep in mind, at this point, we have navigated through three barred checkpoints, but we have only really been spoken to once, at the metal detectors back at the front door. It's as if, you are just supposed to follow the walls, follow the barred checkpoints, and there is no need for human reassurance you are going the right way. Rest assured, someone would appear and correct you if you were going the wrong way. So, here we are at the crossroads, the four way stop, standing silently, wondering what happens next, but then the gate in front of us slides open and we step inside. There was no one to tell us to step inside...somehow, the opening of the gates is instruction enough. We step inside and wait. I look around me 360 degrees and on all three sides stand single file lines of men in jumpsuits, staring blankly at us in the crossroads. At first, they all look alike, white jumpsuits, black work shoes, shaved heads, and numbers printed on their backs. At first, they look nondescript, blank, like shelter dogs resigned to their cage, who doesn't even look up when new people pass by, and have given up all hope of adoption. But, then if you are brave enough to make eye contact with them, you see their humanity, and honestly, you will start to recognize people you know and love in their reflections. One moment they seemed like faceless jumpsuits, but quickly they transform into humble smiles and shy eyes. It is mostly quiet here in the crossroads except the occasional echo. We all just stand staring at the bars, waiting for them to open, as if they have a power of their own, like the bars know where we are going, and they control when we will get there. There is a loud thud and the bars finally open. We step

through and walk down a hallway and even though we don't hear the guards yelling orders, the inmates just stopped still with their faces forward and their shoulders touching the wall. It's amazing how little sound there really is, just an echo here or there, or the cranking of the bars at the crossroads, otherwise, silent. We finally pass through a door into the chaplain's office. This is where I find it's easier to breathe. There is something about those checkpoints, the bars of the crossroads, the silent security guards, the silent inmates, and those echoey hallways where no orders are yelled but somehow everyone knows their orders. It's like the walls are in charge. It's like the walls are the only instructions you need.

As we arrive, the Chaplain assigns each of us an office, and he sends inmates in to meet us. Some of them just come to the chaplain's office hours simply to hear their name said to them, others come for a Bible or to sign up for Bible Study, but many come to talk. Every other moment of every other day they are a six digit number, but at this moment, they get to hear their name repeated to them in greeting, followed by a handshake and a smile, and an invitation to sit down.

On this day, Michael, a man of 47 sat down and smiled at me. I asked him what brought him into the Chaplain's office and he described the concerns on his heart, his guilt and his feelings of utter helplessness. He just wanted to know where God was in his life. He knew he broke the law, he knew why he was here inside these prison walls, but he didn't understand why God wasn't answering his prayers. He prays and studies his Bible everyday but over and over again, Michael lamented that he felt helpless, alone, forgotten. Where was God? He began to cry and then abruptly stopped and apologized for the show of emotion. I assured him that this was a safe place for him to cry if he needed to. He sat quiet for a moment and then the tears returned. Michael was serving his time, he knew what he had done, he only hoped for some peace. He didn't need a burning bush from God, but he was desperately seeking that still small voice telling him he was not alone, and that God had not forgotten about him.

This particular morning, he just talked and I just listened. He cried and I tried to offer him a word of grace. But it wasn't until I got home and looked at our gospel lesson for today, that I wished I'd shared it with him. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Obviously Michael needed to hear Jesus command that he *not let his heart be troubled*. But what about that last part? Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life?" As he sat there next to me sobbing and crying out to God, seeking peace and encouragement, I don't know if I would share *that* part with Michael. Because, as he had already described and as I had seen on my way through the checkpoints...inside that prison, there was...**no** way, **no** truth, and **no** life... except that which was dictated those inmates by the walls. There was no **way** except where the walls lead, no way except within those walls. There was no **truth** except that their lives were broken, they were in prison, and they deserved to be there, no truth except that those walls were stronger and more powerful than they were. There was no **life** except shoulders against the wall, single file, staring blankly through the bars of the crossroads. Freedom IS life, afterall, and there was no freedom whatsoever within those walls. Why else were they ordered to stop and put their shoulders to the wall? It's because that wall reminded them that their lives were no longer free. Those walls stood literally as a big fat NO to any way, any truth, or any life.

I'd definitely share with Michael Jesus' comforting words, not to let his heart be troubled...but I might just leave out that other 'way/truth/life' stuff for another time. It just didn't seem helpful or pastoral at all until I looked more closely at the gospel.

Context

You see, our gospel reading for today takes place just following the foot washing and Jesus' announcement that one of his disciples will betray him. And most frightening of all, he has been telling them that he is going away and that they cannot go with him. Now, his disciples had been following him for years, they loved him, they believed in him. They must have been gripped by terror, in a prison of fear, at the notion of going on without Jesus to lead them. And then, we come to Jesus' encouraging words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I am the way, the truth, and the life." Now, this is a rally cry if I've ever heard one. As I read it, Jesus meant to encourage his followers as his betrayal was immanent, that although he would no longer be with them in body, he would never ever leave them alone, he would always be with them in their belief, for he had claimed them and, he IS...the way, the truth, and the life.

So, that rallying cry is exactly what Michael needed to hear. His greatest fear was that he was alone, that God had forgotten about him, and in that place where the walls seemed to scream orders at him, where they prevented him from moving in any direction, even there, the affirmation that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life was exactly the word Michael needed. It meant he was and is never ever alone, Jesus claimed him.

The world's walls

So, after my visit with Michael, I navigated my way back out of that prison, through the checkpoints, following the walls and the bars until I was finally free, free from those walls. Or so I thought.

The walls of that prison were no longer looming around me, but within moments of leaving, I was reminded of my to-do list, my own fears, my own questions about God's presence in my life. It didn't take long for me to begin to recognize a different set of walls that were dictating my movement, yes, walls, even out here in the free world, walls that seemed to control my life.

I may not live inside walls of whitewashed cinder blocks, but I discovered different walls in my living. And I suspect that many of you have also found yourselves shut in and controlled by other walls, emotional walls, the walls of this world.

What walls do you face that scream NO at you as you walk through life? What walls do you face that tell you *they* are the ONLY way, the only truth, and the only life?

Some of us face walls of depression that tell us there is no way out
walls of abuse that tell us there is no healing, no wholeness to be found
and walls of fear and resentment that tell us we cannot trust one another

Some of us choose to face walls of busyness that waste our lives away
walls of prejudice or security that dictate who we should despise and fear
walls of privilege and greed that shackle our compassion

Some of us face walls of addiction that shield us from our deepest fears
walls of limitation that tell us it's just not possible
and walls of inadequacy through which we can't hear praise

These are only a few, but even out here in the free world, even outside of prison walls, I must be honest with you...life is filled with walls that control just by being there.

Jesus ignores those walls

But, sisters and brothers, here's the catch, in Jesus' words to his disciples, he has given us the answer. ***Walls are no problem for Jesus.*** Prison walls, emotional walls, tomb walls. At the end of John's gospel, after the crucifixion, the disciples are sitting in fear, huddled, and terrified inside a locked room. But those locked doors didn't stop Jesus, did they? Those walls were secure, tight, protecting them from whatever loomed outside...but they didn't stop Jesus...he appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you." It is because of Easter, that we KNOW even tomb walls that scream a resounding NO to life, those walls were no problem for Jesus.

And neither are the walls of that Georgia prison, or the walls Michael felt closing in all around him in his frightful tears. For Jesus, even the walls around our hearts, our minds, and our lives are no problem. Even as those walls seek to control our every move, you and I are not alone, our Savior sits with us, cries with us, prays with us. Even in our captivity, you and I are not and will never be alone.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, he skips the four checkpoints, he blows past the security guards, he doesn't even acknowledge the silent orders those walls bark at us. He was with his disciples in that locked room, he is inside the walls of that Georgia prison, and even now, he is sitting with us inside the walls we face in life. And look around, we may not all sit confined by the same emotional walls, but we do have our captivity in common, not only is Jesus inside those walls with us, but we can and must reach out to one another inside those walls.

If we are Easter people, then we must claim the Easter freedom Jesus embodies. In his living, dying and rising, our Lord Jesus Christ has claimed us. The walls in our living are no mirage. They are real and daunting. And, just as I saw in that prison, the purpose of walls is to demand our attention, they scream NO in our faces. But, my friends, Easter tells us that those walls don't have the last word, Jesus is the more powerful and everlasting YES, and we belong to him. There is a way forward, and when we are ready, as individuals and as a community, we can and must face those walls, but when we do, we mustn't turn our ears to their controlling and limiting orders of the walls. Instead, we must listen to Jesus voice telling us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Thanks be to God.