

Sermon 011109

Good morning St. John's !!

It's a pleasure to be here. I bring you greetings from a very special group of people, the postulants and candidates for the Vocational Diaconate in the Diocese of Massachusetts. We are a pretty diverse group of six right now, meeting every month for a retreat at Bethany house in Arlington. Among us is a person who works in the yachting industry, a insurance broker, a professor of social work, a clerk of the works for the City of Boston and a court stenographer. It's a privilege being part of this group. What makes preparing for Holy Order especially worthwhile is the support we get from our chaplain, your very own Anne Fowler!!!

Two years ago, the postulants and candidates for the Vocational Diaconate of the diocese of Massachusetts were asked to take on a social service project for some 12-15 hours a week for the duration of the year. Even though prisons had always interested me, the only framework I had for understanding prisons were National Geographic TV specials (not the best source of information on prisons!) and about 1 hour during a folk concert that my wife gave for a group of inmates.

I initially looked into volunteering for a wonderful organization that we have here in the Diocese of

Massachusetts called Partakers .According to their mission statement, Partakers' goal is to reduce prisoner recidivism through education and civic engagement.

Partaker Volunteers adopt one or two prisoners who are pursuing their college education in prison. They visit this prisoner at least once a month, support them in their academic work, read their papers, and offer all kinds of encouragement and support. I want to come back to the Partakers model because this is one way that as a congregation, you can become involve in the life of prisoners.

Through looking into Partakers, I learned that they work through another wonderful organization called College Behind Bars which is administered by Boston University's Metropolitan College and under the oversight of a truly wonderful and very funny sociologist and criminologist at BU called Bob Cadigan.

Having had some experience as a college adjunct, I thought one way to reach even more prisoners would be to volunteer to teach courses through College Behind Bars.

When I volunteered to teach my favorite course, Introduction to Ethics, things became really interesting.

No today in the gospel we have heard of John the Baptist, that always unsettling figure dressed in a camel's hair coat, living in the wilderness on locusts and

honey. When this John the Baptist baptized Jesus, he engaged in what you could call a liminal ritual, a ritual that marked the transition from the private stage of Jesus life to the public period of his ministry. The ritual marked the borderline, the change of one reality to the other.

When a volunteer enters a facility administered by the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, there is a similar series of liminal ritual that are performed, rituals that mark the stark contrast between the free world that we inhabit and the tightly regulated, oppressive world of prisons.

These liminal rituals are designed with safety in mind, and they are mandatory. But these entrance rituals, in a symbolic way, speak volumes about the world that the volunteer is about to enter.

One enters a prison literally empty handed , except for a small file folder for the course I am teaching. When the autumn leaves blew a leaf from a tree into my file folder, this lead to an interrogation: what substance was I trying to smuggle into the facility? A blank thank-you note brought in for inmates to sign to thank a particularly effective guest speaker prompted consternation and a call to the commanding officer.

Before you enter, the car keys, the wallet, the nice fountain pen, the cell phone, the watch and finally even the belt and the necktie are safely locked away in a

locker. You enter the prison bringing nothing but yourself.

Then, being stripped of all externals, you enter through the narrow gate. It an incredibly harrowing ritual that now, after two years of working in prison once a week, I still can't get comfortable with. . The metal detector is still my enemy. There is always a penny somewhere in a pocket, or the metal ring from a coke can hidden somewhere that sets of the metal detector, to the annoyance of the COs.

Finally, with all the rituals completed, the door opens in the narrow gate of the 20 feet security perimeter topped by razor wire, and you enter the very new, very surprising, very different world of the prison. Given the lack of resources and possibilities that inmates have, you could say that prison are little pieces of the Third World right here in our own backyard.

My first class was a group of some 35 men incarcerated a MCI Norfolk, a medium security prison south of Boston. The fact that I was teaching Ethics raised some eyebrows for some of the staff. According to them, the inmates were already to far gone – why would I waste my time teaching them Ethics?

But here were some other aspects of this world behind the prison wall that were actually surprising and, in a way, delightful. These were 35 of the brightest people I

had ever met. And apart from being bright, they were model students, exquisitely well prepared, polite, interested, and always ready for the next case discussion group, and most of all ; supportive of each other , especially of the weakest members of their class, in a way that was often surprising and touching.

I love teaching Ethics! There are few more things more interesting to me than the 25 centuries long discussion about what how we ought to live, and the colorful thinkers that took part in that discussion, the stories they told, the theories they proposed.

Much to my surprise, the students agreed. They were more than wiling to enter into the discussions. And this gave them the opportunities to begin to tell their stories.

There is an unwritten rule in prison that you don't ask inmates what they are there for. As the classes went on and trust grew, students had an opportunity to tell their own stories. As part of the Ethics course, for instance, we devote a chapter to Immanuel Kant in Germany and his idea of the categorical imperative. Of the formulations of this categorical imperative is the injunction never to use people as a means to an end, but always as an end in themselves.

Usually at this point, I ask the students to give examples in their life experience of being used as a means to an end by others. This brought up some painful and moving stories. One of the students spoke about the

time before his tenth birthday he was a drug runner for a gang. They would use him, knowing he would go to juvenile if he was caught. When he became of age, he was kicked out of the gang. Others starting to open up about experiences of sexual abuse, both as perpetrators and victims – the ultimate experience of being used as a means to an end.

At coffee hour, today, we will have a chance to continue our conversation. I hope I don't disappoint you. I am not a sociologist or criminologist, I have not written books about prison like my fellow Candidate for Holy Orders, Christina Rathbone, whose book *A World Apart: Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars*, examines the life of women at Framingham State Prison.

I do have a very simple message; Education is the key to rehabilitation for this prisoners. On average, the recidivism rate in our prison system hovers around 66% percent. We have a very expensive and most inefficient system to deal with crime. But of prisoners who obtain their Bachelor's degree in prison, about 1 % or less offends again afer leaving prison. They typically leave, have second careers or begin businesses. For those who remain in prison for life, getting a college degree gives a lasting increase in self-esteem, the simple satisfaction that lies in having done a difficult thing well.

What can you do as a congregation? In this Diocese, Partakers has been a real blessing. You can, both as a

congregation and as individuals, support Partakers. You can support them financially, but more importantly you can become involved as a mentor for a student behind bars.

The snow notwithstanding, it has been a pleasure being with you this morning. May God's blessings be with your wonderful rector Anne , all your staff and your entire congregation!