

Prison Ministry Talk to Knights of Columbus

October 19, 2020 (20 minutes)

My brothers, as Christians, as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, we have a challenging problem. Let me share some stories with you - my recent struggles walking some of this path.

I hope to inspire you to get involved in, of all things, prison ministry. Now most of what I'll say is predicated on covid-19 being behind us. That day will come, let us pray, soon.

We need your help! But first, let's start with some context, some scripture you're very familiar with:

Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-46

...When the Son of Man comes in His glory, he will separate people... as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ... **35 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, 36 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.'** ...

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry ... thirsty ... a stranger ... naked... sick? 39 And when was it that we saw you ... in prison and visited you?' ...

'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

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Really?? This is some tough stuff.

But as we know, this Jesus of Nazareth is quite a radical.

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**My Introduction** – Mark Truxillo

I am a cradle Catholic, # 6 of 7 kids, I went to St. Rita uptown, to Jesuit. Manresa for 30 years.

Married to my high school sweetheart, Pam Truxillo, for 46 years.

We have 3 beautiful children; each married to a beautiful person.

We have 7 beautiful grandchildren ages 3 to 15, all in Catholic schools.

I retired after 35 years in the oil industry.

***Why am I telling you this about me?***

I am greatly blessed!

I follow the rules. I behave myself. I succeed. All my loved ones do too. Everyone I ever worked with professionally did as well.

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The preamble...

For the past 10 years or so, something in the back of my mind, the Holy Spirit(?), kept whispering,
“*Look into prison ministry.*”

Wait.

I don’t know anyone who’s ever been in prison, or in trouble with the law, or even been a victim of a serious crime.

Then about 3 years ago, maybe it was the Holy Spirit, but it felt a lot more like my wife’s sharp elbow in the ribs:

“*Stop talking about it, and go ask Fr. Tim for advice.*” Where can I find out about prison ministry?

All of you know Fr. Tim, so you got a pretty good idea where this is headed. Fr. Tim:

“*I’ve always wanted a prison ministry program at St. Catherine. It’s the only **command** Jesus makes in Matthew 25 that we do not have at SCS. **Will you organize that for us?**”*

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**The beginning of our story...**

So where to begin?

Fr. Tim’s good advice: just pick a few things so you don’t get spread too thin.

(Google “prison ministry” and you’ll see what I mean.)

We learned some things:

***The difference between a jail and a prison.***

A jail is supposedly a short-term holding place where you await trial or sentencing.

A prison is a long-term hotel where you will serve out your sentence. Angola; Dixon Correctional Institute (DCI); Rayburn. And they’re generally 2 hours or more away from New Orleans.

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But the Holy Spirit enters our story again...

At a facilitator training session for LTMT, I met Manny & Margaret Pineda. Turns out they were very involved with Kairos prison ministry. **Kairos** is a Greek word that means something like “in God’s special time,” as opposed to *chronos* or clock time. They invited me to attend a 2-hour closing ceremony of a 3-day Kairos retreat at DCI.

My first visit to a prison was an incredibly powerful experience to witness! This was 42 inmates attending their first retreat from Thursday through Sunday. It is difficult to visit a prison! There are many security checks you go through before and after arrival. To get to the prison chapel, you walk through several sally ports with your escort, surrounded by razor wire.

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto.”

Finally we’re seated in a back corner of the chapel with the retreat facilitators and outside food cooks. And seated toward the front, with their sides to us, were 2 groups of inmates facing each other. One group was the 42 inmates who had just made the retreat. The other equal size group was inmates who had made a Kairos retreat in the past and were now active in **Kairos Inside**. These were the guys who were “church” inside of prison, and were coming to witness their brothers’ ceremony.

Most of these were some very tough dudes, in every way you can imagine. Ironically, Kairos tries to select the negative leaders within the unit to go on retreat. The negative leaders have more *credibility* going back to their units to **build church inside**.

Almost all the 42 inmates got up to deliver a 2-minute witness on what the retreat meant to them. All had powerful experiences. **But it was truly moving the number of inmates who got choked up and cried talking about their retreat experience with their brothers.**

Now think about where we were. Crying is not something you do inside, or maybe ever. I’ve been to dozens of wonderful Manresa retreats and Alpha retreats. But **this was the most dramatically visible experience I have ever witnessed to someone experiencing the love of Jesus. Sometimes for the first time.**

Was this worth the effort to get there? Was it worth all the efforts to make the retreat happen? **Absolutely no doubt!**

An example: One inmate said he watched a facilitator peeling an orange. When the facilitator finished peeling, he offered a piece to the inmate. The inmate said, *“I was so touched! A man has never done something like that for me.”*

Several inmates recounted being raised by grandmothers and aunts. A loving male figure was entirely absent in their lives.

Clearly it is one thing to be euphoric after a 3-day retreat in a set-aside prison chapel. It is quite another thing to bring that sacred presence back into the grim realities of the prison unit. But Kairos-Inside, made up of past retreat attendees are a visible, active support to these new retreatants. **They are the church.** The results over time seem to speak loudly.

The wardens are very receptive of Kairos because of **improved prison behaviors.**

There are **dramatic reductions in recidivism** among inmates who have experienced a Kairos retreat, from a normal 50% in the general population, to below 20% for a Kairos attendee.

“Kairos is ecumenical Christian. We bring together what we have in common and leave our theological differences at the foot of the cross.”

For the last retreat, SCS parishioners baked over **200 dozen cookies**. The outside food is a huge prize for the inmates. One inmate jokingly said, *“Kairos don’t play fair. They get us here with the food, then they get Jesus in our heart!”*

There is a waiting list of 200 men for the 42 retreat spots. Part of it is the food. But as the DCI Kairos community has gotten momentum, other inmates start to see something different. A radical alternative to gang life in prison.

On Saturday night of the retreat, each inmate is given 2 bags of cookies. One to take back to share in his unit. The other bag is to give to someone with whom he has had a fight.

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Let's think now about another scripture reading you know well from Easter time – **Doubting Thomas**.

### Gospel of John 20:19-31

... a week later ... Thomas was with them. **Jesus came, ...**

**Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe."**

Thomas answered and said to him, **"My Lord and my God!"**

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In LTMTTP, I journaled the following prayer reflection while meditating on this Gospel:

*Lord, most of the people who saw you after your resurrection did not initially recognize you – Mary Magdalen at the empty tomb; the 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus. Your woundedness, your brutal death, 3 days in the tomb, and your resurrection **had somehow changed your appearance**.*

*When Thomas finally gets to see you, **you invite him to touch you**, to experience your brokenness and woundedness physically, to have a tangible experience that you had died.*

*In some way, your broken body was a human train-wreck, much like the lives of some men in prison.*

*So too, Lord, I struggle to recognize you in the brokenness of some people, the ignorance, the dysfunction and the poverty and chaos of the world around me.*

*But to believe, to experience your risen life, **I too must touch your wounds**. In the face and the life of the profoundly dysfunctional, the "damaged goods," you call me to recognize you, to love you.*

*My Lord and my God!*

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Inside my first Kairos retreat

Two SCS parishioners are facilitators for Kairos. Believe me, that is a really stretching experience, like nothing I have ever experienced before. A Kairos retreat is a little like an Alpha table. There are 2 or 3 table hosts, with 6 inmates around the table. But instead of a video, *each table host* gives a 20 minute talk some time over the weekend. Kairos gives you a very good outline, and you have 4 formation and practice meetings several Saturdays in advance. But writing your own testimonial on a retreat topic and then presenting it is powerful.

So I got my first Kairos assignment.

I'm pretty nervous at the beginning – I don't quite know how this is all going to work. And I also don't know how an Old Metairie oil retiree is going to work with this crowd.

One of the first steps is everyone, about 60 of us, are standing around the room in a big circle. We're each supposed to briefly introduce ourselves, and say what we want to get out of the retreat! Okay...

I think I said something like, *"I want to see the face of Christ in each man here."*

As you probably know, the Holy Spirit has a sense of humor. Well, about halfway around the circle, I spot this one young black guy, maybe 18 or 20? And he looks hardcore. He's got this hard-core scowl on his face. And he mumbles something with his intro. And I'm thinking, man, I don't know what the Kairos-inside selection team was thinking with this guy. He does not belong here.

A little later, we are all sent to our assigned tables and seats. And who is sitting at my right hand, but hard-core Corey!

[Pausing to look up at God] *~~I guess you think this is funny!~~*

It's a long, complicated story, but under that hard shell, Corey was a scared little kid.

I don't really know what Corey was like before he was arrested. But inside prison, most of these guys are broken. They have failed big-time, run into the wall.

They are poor in spirit.

Gospel of Matthew 5:3

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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***Where do most prisoners come from?***

To grossly simplify, in my experience they come from 1 of 2 places:

1. They were raised on a **different planet** than most of us in this room. Profoundly dysfunctional family, education, neighborhood, emotional stability, mental health.

Remember, they were not born criminals. They typically were born into a bad environment and made a bunch of bad choices.

2. Or, they are **our loved ones and neighbors**, right here in St. Catherine. Several of our fellow parishioners have family members in prison. It's not something you are likely to hear about in polite conversation.

When I went to my first Kairos Saturday Day of Prayer at DCI and introduced myself as being from SCS, at a break a guy comes up to me to introduce himself and tells me "I know SCS. I lived on Tokalon Place."

A few minutes later, 2 young guys come up to me and say, "We went to Rummel."

And then another, "I was a star linebacker at John Curtis."

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So What Can You Do?

Apparently, we never get too old for this. Two of the most active Kairos volunteers, Manny Pineda is 84, and “Pastor AJ” is 89 and recovering from covid-19.

But whatever your circumstances and your interest, we have a wide range of ways you can visit Christ in prison:

1. **PRAY.** It is the most important aspect of **Agape**, the unearned love of God. Sign up to pray during retreat, in 10 minute pieces, and volunteers construct paper prayer chain links like this. I thought it was hokey when I first heard it, but once I experienced it inside, I saw the awe these men had: *“Do you mean someone outside is praying for me right now?”* Many, most, have never experienced that.
2. **Educate.** ...yourself. Read, attend opportunities to learn more about incarceration. As a society, are we handling all this as Christians?
3. **WRITE LETTERS.** Most men do not receive *any* calls or letters from family or friends. They often burned all those bridges with the actions that landed them in prison. Believe me guys, anonymous letters are powerful! And you will be writing Christ in prison.
4. **BAKE COOKIES.** You’ve probably seen the drives Jackie Appleton has coordinated. Under covid restrictions, we are trying to work out directly shipping Famous Amos cookies as well as spiritual books at Christmas time.
5. **BE A KAIROS VOLUNTEER.** I’ve told you much of that story.
6. **BE A MENTOR.** *Here is something you can do today under covid-19!* Reentry court is a simple and effective way for probationers returning to the free world to not land in exactly the same environment that got them in jail the first time. SCS has 10 parishioners who are mentors, 6 of them women. **We NEED male mentors**, and I’m sure there are good ones right in this room! All you need to do is *receive* a phone call once a week from your mentee. It’s like talking to your adult child, usually just encouraging, but often asking challenging questions. There is online training and a truly impressive program to observe. There is more to it, but the results are impressive: greatly reduced recidivism! Less crime in our community.

You can find more information on all this on SCS website: www.scschurch/prison

Or give me a call with any questions. My number is in the bulletin and on the website.