

Via Dolorosa via Municipal Court

by
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Jesus did not shun the work of the dock, the dust of the field or the din of the marketplace. His preaching rang with references to the work-a-day world. Because of this, his words had immediate appeal and lasting effect.

In imitation of the Lord's approach to sermon preparation, I occasionally ask parishioners if I might visit them at their place of work and, if possible, shadow them for an hour or two.

Call it "preacher as free-lance reporter."

Last spring, in preparation for Lent, I asked a parishioner named Don if I could join him on the job. He was pleased to oblige. His position? Bailiff at a municipal court.

I arrived early. The seating arrangement in the courtroom looked familiar: wooden pews. Tables, podiums, a vaulted ceiling and recessed lighting imbued the entire room with a church-like atmosphere.

The congregation of alleged sinners arrived and the atmosphere quickly changed from communion to justice. Court personnel rushed through a full docket of offenses: domestic violence, solicitation, driving under the influence, vehicular homicide.

The experience helped me appreciate what Don does for a living. But the main reason I'd asked to accompany him to work was the hope of witnessing an *expungement*. This action of the court clears a one-time misdemeanor conviction from the record and affords the offender a new start.

Don had informed me of this procedure a few weeks earlier and I thought it would make a compelling illustration of mercy.

No expungements appeared on the docket that day. God, it seems, had other plans. Like the message Jeremiah received at the potter's shop, the word I received at the court had little to do with my pre-laid plans.

As I sat in the courtroom and observed the slouched shoulders and shuffling feet, the reality of sin and its corrosive effect grew more and more evident to me.

The tattered procession recalled the Way of the Cross, but it wasn't Veronica that I saw. Nor was it Simon of Cyrene lifting the Cross to ease the Lord's burden. Rather, it was an image of the Lord himself joining the line of drunken drivers, prostitutes and other trespassers. The Lord himself, saddened and burdened with the weight of human sin.

It was our sins that he carried, our offences he bore.

I'm not sure how the day in the courtroom will affect my Lenten preaching. I do know this: sharing in the work-a-day life of my parishioners enables me to interpret the Word of God in light of the lived experience of my listeners. My brief insight into the world as seen through a bailiff's eyes will affect how I preach the power of Lent as much—if not more—than anything I read in the comfort of my study.