



Thoughts on the Journey...

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Initially, when I was approached about bringing volunteer work in to the prison for the inmates at Southeastern Correctional Institution, I thought it would be a win-win situation for everyone. Social service agencies would have their large mailings done at no cost to them, and at the same time, inmates would have an opportunity to give something back to the community. The first time the steel bars of the prison gates slammed behind me, I have to admit that I questioned my decision. The sound of that metal hitting metal and the locks sealing me into a place where I was at other people's mercy, frightened me more than I thought it would. However, it wasn't long before my fear was reduced to cautious awareness. Four days a month for three years, I worked with about 20 men, most of them sex offenders. The prison authorities made the inmates' participation in the volunteer program conditional. Each inmate had to earn the privilege of coming to these two hour volunteer sessions. Within the first several weeks, word got around the prison and a waiting-list developed. They were eager to help and wanted to be a part of something outside of themselves and their prison sub-culture. These men nearly fell over themselves trying to be useful. I was cautioned about sharing anything about my personal life so, while we were working, I would ask them questions about themselves and listen to their responses. At first, the conversations centered around prison life in general; most of those stories were humorous. As time went on, they began to reveal more about their personal lives. During one of the sessions, I asked them where they grew up? The room livened with conversation and they bantered back and forth about their youth, their families, and their neighborhoods. Before long, the talk zeroed in on their "mamas" and "daddies" and caretakers while they were children. As I listened, my heart sank with sadness. It all seemed too commonplace to them, but for me, I was sickened by their stories of abandonment, abuse, neglect, and overall lack of nurturing and care. Clearly, the stories were not meant to solicit pity; they shared their tales with a benign indifference that made me wonder if they fully grasped the connection between their life then and their life now. It's what they knew, it's what they learned, it is what was at the heart of their anger, hurt, resentment, and fractured thinking. Somewhere along the line they got lost in the lack of love. The very people who were suppose to protect, love, shepherd, and guide them failed them miserably – perhaps because someone failed them miserably as well.

Scripture has many references to 'shepherds'. A good shepherd is someone who leads their flock, keeps them safe from lurking danger, feeds them, and leads them into well-being and abundance. In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, however, we are warned of another kind of shepherd: *"Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost... So, they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered... with no one to search or seek for them. (Ezekiel 34:2-6)* In every generation there are people who become lost because they have not been shepherded in love. They are scattered and removed from the flock because no one takes on the role of 'shepherd' in their lives and lays down their life to bring them back to the fold. And, as the adage goes, *hurt people hurt people* and these hurt people roam the earth perpetuating more hurt.

In John's Gospel this weekend, **Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me... for these sheep I will give my life. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must lead them, too, and they shall hear my voice."**

For most of us, somewhere along the line, we have heard the voice of the Shepherd. Someone has loved us enough to share their faith and bring us into the fold. Otherwise, if not for a twist of fate, we ourselves could be the inmates locked behind those steel bars. As faith-filled members of the one fold, the Body of Christ, we are called to be the voice of the Shepherd that reaches out in love to those who are lost, forsaken, and scattered. We are called to give love to the least of our brothers and sisters - spiritually least... emotionally least... morally least... socially least... mentally least... economically least. We have been given more, so more is expected of us. The love of Christ our Shepherd has access everywhere, through his people. With the help of the Holy Spirit and our willingness to be servants, he uses us as instruments to break down walls, remove barriers, cross bridges, be vessels of resource, and yes...even to open steel gates. When we roll up our sleeves, shed our sometimes arrogant impressions and opinions of who and what people are, let go of our fears, and take the risk of being open, vulnerable, and present to the least of God's people, the face of Christ will be revealed to us. We will witness the love of Jesus, our Shepherd, transforming hearts, minds, and souls of the very people we least expect - most particularly, ourselves!