



# Thoughts on the Journey

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April 25, 2021 - John 10:11-18

Initially, when I was approached about bringing volunteer work into the prison for the inmates at Southeastern Correction Institution, I thought it would be a win-win situation for everyone. Social service agencies would have their bulk 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 prison gates slammed behind me, I have to admit that I questioned my decision. The sound of metal crashing against metal and the locks sealing me in 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 a cautious awareness. Four days a month for three years, I worked with about twenty men, most of who were sex offenders. The prison authorities made 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 spread throughout the prison and a waiting list to participate grew. They were eager to help and wanted to be part of something outside of themselves and the prison sub-culture. They nearly fell over themselves trying to be useful.

As a volunteer, I was cautioned about sharing anything about my personal life, so while 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 their 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 and they bantered back and forth about their youth, their families, and their neighborhoods. Before long, their talk zeroed in on their 'mommies' and 'daddies and caretakers while they were children. As I listened, I was sickened by their stories of abandonment, abuse, neglect and overall lack of nurturing and care. It seemed so commonplace for them, and they shared their experiences with a benign indifference that made me wonder if they grasped the connection between their life then and their life now. It's what they knew; it's what they learned; it's 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 supposed to protect, love, shepherd, and guide them, failed them miserably— perhaps because

someone failed them miserably.

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 their 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."* (Ez 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, as the adage goes, hurt people, hurt people, and these hurt people roam the earth perpetuating more hurt on others.

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"**

Somewhere along the line, most of us have heard the voice of the Shepherd. Someone has loved us enough to share their faith and bring us into the fold. If not for a simple twist of fate, we could be the ones locked behind those steel bars. As faith-filled members of the Body of Christ, we are called to be the voice of the Shepherd who reaches out in love to those who are lost, forsaken, and scattered. With the help of the Holy Spirit and our willingness to be servants, he will use 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, let go of our fears, and take the risk of being open and vulnerable and present to the least of God's people, then the face of God will be revealed to us.