

"...You Came to Me"

The Care of the Soul of a Prisoner and a Prisoner's Family

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Prologue

The phone call came late one October afternoon. I was away from my parish visiting in Fort Worth at our Texas District Fall Pastoral Conference. We had just stepped outside of the hotel on our way to dinner.

"This is M," he said, "I'm calling to give you bad news. K was arrested today." With those surprising and sobering words began the most interesting and challenging, frustrating and rewarding chapter of my thirty-two years of pastoral ministry.

I knew K, but not well. She and her preschool child had begun worshiping with our Crown of Life congregation for about four months before this development. K was a soldier in the United States Army, stationed in San Antonio.

There had been a previous incident, a prior situation of pastoral care. That one, too, began with an anxious phone call from her father. K was in a psychiatric ward at Fort Sam Houston; her son had been surprisingly and suddenly taken away from her and placed in foster care.

Those several visits – responding to a confused and confusing situation – were to provide care to a hurting soul. Yet they were only a hint of what would come for K, this child of God, and for this pastor.

I returned to my home in San Antonio the day after I learned of K's arrest. Over the next few days, a flurry of phone calls with her parents, her sister, her superior officers, the staff and the (then) chaplain at the South Texas Detention Center¹ moved me toward an

¹ Hereafter usually referred to as GEO, for the corporation (The GEO Group, Inc.) that runs the facility and many others throughout Texas, across the United States, and worldwide.

extended series of pastoral visits and actions of pastoral care in this city and, now, at Secure Female Facility – Hazelton², a federal institution in rural West Virginia.

What follows are my experiences, stories, observations, and reflections on “The Care of the Soul of a Prisoner and a Prisoner’s Family.” These are offered with prayer that the Lord of the Church will use them to inform, equip, and encourage other pastors as they care for those arrested, accused, or imprisoned.

Please note that I have chosen to refer to most individuals only by a single initial. While much information about this situation is public knowledge and can be accessed with a minimal amount of online searching, I am striving to protect the identity of those involved as they are part of a continued story of brokenness and redemption.

Prisons & Prisoners in Holy Scripture

My research began – as it should – with God’s Word. And there was an immediate surprise: it happens more than I expected or recalled. It happens throughout the inspired Scriptures. There are prisons and there are prisoners.

Joseph is held captive in a cistern by his brothers (Gen. 37:18-28) and then in Pharaoh’s prison cell in Egypt (Gen. 39:19-23; 41:14); Hanani is put in the stocks of the prison by King Asa (2 Chron. 16:7-10); Samson is placed in shackles by the Philistines and, in blindness, grinds at the prison mill (Judges 16:21,22); Jeremiah is confined to the dungeon by Zedekiah, his own Judean king (Jer. 37:11-21); and Daniel is thrown into the den of lions – a certain death sentence – in Babylon during the Exile (Dan. 6:11-23).

John the Baptizer is a captive of Herod Antipas (Matt. 11:2-6) and is executed by him (14:1-12); Barabbas is released from prison by Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:18-25); the apostles in post-Pentecost Jerusalem are arrested and sent to jail by the Sanhedrin, but miraculously released (Acts 5:18-26); Peter is imprisoned by Herod (Acts 12:1-5) and also miraculously set free (12:6-17); Paul and Silas are prisoners in Philippi and freed in the middle of the night (Acts 16); and Paul – after he had tried to make a career out of “binding and delivering” men and women of the Way (Acts 8:1-5; 22:4) – is a prisoner for the Gospel (Acts 24) and writes a number of his epistles to the Church while in chains for the sake of Christ (Col. 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:8,9).

² Hereafter usually referred to as SFF. This is a part of a multi-facility federal prison compound spread across a hillside in northern West Virginia. When I drove there for the first time in late May 2014, I wondered how I would know or recognize that I had come to the correct place. There is no mistaking the identity of this stark complex. It is visible from some distance as fully-forested land has been cleared for the construction of these several prisons.

The prophetic Word described the ministry of the coming Messiah as the One who would “open the eyes that are blind, [and] bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is. 42:7). While there is no witness in the Gospels of the literal fulfillment of these words, the apostle Paul asserts: “But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22).

Jesus included in one of His parables the harsh treatment of a servant who caused another to be thrown in prison, and then was “delivered...to the jailers” until he satisfied his debt (Matt. 18:30-34).

But our Lord Jesus spoke most pointedly and poignantly of prison and prisoners when He said, “For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me” (Matt. 25:35-36).

The anonymous writer of Hebrews also encourages the infant Church – beginning to face Roman persecution – to have “compassion on those [Christians] in prison” (10:34a) and to “remember those [fellow believers] who are in prison, as though in prison with them” (13:3a).

The apostle Peter addresses suffering as a Christian in his first epistle, writing:

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Peter 4 – ESV)³

Our blessed Redeemer assumes that there will be Christians in prison and He asserts that those who visit them are, in truth, visiting the One who suffered and died and rose to set us free from the prison of sin and from the dungeon of death.

I must add that, while most members of our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregations and most pastors of our Synod have probably had little or no direct experience with imprisonment, there are many Christians around the world who face continued and unjust imprisonment, torture, and death because of their

³ *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

faithfulness to Christ.⁴ Until the Parousia, the Church will and must always remember those imprisoned, pray for them, and visit them whenever possible.

May the Lord of the Church grant that His visible Body on earth and her pastors – those who care for all redeemed souls – remember, pray for, visit, and encourage their fellow saints when they are arrested, in custody, on trial, and sentenced to time in jail or prison (and when, may God grant it, they are pardoned, paroled, or released). May our Lord also grant that His Church care for and support the families of our fellow disciples as they are dealt these realities in this broken, fallen world.

The Culture of a Prison & of Prisoners

First, consider the language. It is hopeful at best; it is euphemistic at worst.

Prisons are often referred to as ‘correctional’ institutions. In many states they are overseen by a ‘Department of Corrections.’ Their purpose – one would infer from this label – is to correct those who are sent there. The correction is supposed to happen by extended confinement and separation from society. (Though this argument is absurd, one might conclude that the longer a person is there, the more corrected that person becomes.)

Some prisons are labeled ‘penitentiaries.’ Yes, the root word is the same as ‘penitent’ or ‘penance.’ (In fact, in the Roman Catholic Church a ‘penitentiary’ is a priest charged with certain aspects of the administration of the Sacrament of Penance.⁵) The implication is that a penitentiary is where someone learns what it means to be guilty, expresses sorrow for her wrongs, or (though this is not Lutheran [i.e. Biblical] theology) does this act of penance to pay back God or society for the crime she has committed.

A prisoner is an ‘inmate’ – which actually means one individual in a group that occupies a single place of residence – but has also come to be applied to a person confined to a jail, a prison, or a psychiatric hospital, especially for a lengthy period of time.⁶

In addition, we’re all familiar with the expression ‘serving time.’ While it accurately conveys a truth: time is being served, and time is the object being served – those are

⁴ There are Christians today – as there have been for 2,000 years – who are persecuted for faithfully bearing and confessing the name of Christ. There are also Christians who are rightly accused and justly sentenced to confinement. Some bear injustice for the sake of Christ; some are guilty and bear justice as sinner-saints, redeemed by Christ Jesus and baptized into His Body. Here is the common truth: each prisoner is free, free in Christ and freed from the sentence of sin, the tyranny of the Tempter, and the dungeon of death. Each prisoner must hear – again and again – “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous (innocent) for the unrighteous (guilty)” [1 Peter 3:18a].

⁵ http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/penitentiary

⁶ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inmate>

words that I choose to no longer use. Through the almost two years of pastoral ministry to K as a detainee and now a prisoner, I've watched how time moves so very slowly. I've watched how time does not change the new reality of her existence. I've also observed that time has been lost – time with her family, time in her military vocation, time with her fellow Christians – that can never be regained or replaced.

Beyond the language, here are other aspects of life in a prison and the life of a prisoner that I have learned, discovered, and observed.

Prison is depersonalizing. Prisoners are given numbers. Prisoners are called by their last names. Prisoners wear uniforms – navy blue in San Antonio, tan in West Virginia – that emphasize the sameness of each person.

Prison means a schedule is set for you. Lights go on and lights go off. 'Count' happens at certain, specified times or at unannounced times. Lock-downs – for known or unknown reasons – confine prisoners to their cells and keep visitors away.

Prison means you do not move from place to place without permission or orders. And you can and will be moved from one cell or one prison to another with only the slightest amount of notice and the smallest of explanations. (It sounds as though it's a movie plot point, but there is a practical reason for this: wardens don't want plans to be made based on a prisoner's known or anticipated movement from one facility to another.)

Prison means that bars and reinforced windows and wire and fences define the space. Though I had driven close to the GEO facility in San Antonio for twenty-five years, I had never noticed the flat roof of this plain-grey building had a fence with wire on it. Here was a detention facility blocks away from one of the busiest tourist sites in our city, and I wasn't even aware of it. And, now that I know what this building is, I look at the roof when I drive past, and I never, ever see anyone enjoying some fresh air and sunshine.

Again, prison means walls and limits and rules. On my first visit to SFF, I observed the vending machines in the visitation area. I also curiously observed the zip-lock bags of quarters carried by most visitors. (I hadn't yet learned that the machines give no change.) One of the guards, sensing that I was new to the prison, told me, "The inmates can't go past the yellow line." So, I began watching how that rule was followed. Indeed, prisoners would step up to the line while their visitors would approach the machines and then give instructions as to what items to purchase. The next morning I asked K if she would like a cup of coffee. "Oh, yes!" she replied. When she moved to the line closest to the coffee machine I read off the options and then selected the mocha-blend

she desired. It was a simple thing, but getting to choose her own kind of coffee that day meant a great deal.

One final observation about prison life: it can mean that you are inside a building most or all the time. For more than sixteen months, K was outside very briefly only two times – when she was transported to a courtroom for a hearing. Though it was a gradual change, her complexion grew paler and paler, her face was less animated, and her eyes were dark and listless. When I finally saw K at SFF after almost three months of no visits, I was pleasantly surprised at how healthy she looked. Her pallor was gone. Her color was stronger. She had been out in the sun; she had been able to walk on the outdoor track; she had opportunity to do more physical fitness and her energy had been renewed.

When the writer of Hebrews calls the Church to “remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them” (13:3a) the Body of Christ is being called to a profoundly difficult task. How can I imagine being in prison or being in prison with a fellow-Christian? This pastor can now do this better than I ever thought I would be able. However, as I’ll share in some of my closing comments, I wonder how this can happen for the people of God at Crown of Life, K’s brothers and sisters in faith.

Yet there is reason for Gospel-based optimism. John Pless offers some insight and illumination from Martin Luther as he writes:

In this letter [to Lambert Thorn in January 1524] we see the strength of Luther’s Christology for pastoral care. The entire Christ, God and Man, is present with and for those who belong to Him by faith. The presence of Christ is not an abstraction for Luther. Christ is bodily present through His Word and according to His promise. No dungeon is too dark for His light, and no jail cell is so secure as to keep Him out.⁷

Chaplains or Pastors?

Is there a difference? Yes, there is. Does that difference matter? Yes, it does. I spent a fair amount of time searching for resources on the care of a prisoner’s soul. I discovered that a great deal has been written about “prison ministry” by individual Christians and by groups within the Christian church. But that’s not my focus; that’s not my story.

⁷ Pless, John T. *Martin Luther – Preacher of the Cross*. Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, Missouri, 2013, page 36.

There are also any number of writings that describe the role and work of a prison chaplain. There are, however, in my not-quite-exhaustive search, very few articles or books that deal, even briefly, with a pastor's ministry to an accused or incarcerated member of his congregation. (One of these rare but unpublished accounts will be presented below.)

A chaplain may or may not be an ordained pastor of any recognized church body. While I don't know specifics about their backgrounds or training, I did meet and communicate with two different chaplains at the South Texas Detention Facility and, already, two at Secure Female Facility – Hazelton.

The two in San Antonio were part-time chaplains. I suspect – but I am not sure – that they were receiving a stipend or salary for their work. The two in West Virginia are full-time staff members of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBP). Beyond that, I know nothing of their work, their training, their experience, or their theology.

Let me approach this in a different way. Because of my ministry setting – San Antonio is often called 'Military City USA' – I have come to know something about military chaplains. Several LCMS chaplains have become friends of mine. While this may be stretching the point, a chaplain has a more homogeneous 'flock' than a typical parish pastor. A military chaplain – especially when he is deployed – will serve a specific group of soldiers or sailors or airmen or marines. They will have a great deal in common. Even though they are of different backgrounds and different ranks, they wear the same uniform and share a common mission.

This is still truer for a prison chaplain. His 'flock' is even more narrowly defined. Yes, they, too, wear the same uniform and, though they come from a great variety of backgrounds, they share a common place in life and a common experience because of their mutual incarceration.

By contrast, a parish pastor's flock – at least this pastor's flock! – is amazingly and wonderfully diverse. I hold little babies in the hospital and pour simple water over their heads as I speak the Triune Name when their parents carry them to the font. I share a Bible story and play my guitar and pray with preschool children in our weekly chapels. I catechize middle school youth and teenagers and adults. I work or have served with a Director of Christian Education, a Deaconess, a Director of Parish Music, and a Director of Early Childhood Ministry. I visit members in hospitals and nursing homes. I preach (almost) every Sunday. I serve Christ's body and blood to the spiritually hungry and thirsty. I preside at weddings and I conduct funerals. And I travel to do this. While my setting does not seem, to me, to be highly unusual, I can easily drive 25, 40, or even 80

miles in several different directions to visit in the homes of the souls of those who make up Crown of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church.

What I mean to say is that a prison chaplain is contracted to serve a specific group of people in a specific setting, while a parish pastor is typically called to serve a specific but diverse group of people of many different ages in a variety of settings.

One anecdote may reveal something else about the difference between chaplains and pastors: prior to making my first visit to K at SFF in late May, I had (I thought) completed all of the forms necessary to be on her visitor list and to be designated as her 'Minister of Record.' When I arrived at the prison, I assumed that my name would be on a list and I would be able to enter without complication.

The correctional officer at the desk was, I'll say it nicely, not the most welcoming person. After I did the initial sign-in, I told him I was the prisoner's 'Minister of Record,' and that I had cleared it with the staff chaplain to bring her Holy Communion. His response was, "I don't care if you're the warden; you're not allowed to take anything into this building!"

After a bit more give-and-take, he summoned the chaplain on duty to the front desk. When I told him that I had submitted all of the paperwork (some of it two and three times), he explained that Chaplain S had not done the final 'sign-off' for me to be K's 'Minister of Record.' "In fact," he told me, "I've been working with the FBP for over eight years, and you're only the second pastor I know of who has asked to be designated as a Minister of Record."

I'm telling this part of the story to emphasize an observation made in San Antonio and followed by the two days of visits in West Virginia: I recall seeing a Roman Catholic priest at GEO one time. I never saw or learned that another pastor of any denomination was visiting when I was present. Although this is conjecture, the response of and attitude toward me by the staff at GEO seemed to support the perception that they did not commonly observe pastors visiting their members.

As I pondered the care of the soul of a prisoner and the distinctions between chaplains and pastors, I was able to engage in phone and e-mail conversations with faculty members from both Concordia Theological Seminary (Fort Wayne) and Concordia Seminary (St. Louis). Since I have been away from seminary for thirty-two years, I may have forgotten what I was taught about this aspect of pastoral ministry and pastoral care. My questions to these professors included:

- 1) "Is there a unit/session/presentation on the pastoral care of a prisoner and a prisoner's family? In what class might this be taught?"
- 2) "Is there discussion/presentation on how the specifics of the situation (a member who is arrested, accused, or imprisoned) might/should be (not be) mentioned publicly (in a sermon, for example) in the congregation, or how it should (not be) discussed with and within the Board of Elders?"
- 3) "In that second question, I'm interested in how confidentiality (apart from the Confessional) and 'public' vs 'private' knowledge are presented to the seminarians."

The response was underwhelming. That doesn't mean these professors were unwilling to communicate with me! It simply means that they told me: "We're trying to cover a lot of material in *Pastoral Theology*. And we don't have time to deal with every aspect of every situation that may arise in a pastor's ministry."

I understand completely! And I'm not sure I would have taken copious notes had an experienced pastor come into the class to tell his story of "*The Care of the Soul of a Prisoner and a Prisoner's Family*."

At the same time, several other professors – particularly Richard Nuffer from Fort Wayne – did help me get in touch with some of those within our church body who have done or continue to do specialized prison ministry. The helpful counsel of James Rivett – see footnote 34 – came out of these contacts.

I also found find some helpful insights regarding prison and imprisonment in Allen Hanson's book of his personal story of incarceration, *I Was In Prison*⁸, and from *In the Shadow of Joseph – Letters from Prison*, the story of and reflections about the lengthy imprisonment of former LCMS pastor Thomas Bird.⁹

Above all, I am grateful to my own father and mother who suggested that I speak with Michael Brockman about his experiences in being a pastor to (which means caring for the souls of) some men at Medium Security Unit (MSU) Hutchinson, Kansas while he served as the called pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Hutchinson for fifteen years.

To summarize, Pastor Brockman's adventures – and opportunities – began with a letter from an LCMS man imprisoned at MSU. From this initial contact and from this first

⁸ Hanson, Allen D. *I Was In Prison – Personal Witnessing in Jails and Prisons*. The Board for Evangelism Services, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: St. Louis, Missouri, 1986.

⁹ Bird, Thomas; Kothe, Kenneth; and Racer, David. *In the Shadow of Joseph – Letters from Prison*. Alethos Press, 2004.

Lutheran-Christian, Brockman had the privilege of baptizing one inmate, catechizing and re-catechizing a number of disciples, welcoming eight of them into membership at Christ Lutheran, serving them with Word and Sacrament regularly on Thursday afternoons, and conducting Christian funerals for two of the inmates¹⁰.

An Excursus: A Chaplain and a Pastor

There is one other aspect of the chaplain/pastor distinction that I would like to address. I'm not sure how and where I first read of Pastor Henry Gerecke. Perhaps you are also familiar with his story. (In my opinion, everyone in The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod should know of it!) Here is a brief summary¹¹:

Gerecke – soon after graduation from Concordia Seminary – became the leader of an unconventional ministry in St. Louis in the 1920s and 1930s known as City Mission. He volunteered to be an Army Chaplain in late 1943. (Two sons were already on active duty.) After his training, Gerecke was posted to serve with the Ninety-Eighth General Hospital in England. By late 1944, his ministry included the supervision of a German chaplain serving more than a thousand German prisoners of war held in a camp nearby. After VE-Day, when many soldiers were returning to the United States, the Ninety-Eighth was moved to Munich. Here Gerecke finally had a proper chapel, a sanctuary that had survived the Allied bombing and even had a working two-rank pipe organ. However, this was not to be the end of his military duty. In early November of 1945, Gerecke would receive new orders. He was chosen to be the second Protestant Chaplain to the German prisoners on trial in Nuremberg at the International War Crimes Tribunal. (The first was another German-speaking Lutheran pastor named Carl Eggers. However, his tenure was brief as the Nazi prisoners refused to be counseled by a mere 28-year-old.¹² This led to a frustrated Colonel Burton Andrus asking for an older and more experienced Henry Gerecke to receive the position.)

It's also pertinent to note the Allied perspective on the spiritual care of prisoners of war. Sometime in early 1945, General Dwight Eisenhower issued '*Standard Operating Procedure No. 49: Employment of Prisoners of War*', which allowed freedom to POWs to attend religious services, for clergymen who were also prisoners of war to minister to

¹⁰ Brockman, Michael. "Prison Work in Hutchinson, Kansas – 1998-2013," unpublished manuscript, June 2014. Pastor Brockman also speaks of the dynamics of welcoming some of these men that he served into official communicant membership at Christ Lutheran Church.

¹¹ I have a number of articles about Chaplain Gerecke that I have read and gathered over the years. However, many of the particular details in the following paragraphs are from Timothy Townsend's *Mission In Nuremberg – An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis*; William Morrow/HarperCollins Publishers: New York, New York, 2014.

¹² *Mission at Nuremberg*, Townsend, page 103.

their fellow prisoners, and for visiting ministers to privately attend to the spiritual welfare of captured combatants.¹³

I can't and won't tell the entire story in this paper. (That's why Townsend wrote his book!) But here are some salient points about Gerecke's care of the souls of these prisoners.

When Chaplain Gerecke met his new commanding officer at the Palace of Justice in November 1945, Andrus told him of a memory from Sunday school, a story about a lost sheep. "Chaplain," he said, "you're going to find lost sheep in our prison and, if God is gracious to you, you might bring a few of them back."¹⁴

To emphasize the Gospel-motivation of Gerecke, I'll quote his own words: "I was there as the representative of an all-loving Father. I recalled too, that God loves sinners like me. These men must be told about the Saviour bleeding, suffering and dying on the cross for them."¹⁵

Gerecke lived this out. He spent a great deal of time visiting the fifteen prisoners given to his care. (Six others were Roman Catholic by upbringing and were served by a U.S. Army chaplain who was an ordained priest.) He soon began a worship service on Sunday, the organist being a former lieutenant colonel of the SS. The simple service was composed of three hymns, a Scripture reading, a sermon, prayers, and then a benediction. Eventually, there were thirteen who attended this Lutheran service.

Frederick ('Fritz') Sauckel was the first to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. After one Sunday's chapel, he asked to receive Communion. Chaplain Gerecke went to his cell that very day and found Sauckel kneeling in prayer on the cement floor. As Gerecke prepared the elements, Sauckel rose to his feet, threw his hands in the air, and cried out loudly, "Gott sei mir gnädig, ein Sünder!" ("God, be merciful to me, a sinner!").¹⁶

Not too much later, in Albert Speer's cell, Gerecke heard this question: "If I can tell you that the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed me from my sins and I believe that, will you commune me?"¹⁷ The same affirmation and request were soon echoed by Baldur von Schirach and by Hans Fritzsche.

¹³ Townsend, 136.

¹⁴ Townsend, 117.

¹⁵ Townsend, 141.

¹⁶ Townsend, 174.

¹⁷ Townsend, 181.

Soon Gerecke arranged a special service in the cell-chapel and the three men knelt before the crucifix asking that their sins be forgiven. They then moved to the altar – a white sheet covering a table – and received Holy Communion for the first time in many years.¹⁸

In June of 1946, seven months after the Tribunal began, a rumor floated through the cells of the Palace of Justice that a number of American officials – including Chaplain Gerecke – were to return to the United States. Part of the rumor, it seems, was that Alma, Henry's wife, was asking her husband to come home.

Something quite unusual then happened. Hans Fritzsche – during an active session of the trial – composed a letter to Mrs. Gerecke and passed it around the prisoners' dock. All twenty-one Nazis, even those who never attended chapel or responded to either the Protestant or the Catholic chaplain, signed the letter.¹⁹

I'll close this excursus by quoting the words of Fritzsche – but not from the above-mentioned letter. Curiously, these are the words of the former Nazi Minister of Radio *Propaganda* [emphasis mine]. What blessed irony that Fritzsche would write thusly! Note also how this man uses the language of *Seelsorger* in his description of Gerecke's unique and challenging ministry.

Pastor Gerecke's view was that in his domain God alone was Judge, and the question of earthly guilt therefore had no significance so far as he was concerned. *His only duty was the care of souls*. In a personal prayer which he once made aloud in our queer little congregation he asked God to preserve him from all pride, and from any prejudice against those *whose spiritual care had been committed to his charge*. It was in this spirit of humility that he approached his task; *a battle for the souls of men* standing beneath the shadow of the gallows.²⁰ [Emphasis added by this writer.]

Henry Gerecke was both a chaplain, by official military designation, and a pastor, by the guidance and blessing of the Lord of the Church, during the months he served this flock of prisoners in Nuremberg.

¹⁸ Townsend.

¹⁹ Townsend, 223. Note: I have viewed this actual letter in the collection of the Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis.

²⁰ Townsend, 8.

Clarity About My Role

For the first several weeks I attempted to visit K on both Monday and Tuesday, the only days permitted for visitation of female inmates. (I do wonder, still, how much of my compulsion to visit so frequently was my need to be needed – and to be the ‘rescuing hero’ – rather than my perception of the needs of the one arrested and detained.)

However, and though it didn’t happen immediately, it became clear to me quite quickly that I needed to have and express clarity about my role to her and to her family. But, first, I needed to understand, affirm, and articulate the nature of our relationship and, therefore, the purpose of my visitation.²¹

Did she need to see a friendly face? Of course. Did she need to know she wasn’t forgotten? Certainly. Did she need encouragement? Absolutely. Did she need to have someone who would listen to her concerns? Definitely. Did she need someone to give her helpful legal advice? Clearly.

While it was not unexpected, there were continued phone conversations with (usually) her father in those first several weeks as well as frequent contacts and conversations with her sister, who had moved to San Antonio shortly before K’s arrest. In these exchanges there were often these kinds of comments and questions: “Would you tell her that...?” “She needs to do this...” “What do you think about...?” “Why is it taking so long to...?”

I’ll admit that I was tempted to answer or find answers to these questions. (Who doesn’t want to be the go-to-guy or the problem-solver?) But K needed a pastor. Others could be her friends or her attorneys or her practical-advice-givers, but she needed someone to care for her soul. It seemed then – and still now – that this was the vocation the Lord had given to me and to no one else.

But I needed to say this. I needed to say this to K, to A (her sister), to her parents, and to the elders of my congregation.

This has been one of the key learnings in this extended journey: I can choose to be many things in my relationship with this imprisoned Christian, but I choose to be her pastor. I choose to have clarity that my role is to care for the soul of this baptized child of God. In stating this, I am not only clarifying my role toward her and her family. I am being clear why I visit, why I must visit, why I pray, why I must pray, and why now (since

²¹ At this point (late October and early November 2012), K was not yet a member of Crown of Life, but of a neighboring LCMS congregation. That story is included in this paper.

March 2014) I must write and have phone conversations with K throughout her extended imprisonment.

Another issue needs to be addressed as I ponder the care of the soul of this prisoner. As noted above, there are many times that Holy Scripture mentions those imprisoned. However, it must also be noted that many of these people were imprisoned unjustly.

If my pastoral care was to such a Christian, the focus would be different. It's quite likely that the Word of God would need to address these questions: "Why would God allow me to suffer this unfair and unjust punishment?" "How do I live and witness when am I a prisoner – not as the result of a specific sin – but because the brokenness of the world has impacted the criminal justice system?"

But my role is to care for the soul of a disciple of Christ who is facing just punishment because of her sin. (This is similar to the challenge faced by Chaplain Gerecke while serving in Nuremberg.)

Though I still wrestle with the fairness of the length of the sentence handed to K, I am fully aware that there is real guilt under God and in the kingdom of God's left hand. This changes my role. My desire and my commitment is to invite her to confession (yes, this has happened – frequently) and to speak the freeing certainty of absolution. In short, my role is to assure K that the cross of Christ is truly for her.

A Visit vs. a Pastoral Visit

I know what to do and say when I visit a member in the hospital or a member who is a shut-in. I (usually) know what to do and say when there is a life-threatening accident or the sudden death of a member. I know what to do and say (though, I confess, I often respond with hesitation) when I visit with an inactive or unhappy member. But nothing in seminary or past pastoral experience had prepared me for visiting a Christian behind bars, dressed in GEO navy blue, manacled and shackled.²²

I quickly learned the procedures and rules (though, on one occasion – see later – I foolishly forgot one of them). I first needed to be on K's official list of visitors. This was a challenge because I could not communicate with her. Her only contact was with an attorney and with her sister.

²² In my undergraduate years (at Concordia College, Ann Arbor), I volunteered for periodic visits at a juvenile detention facility where we mostly played 'Spades' with the teenage boys. I was also part of 'Kol Timbrel,' a small singing group that represented the college. On two occasions we went to a nearby state prison. While we shared the Gospel in song and with some spoken words, we had no one-on-one interaction with the prisoners.

Once this was accomplished, I could visit during the set hours. I would show my driver's license to O, the downstairs officer, pass through the metal detector, initial the sign-in sheet, and take the elevator to the third floor.

However, I wasn't the only one who came to visit the detainees. I would often wait for 45 minutes to an hour or more to be allowed to spend our 20 to 30 minutes together.²³ In addition, for the entire sixteen months of pastoral visits at GEO in San Antonio, there was a strict and constant requirement to segregate K from other prisoners in certain areas of the building. (I won't go into why this was so, but it proved to be a blessing because this meant that our 'side' was 'cleared' of other detainees and visitors, allowing our conversations to be more private and confidential and less distracted and disrupted by other movement and noise.)

As I paced the waiting area – my usual way of passing time (though I sometimes turned on the always-too-loud television to ESPN) – I would rehearse the content of what I wanted to share in the visit. The officers would speak her name over the scratchy sound system, point left or right (I usually had figured it out already by the coming and going), the barred door would open, and I would enter the visitation area, walking down the row of stations until K stopped opposite me behind the plexiglass.

She would bend over to pick up the phone – a difficult task with her wrists bound closely and chained to her waist – punch in her code and nod to me when it was time for me to pick up my phone. So began the almost-every-week pastoral visits I shared with this child of God.

Our pattern developed into this simple form: We would exchange pleasantries. K would *always* ask, "How are you?" (She really meant it; she really wanted to know. I think it was a request to learn something about normal life outside of life 'inside.')

I would also ask how she was doing. I did want to know – though I didn't ask specifically – if she had heard from her parents or had been visited by her sister (this happened almost every week), by a few of their friends (this happened rarely), by her parents (rarer still as they lived hours away), or had been contacted by her lawyer.

But I learned quickly that I would run out of time if we spoke only about these things. My role was – and is – to be K's pastor. My desire was to share God's Word of Law and

²³ During the months I visited at GEO in downtown San Antonio, I would often combine those trips with a visit to Rev. Danny Chambers, hospitalized in the same city. This was more than another pastoral duty as Dan – whom I had begun visiting in late January 2012 – was a safe resource for me to 'debrief' the challenges and opportunities of my care for the soul of K. He would offer counsel and encouragement, and was faithful in his prayers for me and for our sister in Christ.

Gospel. My commitment was to bring the Good News of and in Jesus Christ to her each time I entered the detention facility, picked up the phone, and looked at her through the wire-reinforced glass.

Allow me to return to the 'rules' at GEO. When I began my visits, I was permitted to carry upstairs my *Pastoral Care Companion*, the worship guide from Sunday's Divine Service, photocopied hymns, and any other soft-covered Christian resource or book. (The *Lutheran Service Book* was out-of-bounds because of its hard cover and sharp corners.) So, as I shared the Scriptures from the previous Sunday or two, I could hold them up to the glass. I would also do this with the music so that – over the telephone – K and I could sing together a portion of the liturgy or some hymnody.

However, several months into these pastoral visits, I showed up at GEO one afternoon with the above-noted items in hand. O said, "I'm sorry. The warden has changed the rules. No books. No papers. Nothing in print." "How long will this be in effect?" I asked. "I can't say," he replied. "It might be for a little while; it might be longer."

It was longer. The rule never changed. For the next year plus I visited K with nothing in my hands. No Bible. No *Pastoral Care Companion*. No worship guides with pictures on the front. No photo-copied hymns. No *Portals of Prayer*. No notes.

My drives downtown became silent. I (too) frequently listen to talk-radio, but now I would spend my time remembering and rehearsing what I would say. This is how I would also pass the minutes in the waiting area, pondering our journey through the Church Year, reviewing the appointed Scriptures, recalling yesterday's or last week's sermon, and singing in my head a hymn or two.

We would walk through our respective metal doors; they would clank shut with telling solidarity. She would pick up her phone; I would pick up mine. She would smile; so would I. Again, after the pleasantries, the pastoral visit would begin.

"We're coming to the close of the Epiphany season; next Sunday will be the Transfiguration of Our Lord. Ash Wednesday is around the corner." "Yesterday the readings were..." "We celebrated three baptisms at Crown of Life last Sunday!" "My sermon focused on this theme..." So I would give a review of my proclamation of the Word to the baptized – her brothers and sisters in Christ – sitting in the same pews she knew, but in which she could no longer sit.

We almost always sang together. This accused and incarcerated child of God loves to sing and loves the Church's hymns. K had been taught them well – in home, in church, in Lutheran day school.

One time I said, "Do you know *'The Lamb'?*" "Of course!" she replied, "It's one of my favorites." "It's one of mine, too," I responded. So we named the opening words of each stanza, then began to sing. We stumbled a bit, but managed our way to Gerald Patrick Coleman's final words:

"He rose! He rose! My heart with thanks now overflows.
His song prolong till ev'ry heart to Him belong!
Worthy is the Lamb whose death makes me His own!
The Lamb is reigning on His throne!"²⁴

I often wondered who was listening to this praise and proclamation. Throughout our visits, there were frequent clicks on the phone line. I assumed some invisible correctional officer was carefully listening to the words we exchanged. I hoped that he listened even more intently when he heard a Lutheran pastor and a prisoner singing together in confident faith.

There is no difference between what happens on a Sunday morning and what happened on these (mostly) Monday afternoons and evenings. Of course, the setting was dramatically different, the number of worshipers was clearly different, the attire of the hearer was obviously different, but the purpose was the same: a sinner needed to hear the Gospel.

This was – and remains – my strongest purpose and my highest goal. Although our visits at GEO have ended (more below), my desire, in written or spoken or face-to-face contact, is to bring to K the Good News of salvation through the cross and the open tomb of Jesus Christ. She needs to hear what every soul needs to hear: the accusing and incriminating word of Law and the forgiveness and freedom of the Gospel, breathed into our hearts by the Holy Spirit's holy breath.

I would always end my pastoral visit with the Aaronic benediction, but I would personalize the words: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you, K, with favor and give you peace." The promise of God and the sign of the cross placed upon her though the plexiglass were followed by her quiet but strong "Amen" with her head bowed.

"Thank you," she would mouth and we would walk to our exits. Her door would clank open to lead her back to her cell and her confinement and mine would clank open to lead me back to my unconfined life and ministry.

²⁴ *Lutheran Service Book*, Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, Missouri, 2006, #547:5.

Affirming & Living Various Vocations

At an early point in my visits to K at GEO, on a quieter day around the downstairs check-in desk, I paused and said to the officer, “You know my name. I’d like to know yours.” He looked up and told me, “It’s O_____.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I’m glad I know your name. But what about the two officers upstairs? Could you tell me their names?” He took my card and wrote inside it all three of their first and last names: O_____, P_____, and R_____.

Something was happening as I visited the South Texas Detention Facility (almost) every week. I was interacting with people outside of my usual sphere of pastoral ministry and friendships. I would nod to other visitors and occasionally engaged in a conversation. (I didn’t always wear my collar; sometimes I wore a polo shirt and slacks. I’m not sure whether my choice of attire invited or inhibited any response!)

But something was different about my relationship with the officers. I quickly observed that not everyone liked them or respected their authority – as though O and P and R had, themselves, put their family members or loved ones or friends behind bars. I had chosen to be polite and to smile at them and to wave or say “good-bye” when I left at the close of my visit.

I did this because this man and these women had vocations. I never told them that. I’m not sure they would have either understood or affirmed so if I would have said, “God has given you this vocation, this calling. This is how you serve your neighbor. And these women and men here at GEO are the neighbors God has placed before you.”

My suspicion is that I would have heard, “Um. No. This is my job. I put on my uniform. I show up for work. I do what I’m supposed to do. Then I go home. And I get my pay check twice a month.”

It was my decision to say to myself: “I have a vocation. (Yes, I know, I actually have more than one.) When I come to GEO I am living my vocation as pastor to K.”

But I needed to say more, “Those who work here, nameless or named – O who checked my ID, ran me through the metal detector, and paged through my *Pastoral Care Companion* (when I could still take printed items up with me; I never knew what he expected to find!); R and P who greeted me from behind their safety window and told me: ‘We just finished count...’ or ‘There’s going to be a long wait today...’ or (on the best days) ‘We just called for her. She should be down in fifteen minutes...’ and then

blared her name over the loudspeaker and pushed the button to let me in and let me out – each one of these has a vocation, too.”

This changed my perspective. If I had a vocation (I did), then so did they. And this changed my unexpected, but frequent prayers for O and R and P. Here is a portion of a prayer ‘For the Prisoner’ from the *Pastoral Care Companion* that, I suspect, though very well-written, is rarely used: “Enlighten all who work in this institution that they may be humane and compassionate...”²⁵

Now – in my new journey – these prison guards who “work[ed] in this institution” were real people, real people with real names, living out real vocations.

A sidebar: several weeks after I learned the names of the three officers I saw almost every time I visited K, I called down to GEO while I was driving to see if I could time my visit appropriately and efficiently.

“Third floor. Visitation, please,” I told the person who answered. When the phone was picked up on the third floor, I asked, “Is this R or is this P?” There was a pause before this brusque response: “Who is this?”

I said, “This is Pastor Barz, the one who visits K.” Another pause. “But how do you know our names?” she wondered aloud. My reply was, “I asked O a couple of weeks ago and he told me.”

“Well,” she answered back, “no one ever calls us by our first names here. It’s always ‘Officer _____’ or ‘Officer _____’ or ‘Officer _____.’ You just surprised me. So when are you getting here today?”

I don’t know if I made a difference in the lives and work of these three GEO workers. I don’t know if they ever talked about me and my response to and relationship with them. I don’t know if they ever pondered: “What do I do? Is this employment my vocation? And what of these blue-clad ‘neighbors’ I am serving?” Nonetheless, I’m grateful that I learned about vocation from a different perspective in my sixteen months of visiting at GEO.

There is another perspective on vocation that I have pondered and am compelled to address: is it possible to speak of the vocation of a prisoner? Even more specifically, is it appropriate to consider and to affirm the vocations to which K is now called?

²⁵ *Pastoral Care Companion*, Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, Missouri, 2007, page 509. Note: There are more than five pages of resources for use with ‘Those in Prison’ in this fine and valuable book.

Allow me to frame this more broadly. Gene Edward Veith says it well (echoing Luther):

...All vocations are equal before God. Pastors, monks, nuns, and popes are no holier than farmers, shopkeepers, dairy maids, or latrine diggers. ...All are sinful beings who have been loved and redeemed by Christ. In God's earthly kingdom, though, Christians do have different callings, and their complex relationships with each other become occasions to live out the love of God.²⁶

Our vocations are "God at work." While we often think that we are working for or serving God, in actuality God is working as we love and serve our neighbors. Even more, "Christ is hidden in our neighbors, particularly those in need."²⁷

This remarkable truth compels me to reflect on Matthew 25 – the very portion of Holy Scripture that gave the title of this paper – differently. As Veith writes, "The farmer and the others feeding the 'hungry' are feeding Christ. The mother dressing her baby is clothing Christ. The nursing home attendant is taking care of Christ."²⁸

So what of this prisoner? What of this woman? What of this child of God? What of this disciple of Christ? What are her vocations? And who does she serve?

K continues in the vocations first given to her: daughter to her parents and sister to her siblings. She also continues in the vocation of mother. Though her children are now in the care of others; she will and must always be their mother. For vocations are not self-chosen. While our culture asserts that we choose them, the Lutheran-Christian affirms that we are called to our vocations.²⁹

But now it gets more difficult – for me, and for K.

Can I say, should I say, in my care for this soul, "You have a new vocation. Clearly, you did not choose it; but you must believe that God has called you to this vocation of prisoner"?

²⁶ Veith, Gene Edward. *God At Work – Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois, 2002, page 39.

²⁷ Veith, 45.

²⁸ Veith.

²⁹ Veith, 50. The redundancy must stand: "vocare" is the Latin verb "to (be) called."

If this is so – and I am convinced that it is – it is a living under the way of the cross. A theology of glory cannot assert or accept this. It is possible only because God Himself has chosen to serve us under the cross.

Here we are bold to pray with Martin Luther:

Dear Lord, I have Thy Word, and I am in the station that pleases Thee. This much I know. Thou seest all my inadequacies, and I know no help except in Thee. Help Thou, therefore, because Thou hast commanded that we should ask, seek, knock, and has said that when we shall surely receive, find, and have what we need.³⁰

Prison guards, officers, and wardens have their vocations, though they may be completely oblivious to this reality. They serve God by serving their neighbors – those under their authority and the society in which they act publically (on our behalf) as servants.

And prisoners have their vocations. But only a Christian who is imprisoned might, in repentance, acknowledge the consequences of law-breaking, see her or his calling in wearing an unchosen uniform, and then live out this truth (while wearing the uniform, the garment, bestowed in Holy Baptism!) by serving the neighbors who also live for a time in a jail or a prison.

Stories & Experiences

The story is that God was at work in the middle of a story of sin and brokenness. *The* story is that God was allowing me to be an instrument of His love and grace and forgiveness. But there were stories that were part of my narrative of the numerous pastoral visits I made at GEO in San Antonio.

Christmas was on Tuesday in 2012. That means that Christmas Eve was a Monday, my day to visit K.³¹ Yes, there was plenty to be doing and planning and thinking about at home and at church. At Crown of Life, we have three services on Christmas Eve and a Festival Service on Christmas Day. “But if this were my child...” I kept saying to myself.

³⁰ Veith, 152. The author quotes from Luther’s *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (trans. by Jaroslav Pelikan) in *Luther’s Works, Volume 21*, Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, Missouri, 1956, page 233.

³¹ Another rule had changed. Originally, visitation could happen from noon to 7:00 pm on Monday and Tuesday. This was changed to only Mondays. I’ll admit that I lamented this because I try to take Monday as my ‘day off.’ However, I’m grateful that by our Lord’s grace this was not a burden and I was able to visit every Monday that I was in town.

I planned my visit in this way: my goal was to be the very first one to GEO that Monday. I would arrive early, before the opening of visitation at noon. Well, I did get there early, but at least three others were earlier than I. They were already in line to check-in when I arrived. I tried not to stew, but then decided that I would be bold. Though he was already sitting at his station in front of the elevator, O was not yet checking anyone in. That, too, was a rule: the desk didn't open until noon.

So, I turned to the group – there were at least twenty people in line by this point – and said, “As you can see (I *was* wearing my collar that day), I am a pastor here to visit one of our members. Would it be okay if I went upstairs first? I do have other services to be ready for yet today.” The response was immediate and positive: “Sure!” “That’s fine!” “God bless you, Father!” (We can hear that a lot down here in this Roman Catholic city.) “Go to the front of the line.”

Even as I was thanking them, O was correct and official in his vocation. He stood up and said, “Is everyone okay with this? Because, if you’re not...” Once more, those waiting were kind and supportive of my being the first to go up to the third floor for a visit.

That was a singular Christmas Eve. In a way, it was a perfect enactment of a hymn we sing often during the Advent season:

“He comes the prisoners to release, In Satan’s bondage held.
The gates of brass before Him burst, The iron fetters yield.”³²

But that wasn't the end of the experience. When I left the visitation stall, either R or P rapped on the glass behind which they worked. “Would you give us a blessing today?” she said with a smile. I replied, “Certainly” and spoke to the officers through the glass that they might have the gift of joy from our Lord who came to this world as an infant to win our salvation. I made the sign of the cross upon them and turned to go home. And something more happened on my way out. (This will, perhaps, sound nobler than it actually was.) When I stepped on to the elevator after visiting, reading the Word, praying, and singing with K, another visitor boarded with me.

I said, “This isn't where I usually spend Christmas Eve.” He replied, “I didn't want to come here today.” To which I responded, “I didn't want to be here either, but isn't this what Christmas is for? Christ Jesus came into our world to set us free?” He didn't say

³² *Lutheran Service Book*, #349:2. The words of the hymn are by Pastor Phillip Doddridge (1702-51), written to accompany his Christmas season sermon delivered on December 28, 1735. [See Precht, Frederick L, *Lutheran Worship – Hymnal Companion*, Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, Missouri, 1992, page 36.]

anything. But I hope he rethought whatever it is he considered Christmas to be and to be about.

Another story: it was now June of 2013. We were going to have a Reception of New Members in a couple of weeks. A (K's sister), who was becoming an active participant in our congregational life, was one of those we would receive by Transfer of Membership. So, as I came to visit that Monday, I decided to ask K an important question. After I had focused on the necessary content, I said, "We're going to be welcoming new members two Sundays from now, including your sister. Do you want to be a member of Crown of Life Lutheran Church?" To which K immediately responded, "Yes, I would. I would like that very much."

"Then this is what I'll do," I replied. "I'll call Pastor _____ and talk to him to make sure that a transfer will be okay with him and with that congregation. If he says, 'Yes,' then we'll put your name on the list of new members right next to your sister's." This brought tears of joy to K's eyes and to mine.

I want to be clear that I had spoken with the pastor of this neighboring congregation soon after K had started worshiping with us at Crown of Life and I learned that her membership was there. As new members were presented to our elders I had already spoken to them of some of the particulars of this situation. They were strong in their support of receiving K as a member. As is our practice, she is also assigned to one of our elders' 'Care Lists.' This man has proven to be faithful in his support of both A and K in the time they have been official members.

I mentioned "breaking the GEO rules" earlier. Here is that story. My wife and I were downtown the week of Thanksgiving; we were having lunch with our daughter and her husband-to-be as they were home from Concordia University – Nebraska. Because it was a Monday, I thought it was great efficiency to combine tourism with pastoral care. So, I left them on the east side of downtown and drove to GEO on the west side. I paid and parked and went inside to sign in. But I forgot that I was wearing shorts! O looked at me and, once more, did his duty. "You can't go up to visit wearing shorts." I knew that, but I had forgotten.

Then, in a softer voice, he leaned toward me and said as he pointed, "There's a Goodwill store just a block away. I think you could find some slacks there." "Thanks," I replied, "I'll be back in a few minutes." \$2.99 later – and after a purchase and a change in the restroom – I signed in again. "Nice pants," O said. "Thanks for noticing; they're new," was my chagrined response.

But some parts of the story are not at all humorous. One of the longest days of my life happened in December, 2013. The Sentencing Hearing was finally set for two days after Christmas. K had already been in confinement for fourteen months. I had been asked by her attorney to write a letter that the judge would read and, hopefully, consider in his decision on the length of sentence. I sat in the courtroom to the left of K's mother and her sister. We watched the drama unfold.

A daughter, a sister, a mother, a child of God sat forty feet away from us, but the distance was farther than that. For we and she were not allowed to even wave to each other, much less to embrace or converse. The morning moved slowly but certainly toward an announcement of the sentence.

When that finally happened, the pain I felt was almost physical; my heart broke as I considered how long K would (or could) live as a prisoner. And then K – in chains – was taken from the courtroom by the bailiff. Again, no touch, no contact, no communication, with her family was allowed.³³

We remained in the Federal Courthouse for another hour. Speaking softly, stunned and grieving, shedding some tears, her mother and her sister and, for some of the time, her attorney and I huddled together. I had a prayer with her family, asking God's strength for them and for K in the days ahead. Then we considered an unforeseen challenge.

A news camera and a reporter were waiting outside of the courthouse. The prosecution team gave them a brief interview. And I kept peeking around the corner to see if they were still there so that K's family could leave without this possible confrontation.

This was a tough moment for me. Not knowing if the TV team would wait us out, I began rehearsing what I would say if the camera was on me. I wanted to say, "Today a sentence was determined. Today was about justice as this world attempts to make it happen. But there was another sentence spoken 2,000 years ago at a very different court. The guilt of this woman was satisfied when Jesus Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of every sin, yes, for the forgiveness of the sins on which the judge acted today."

I told her mother and sister that we would walk out together and, if asked, I would speak to the reporter. But, when I looked one last time, the camera crew was gone. For better or for worse, my attempt to make a public statement would not be heard.

³³ John Grisham's novel, *The Confession* [Doubleday: New York, New York, 2010] – in which, interestingly, one of the key figures is a Lutheran pastor – conveys something poignant and painful about the lack of and longing for physical touch between a condemned inmate and his mother. See, particularly, pages 192-195.

The Next Chapter

I went down to see K the next Monday, but – for reasons I’ll not disclose – was not allowed to make a visit. The following week I was able to see her. Quite frankly, I was dreading this visit. I imagined that there would be bitterness and anger and even despair. I was pleasantly surprised. Again, I am choosing to hold some of what I know in confidence, but there was acceptance of the consequences of her actions, that her choices had resulted in the reality of a long period of incarceration. We spoke that day – as we often did – of the mercy and grace of God. This is what we cling to: by His dearly loved Son we do not get what we deserve and we get what we do not deserve.

About two months later, A approached me after worship. (We would often visit in the back of the sanctuary after the Divine Service.) Her news was simple and, though not unexpected, still surprising: “K has been moved to Oklahoma. She doesn’t know how long she’ll be there.”

The assumption at this time, according to what we heard from the judge at sentencing, was that K would serve her sentence in Texas so that family would be able to visit her more frequently. When we heard that, I told K’s family that I would commit to going wherever it would be to visit this sheep of my flock.

However, that commitment is being tested. In late March, A and I once more visited following worship. This time her news was even more surprising: “K is now in West Virginia. I’ll give you more details as soon as I learn them.”

This new chapter has new challenges and, I pray, will provide new opportunities.

The greatest and most obvious is the challenge of distance. I am committed to maintaining my pastoral relationship with K. But weekly visits are out of the question.

As noted earlier, I made a promise to her family. I would care for their daughter’s/sister’s soul for however long she needed and wanted pastoral care. We all assumed the prison would be in Texas. As has already been explained, this is not the case.

Here is what I have been able to do:

I strive to write K at least once a month. Along with a typed letter³⁴, I place in a large envelope a copy of each Sunday’s sermon and a copy of the appropriate worship folder.

³⁴ Rev. James Rivett, a veteran of prison ministry (and an ordained LCMS pastor) shared some insights and advice with me in a phone call [May 2014], cautioning me to be careful about communication – especially

In addition, as K now has access to a guitar in the prison chapel, I have sent her twenty hymns from *Lutheran Service Book – Guitar Edition*. (In a recent phone conversation, she told me that she has compiled and is sending me a list of other hymns for which she would also like to have the guitar chords.)

I've also sent her each month's *Lutheran Witness*, the quarterly *Portals of Prayer*, and our congregational newsletter.

As I continue to learn – and follow – the rules at SFF, I know that I cannot directly send her books or magazines. (I do hope that the *Lutheran Witness* and *Portals of Prayer* have gone through. I honestly have forgotten to ask!). Early on, she was excited to tell me that family friends from her childhood congregation ordered for her copies of *Lutheran Worship* and *Law & Gospel – Reader's Edition*. I've also ordered for her a *Lutheran Study Bible* and *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* at her request.

When I learned from A that her sister had been moved to West Virginia, she was pleased to tell me that, first, phone conversations can happen, and second, visitation is now a 'contact' visit. (This means face-to-face with no plexiglass or telephone!)

I have also set up a phone account so that K can call me. It works this way: I put money in an online account and registered my phone number. This allows the prisoner to call out. I am not able to call in. However, I do have both a phone number and an e-mail for the SFF chaplain.

Again, there is the matter of visitation. I had a family trip planned in late May and early June of this year. (This would also include parts of four days at a DOXOLOGY Gathering where I was to serve as Chaplain.) When I looked at where my wife and I would be – St. Louis, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, and Nebraska – I began making arrangements for travel to West Virginia.

As noted earlier, I did make contact with the chaplains there, completing and submitting the necessary forms. But here was an important question: would I be allowed to serve K the Lord's Supper? As she had not received our Lord's body and blood since early October of 2012. I wanted to bring her these gifts.

Chaplain S of SFF worked with me on this. He assured me that I would be allowed to do so; however, I would need to bring and use non-alcoholic wine. After conversations with several pastors and the executive director of our Synod's Commission on Theology

with a woman prisoner. While I have no reason to be concerned about anything untoward being said about me to others by K, I am typing my letters and saving them on my computer so that I have record of what I have written and sent.

and Church Relations, I did sufficient research to find out that I could buy 'low-alcohol' fermented wine here in San Antonio that would be considered – because of the extremely low alcohol content – 'non-alcoholic wine.'

So I prepared my 'Communion-apart-from-the-Divine-Service'³⁵ kit and packed it for my first visit to SFF.

Earlier, I described some aspects of my initial visit. Here is another portion of that experience: I was not allowed to take into the facility the elements for Communion that I had prepared. Instead, as a "compromise" with the chaplain on duty, he provided two of the bread-and-grape-juice sets that they use to give Communion to Protestant prisoners. Although I did so reluctantly, I used those elements – it was still the "fruit of the vine" – to share the Lord's Supper with K in the open visiting area.

This, too, was simply to be accepted. There was no other possible option for space. It is my practice to use the order from the Divine Service when I bring the Lord's Supper to homes and hospitals and nursing homes, singing the Agnus Dei, the Sanctus, and the Nunc Dimittis with those to whom I am bringing our Lord's precious gifts.

Unfortunately, I was not allowed a proper setting nor the printed materials to do so. (We did, however, speak together the words of the Agnus Dei in our brief celebration.)

I do not know when I will return. But I am not the only one dealing with this new and different reality. I do not know how often her family can and will visit.

Her parents and her sister are not able to make that lengthy trip. Her older brother – who lives about eight hours away – has been the only other family member to visit K at this point. Work and finances are the main reasons. They must long – much more than I – for the opportunity to hold and hug their daughter and sister again.

Though it is my commitment to be her pastor, I am also committed to finding another (or other) LCMS pastor(s) to visit K and speak Law and Gospel to her, pray with her, and bring to her the Supper of our Lord.

What I've Learned; What I Am Still Learning

Before I pose some items for your reflection, I need to reflect.

³⁵ This is my chosen descriptor for what some call the 'Private Communion' kit. However, these celebrations – with the hospitalized, the homebound, those facing military deployment, a prisoner – are not 'private'; they are simply miniature Divine Services in different contexts.

In twenty-one months I've learned a great deal about the world of a prisoner and about the world of this prisoner.

While learning about the culture of incarceration is illuminating, I am still challenged, namely, to learn and understand the impact that this new reality has upon *this* prisoner and her spiritual needs and how this reality influences *this* pastor and the pastoral care of this soul that I strive to give.

I am also continuing to learn and discover how K must be connected to the Church (and to her church) and how the Church (and her church) must be connected to her. As you will see below, this is where I pose the greatest number of questions. The challenge and opportunity remains: how to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ – particularly His gifts in Word and Sacraments – to this redeemed child of God.

Finally, I've learned – and, no doubt, will learn much more – about the 'dos and don'ts' of the care of a soul of a prisoner and a prisoner's family. I won't and can't and shouldn't be the problem-solver. I will appropriately hold in confidence what I must, even as I communicate clearly and openly with K, her sister and parents, our elders, staff, and congregation, and with brother pastors.

As I continue to learn the 'system,' the rules, the protocols, and the basic practices (when I return to West Virginia I will bring my own zip-lock bag of quarters!), I will certainly strive to build relationships with and show respect for chaplains and correctional officers who have their distinct vocations.

Challenges & Questions

While I understand much more about the care of the soul of this prisoner and this prisoner's family, I don't have all the answers that I desire; nor do I have answers appropriate for the unique circumstances of other pastors caring for the souls of other prisoners.

Below are some questions I have been asking myself and, with some of them, having discussions with brother pastors and with the elders of our congregation. I offer them for you to ask yourself if and when you deal with the imprisonment of a member of your flock.

- What to say within our congregation about their sister in Christ...where she is and why she is there.
- How do we or should we speak of K as one of our fellow members?

- How do we respect confidentiality, especially when this crime and her sentence are matters of public knowledge? (In this particular situation, there have been newspaper articles, television reports, and items posted on the internet.)
- Allowing her family – particularly her sister (a faithful and involved member) – to decide or guide what will be said and how it will be said.
- Appropriately sharing the situation with our elders – especially before she was received as a member of this congregation.
- Appropriately sharing the situation with members of Crown of Life – so that they will be able to care for their sister in Christ with prayer and with written notes.
- Encouraging members of this congregation to write K and let her know that she is not forgotten.
- Maintaining communication with her parents' pastor (as they are members of another LCMS congregation in another city) so that he knows that I am striving to care for the soul of a child of the souls for which he is caring.
- The choice of attire when visiting: did wearing my collar – dressing in a pastor's 'uniform' – invite conversations that might not have otherwise happened? Or did wearing my collar stymie contacts and conversations? (I tend to believe that it encouraged interactions.)
- The 'fasting' from Lord's Supper during this extended time: What are *her* options? What are *my* options? What about receiving this Sacrament from a non-Lutheran prison chaplain?
- The challenge (and the less-than-satisfactory option I chose) when I determined to bring the Lord's Supper to K at SFF-Hazelton, West Virginia. What should I have done or done differently?
- Using the numerous times that Scripture speaks of prison, bondage, freedom, etc. to make reference or application in Bible study or in a sermon.
- Including prayers in worship for prisoners *and* for those who work in prisons.

† Soli Deo Gloria †

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