

Prison Chaplaincy, Addicts and Grace
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It is often hard to find words to describe the experience of being a prison chaplain---the moments of great joy and the moments of deep sorrow. Lately there has been too much sorrow. But for now, I'd like to tell you about Terri --- in hopes that it might give you insight into the work of a prison chaplain.

I can't remember the moment I first met Terri, when she came to prison for one of her first times for drugs and all the crimes connected with drugs and addiction. I will forever be haunted by her beautiful smile---a smile that always seemed to have more to do with making others feel better. She wanted to know the Bible better, so for weeks we sat studying together a Bible Study designed for women with eating disorders. One of her times back in, she was 6 months pregnant with her third son. I remember the disgust expressed by one of the officers at her for using drugs while she was pregnant. I was allowed to go to the hospital after the birth for a pastoral visit. The father was there as well---she was distant and depressed---she never got to see her baby much after that. A few years later when she was back in---again--- she found in herself the courage to speak and sing at a special event at the prison. She had the ability to force herself to do what is hard. How she wanted so hard to do the right thing, to be there for her sons, to beat her addictions.

This last time, Terri came back in still showing the physical signs of domestic violence and drug use. I reminded her of all that we learned in our Bible Study together: God's steadfast love for her; that Jesus loves her and will help her to be well; that she is made good in God's image. Her face flinched with tears in the hearing of these words ---that she could not receive. In March of this year, 3 days after being released, Terri died of a heroin overdose. Over 60 women came to her memorial service in the prison.

Too many of my flock are dying. When they come back in, I am grateful that they are alive---and many share with me that they are grateful to be in prison, for otherwise they are sure they would have died.

This past week, I gathered with the women in prison for yet another memorial service. By all reports Uri was doing well out on parole (addictive thinking always tells us one more time won't matter or fools us into believing we can be around those people and be okay). So many memorial services; each one giving space to expressing the feelings of grief safely; each one proclaiming the comfort and peace of God and the resurrection power and hope in Jesus. The challenge for me is speaking to the hopeful peace that the person who has died has found in God's arms while seeing in the eyes of the women gathered such despair for their own living in addiction, that it would be 'easier' to die themselves. I am glad that God is a life-giving God; that He sent His only Son to live and die and be raised up so that we are never alone in our despair; so that we are given the power and grace to be healed of our addictions and loved into recovery. At the end of Uri's memorial service, one of the women present said that we can't let her death be in vain; we have to, with God's help, fight hard for our recovery, our sobriety, and our lives free from addiction.

For as long as I have been caring for addicts in prison, I don't understand addiction. I don't think it is possible with rational thinking to understand that which is not. But I am learning, and I keep learning. And I offer the following definitions from various sources that have helped me in ministering with so many amazing addicts. The first is from Stephanie Covington, a clinician and author recognized for her pioneering work in the area of women's issues. Simply put, she defines addiction as "the chronic neglect of self in favor of something or someone else." And then there is the Linn's (Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew) who together in their book *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God* have this to say about addiction: "The feeling of not belonging underlies every addiction. Every addiction (or compulsive negative behavior) began as the best way we knew at the time to belong to ourselves, others, God, and the universe. The way out of an addiction is to find a better way to belong and wake up to our God of

belonging, or that we belong to God.” And lastly, I refer to Gerald May’s classic book *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*. In addition to explaining the science and brain chemistry of addiction, he states, “addiction attaches desire, bonds and enslaves the energy of desire to certain specific behaviors, things or people. These objects of attachment then become preoccupations and obsessions; they come to rule our lives. . . . Understanding will not deliver us from addiction, but it will, I hope, help us appreciate grace. Grace is the most powerful force in the universe. . . . Grace is where our hope lies.” This I too believe, with all my heart---recovery from addiction is possible with God’s amazing grace.

In April of this year, I attended the Compassion, Peace, and Justice Training Day Program sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Of interest to me was the workshop entitled, “Reforming Drug Policy---From War and Prison to Regulation and Rehab.” I learned of the Drug Policy Task Force authorized by the 2014 General Assembly and their work to promote study, discussion, and engagement among church members and to discern how to advocate for effective drug policies grounded in science, compassion and human rights. The truth of addiction is that it affects many families in many churches and I am glad that it is being talked about for everyone’s benefit and healing. Recently, Bedford Presbyterian Church held a community conversation about addiction. It seems to me that it is in the place where God’s grace is proclaimed and shared that the stigma and shame of addiction should be no more.

I end with continued gratitude to the Presbytery of Northern New England for the ongoing support and prayers for this ministry. Most particularly through the Presbytery Mission Grant funds given to the Women’s Prison Ministry of the NH Council of Churches. The funds support my work in connecting women in prison and when they are released with many churches and congregations that share of God’s abundant Grace.