

Deacon Jim Ward's speech at Wayne United Methodist Church on April 5, 2000

Good Evening, my name is Jim Ward, and I am a Roman Catholic Deacon. As a deacon, I work primarily in prison ministry as a volunteer chaplain, so I'm not really used to this kind of audience. Usually when I talk to people, they don't have the option of leaving.

Before we get going, I should tell you a little about myself.

I am a native of Detroit, always a Westsider, 25 year Canton resident.

I'm married, two children, a dog.

By trade I'm a computer programmer.

I am also a deacon; and that's an all encompassing, 24 x 7 kind of a thing.

Since you may not be familiar with Catholic deacons, let me tell just a little about us.

We are ordained clergy with the special mission of service.

We receive much the same training as priests, same seminary, same vows (except celibacy if we are married at ordination).

We have secular employment and do not receive compensation for our church work.

We are assigned to a parish and we help out, but we are servants (*diakonia*) first and foremost.

Like all Christians, we are called to represent Jesus to others,

in Catholic tradition, our priests are called to be like the Jesus of Jerusalem,

the one who offers himself to God to reconcile us with his Heavenly Father.

Deacons, however, are called to be like the Jesus of Nazareth,

the Jesus who lived with his family in the community, working at his trade, serving his community with forks of peace and justice.

That is why many deacons are chaplains and advocates:

chaplains in prisons, hospitals, fire departments and law enforcement, advocates for the homeless, the oppressed and the marginalized.

I am primarily assigned to Western Wayne County Correctional Facility, on Five mile, west of Beck.

Not the nice new one on the corner, that is Scott, the women's facility.

We are the men's facility, the old Detroit House of Correction (DeHoCo), built around 1920.

We are a medium security, transfer facility; prisoners enter or exit the system through Western Wayne.

The average stay with us is about 3 weeks, although we do have a psychiatric facility and sometimes people are there for longer periods.

I work with a number of other people:

Chaplains: full time paid professionals, employed by the state.

They supervise our programs and act as liaison with the prison administration.

Catholic Clergy: A Catholic priest is an exception at a prison - there just aren't enough priests to go around. There are a quite number of deacons, for this kind of ministry is particularly appropriate for us. We lead liturgies and provide pastoral services - baptisms, weddings, scripture studies, and so on.

Other clergy: Catholics don't have a monopoly on prison ministry.

I work with a number of other clergy; Protestant, Islamic and so on, who minister to prisoners.

We share both facilities and prisoners. I often have Protestant prisoners at my services and vice versa - we all get along just fine.

Lay volunteers, there are many devoted volunteers; they are pen pals with inmates, they visit inmates – they are the only visitors some prisoners get.
Others lead AA / NA groups, teach G.E.D. classes or offer pro bono legal services

So what do we do there? What is it like?

I think the best way to explain is to take you with me on an imaginary visit. Since we are going inside the fence, you will need security clearance; which requires a complete background check.
So if any of you have outstanding felony warrants, you should stay here – otherwise the next voice you hear will be a U.S. Marshal.

The fence

As we pull in, the first thing you will notice is the 20' fence – three of them actually, with razor tape on the top and wired with alarms.
There are towers around the perimeter. In each are officers with rifles. Other than this, the corrections officers we will meet are unarmed.

The lobby

We walk inside the lobby and notice it that it is hot – summer or winter.
The first impression is that it is clean and neat, but dreary. Everything, furniture and fixtures, is old – cast offs from other state offices.
We sign in at the reception desk, get our prison ID and a locker assignment. Any thing we bring inside must be pre-approved by the warden on our manifest.
We empty our pockets into the locker; wallet, car keys, grocery list – everything.

Pat down

We go to the first check point and enter through a sliding door a small glass walled room. The other door leads out into the prison proper.
We walk through a metal detector. We are searched, and so is everything we bring in.
We carry everything in clear plastic so it won't have to be opened.
We clear security and enter the prison proper.

The back gate

The old cell-blocks are directly ahead - it looks just like the movies; two stories, catwalk, steel bars. We go downstairs to the back gate.
The officer lets us in, calls ahead to the chapel to let them know we are coming, and lets us out.

The yard

We step out into the yard.
It is large - several acres, dotted with buildings, kitchens, work areas and housing units where most the prisoners live, two to a room.
We arrive just after short count, one of the four counts held during the day.
It is evening yard - the one time the men can leave their rooms.
Inmates are walking around; never more than two at a time and never standing still – that is against regulations.
We turn right and walk up the hill to the chapel.

The chapel

This is one of the oldest buildings, it looks more like a barn than a chapel.
It is dingy, painted gray, and smells like disinfectant and sweat.
We set up our altar, an old end table, and lectern, set out service sheets and bibles.
I put on my alb and stole. The officer calls out on the PA system Catholic services.
The inmates must 'kite' or request to be put on a 'call out' list to attend.

The Men

The men begin to arrive, mostly alone, sometimes with a friend.
They are dressed in uniforms, blue trousers with an orange stripe, yellow T-shirt.
We greet each one with a handshake, "Welcome, thanks for coming"
There is no 'typical' prisoner; we could meet anyone; from a company president to a street person.
Their crimes could range from outstanding traffic tickets to murder.

They say people in jail fall into one of three groups.

On meeting the first group, your only thought is "How did you ever wind up here? You don't belong in jail."

With the second group your thought is, "Yup, you belong here."
And the third group, "Jail is too good for you."

There seem to be two common threads among inmates:

One is substance abuse.

Alcohol and or drugs are at the root of most of their problems.
If you are a cocaine addict, you *will* lose your job (family and friends as well).
To support an 800 dollar a week habit, you *will* turn to theft.
And you will be caught and sent to jail.

The other is developmental disabilities.

With the cutbacks in state funding for group homes, many disabled people have been turned out on the streets to fend for themselves.
Eventually they wind up in jail.
They tend to be poor communicators and are difficult for the guards to deal with.
They usually wind up in the psychiatric units, often heavily medicated to make them tractable, guilty of no real crime except being disabled.

People often ask if I think the prisoners are 'conning' me when they tell me their stories.

I tell them "I really don't care if they are or not."

They have already been judged in *this* world, so I don't have to. And in the *next* they will be talking to a judge who is not easily conned.

If they tell me they are not guilty, I just say OK.

I accept what they tell me about their past; because what happened in their past is not as important as what they will do with their future."

One of the men asks me to call his fiancé for him, another his mother.
One man shares a confession with me, and I pray with him for a while.
Another says he is 'riding out,' going to another facility, tomorrow.

He thinks it is Jackson, and he asks us to pray for him.

The Service

I ask for two volunteers to read, and we are off.

It is a standard communion service, using the readings and collects for the day.

The men read from scripture, we pray together and share thoughts on the readings.

We pray for the men in prison, their families and loved ones, for the victims of crime – whatever is on their minds.

If one of the inmates will be going out on parole, we say a special prayer of blessing for him.

The Bible Study

After the service,

we pass out the bibles and begin to read – we are currently reading the book of Acts.

We read a few verses, then discuss it. The men ask questions and we go wherever they want.

I am always amazed at the intensity of devotion and knowledge of scripture they have.

Leaving

After a prayer of thanks and final blessing our allotted time is up and the men must leave.

I have to be careful because of the 8:30 count,

If they don't get back to their units by then, they can get in trouble.

They go back to their units, we return to the outside. At the back gate, we show ID and the officer lets us in.

On the way out, one of the officers thanks us for coming. We pick up our things from the locker, return the ID and leave.

Why do I do it?

Why would anyone want to do this work? I don't know. For me it is a call to love the unlovable. There is a passage in Matthew's gospel where Jesus tells his disciples that "whatever you do for the least of my brothers, you do for me." These men truly are the least of Our Lord's brothers, to help them is to help Him.

I would like to leave you with a request and a challenge,

My request is simple

I would ask for your prayers – for the men I care for and all who are in prison.

Pray for them, accepting them as they are, trying to see them as Jesus sees them.

Pray for those men who come to our church services,

but please pray even harder for the men who don't.

Ask the Lord to touch their lives and change their hearts;

that these men, who are surely in the valley of the shadow of death,

receive the courage to change and the strength to persevere.

Pray for all those they have hurt; the direct victims of their crimes, of course,

but also the indirect victims; their families and friends.

Pray that the hurts they caused may be healed

and that all they have hurt may come to forgive them.

I would also ask you to pray for the corrections officers, and all who work in prisons.

That the Lord may grant them wisdom and patience when dealing with the inmates,

and may keep them safe from harm.

The challenge is harder

I would like to challenge you to change your thinking about prisoners, jails and ex-offenders.

About Prisoners

They are still human beings; made in the image and likeness of God.

Regardless of what they have done, they can change.

And one sure way to prevent that change is to say, “They will never change. Why bother with them.”

Jesus thought enough of prisoners to die on the cross for them; shouldn't we feel the same?

About Jails

They are not black holes, dumping grounds for human refuse, or a “finishing school for criminals.”

They are challenging environments,

but they do offer opportunities for people to learn new life skills.

Inside there are AA / NA groups, GED preparation classes, religious services.

The individual who wishes to change their life can make a start there.

Ex-offenders

Which brings us to ex-offenders,

how can the change started in prison be nurtured on the outside?

The recidivism rate (the rate at which people return to jail for another offense or parole violation), is about 75 %.

This means that for every 100 people who serve their time and re-enter society,

75 will return to prison sometime within the next 5 years.

If those ex-offenders can successfully join some kind of group,

like AA or NA, the rate falls to about 25%.

If they connect with a religious group, a church, the rate falls below 10%.

So my final challenge is to accept ex-offenders.

Hire them at your place of business,

accept them into your neighborhoods,

and welcome them into the community of your Church.

Give them a share in the benefits of society

and you will give them reason for staying out of jail.

Speak well of them.

Remember that they will live up to your expectations;

expect the worst and that is what you will get.

Expect the best, and you will be amazed.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the gift God has given me of both the Diaconate and jail ministry.

It is a privilege to share these men's lives,

to stand with them at the darkest place in their lives and point to the light.

I never thought I would be ministering in a prison,

now I can't think of doing anything else.