Forgiven—No Matter What

Parishioner Julia Tully reflects on an unexpected place of reconciliation.

The place I have seen God the clearest is one that might surprise you: within the walls of a prison classroom. As a graduate theology student at Villanova, I had the opportunity to accompany our undergraduate students to tutor men who are incarcerated at a state correctional institution. I had begun to learn more about the injustices that lie within the criminal justice system in the United States, especially the dramatic disparity of sentencing based on race, as well as the few human rights afforded to incarcerated people. The United States holds 25% of the world’s incarcerated population. When people are accused and convicted of a crime, the case is “the people of the State of Pennsylvania” vs. the “offender.” I’m one of those “people”—and I am unsettled that this is being done in my name.

The night before my first visit, I was nervous but excited. From my first visit, I was hooked. I realized the value of the tutoring, but what was of greater value to the men we met was a reminder of their dignity. One of the very first weeks I went, one of the men told me that he looked forward to time in the tutoring room because it was the one time a week he remembered he was a human being.

Human beings are complex, and the tutoring room offers a space to lean into that complexity that exists nowhere else within the prison. Many of the men we worked with were from Philadelphia, and during the Eagles’ Superbowl Season, I went to the prison on Monday mornings. Each week we arrived with increasing football excitement, analyzing the previous night’s game and sharing disbelief that our beloved Birds just kept winning. We shared Carson Wentz sorrows and Nick Foles delights, and I got to tell stories from my trip to the parade. Our weekly visits offered a chance for the men we met to interact again with the wider community—to begin to reconcile.

My experience behind the prison walls opened my eyes to the power of radical forgiveness. Conversations ranged from tutoring grammar to discussions about the meaning of justice from different religious perspectives. The experience gave power to the idea that no person should be defined by a single choice they made. After theological reflection, I realized that this is how God loves us.

I work as a Campus Minister at an all-girls Catholic school, and a lesson I try to instill in my students is that God loves them, no matter what. There is nothing we can do that can isolate us from God’s love! When I really think about it, it’s overwhelming. Through the sacrament of reconciliation, we are always forgiven. This is radical, that we can cause harm to our world and ourselves but there is a loving Creator who still loves us and desires to be in relationship with us. As a Christian, I realized that this is my call, too. I am called to show the love of God through my life, and this includes radically forgiving people whom we as a society have given up on.

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This is challenging for my students. They often jump to the question, “But what if I murder someone?! Would God still love me then?!” When I tell them that some of the kindest people I’ve ever met have been convicted of murder, they’re often even more challenged. As a society, we push those who have caused harm to the far edges, out of sight, and therefore out of mind. We have firm judgments about people who have caused harm—but we don’t consider the truth that we, too, are sinners.

I recently went with my junior and senior students to a viewing of the film Just Mercy, based on the book of the same title by Bryan Stevenson, attorney and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. The film beautifully tells the stories of the incarcerated people that Stevenson worked with. Some were wrongfully convicted; some received insufficient representation in court. We watched the men struggle with how close or distant to keep their family members as they awaited an execution date, because they didn’t want their family to feel more hurt than they already did. We saw them wrestle with understanding that their actions caused harm; we watched as they confronted why that meant that their lives should be taken away.

After the film, we returned to campus and I was blown away by my students’ reflections. When I asked what the film has to do with our faith, they hit the nail on the head. Not only did they address the lack of human dignity in the prison system, they also recognized the importance of forgiveness. Not only did they point out their own call to forgive as Christians, but also the reason for it.

We humans continue messing up. When we look back through salvation history, we see time and time again where we make a promise to God, and then our humanity gets in the way and we break it. Think of Adam and Eve, the golden calf. . . the list goes on. But God desires to remain in relationship with us, despite it all, no matter what we have done. So much so, that God sent God’s only Son to save us from our sins. We sin, and we are also forgiven.

During this Lenten season, as we are all called to re-evaluate our lives and the things that prevent us from drawing closer to God, we can meditate on the beauty that lies in forgiveness. The gift of the sacrament of reconciliation allows us to know God’s love more fully, as we consider what it is that separates us from God and lay it down at God’s feet. Expressing sorrow and a desire to change, we are forgiven—no matter what we have done.

—Julia Tully

In your prayers, please remember all those who have asked for our prayers and our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital.

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