

Jan, 15, 2013



Dear Reverend Schori,
We at Snake River Correctional Institution are truly blessed to have Lee and Charlie [Elsie] Manning, from St. James in Fruitland, Idaho, as the volunteers for our service here @ S.R.C.I. I'm sending you a copy of something my friend Steve Buleit wrote about, mainly Lee Manning, use it with permission if you care to do so.

Our service here is growing we have Twenty Congregants now in our service. The Boise Diocese has become our diocese in charge - Bishop Thom was here last year and confirmed 4 or 5 men and I transferred ^{from} the United Methodist by letter. Canon Ashby shared in worship Dec 15th, 2012 and will be here again on Ash Wednesday.

We appreciate the Episcopal Church and the wonderful Liturgical Service!

Soli Deo Gloria!

J. Dean Sawyer

A Winter's Eve

We hadn't been there in almost three weeks. Just walking to the chapel that night felt like an excursion, an unexpected event. The hallway, ominously called the Main Corridor, is naturally stark and sterile. The facility's pipes run above, and the scuffed, tired linoleum lays below, adding to the industrial feel. But that night, it felt especially so, given that we were its only occupants.

Its 20-foot high, gray concrete walls tend to miniaturize anything within its confines. And by this time, the early December darkness had already entered, encasing the normally bright hallway as a tunnel. It reminded me of the opening scene of *Get Smart*, a 1960s spy comedy show where Maxwell Smart speeds down a similar, long and dark hallway.

The prison had been on lockdown since Thanksgiving evening, the result of coordinated gang brawls in several parts of the prison. For ten days, the inmate population of about 2700 were confined to their cells. We received paper sack meals and were restricted from all activities and work assignments for the duration. Most of us even took to "bird-bathing" using a washcloth and our cell sinks to attempt to mitigate our own odiferous assaults from a lack of showers.

Even as normal operations began to resume, we were still restricted from chapel activities

2. where larger groups of inmates from various parts of the prison can associate. So I was surprised to be called to the chapel on a Wednesday, along with several others.

To our delight, the chapel had been decorated in Christmas splendor since our last coming. Garland, in festive, sparkly colors, hung like streamers from the ceiling and outlined the windows.

The chapel can normally seat about 150 inmates. But that night, it stood mostly empty save for the dozen or so chairs set up in the back corner. The chairs faced the wall and hallway windows to create a container, a space within a space.

In the single facing chair sat Lee, an outside volunteer who leads our weekly Saturday evening Episcopal service along with his delightful wife, Charlie. During the lockdown, we had missed the first two weeks of Advent and their accompanying communions. Instead of just waiting until the next Saturday, Lee received permission to come in midweek, especially for us, to "catch us up," so to speak.

Eight or nine of us inmates in matching prison-issue jeans and blue shirts sat with rapt attention as we attended to the prescribed

liturgy of readings and responses, though shortened for tonight. I know many people are drawn to the high-energy, rock music contemporary services, but I find the rhythm and familiarity of this more traditional liturgy to be comforting.

Coming down off of the lockdown and its antecedant violence, and of the public's frantic, if misguided, preoccupation with Mayan predictions, I welcomed the soothing ritual. I also hoped this presaged what might still be a salvagable Christmas, since many of us thought the lockdown would run through New Year's Day.

Lee is a grandfatherly figure, or a to most of us "slightly older men," at least a fatherly figure. He wore comfortable attire, still a little dressy while staying warm on this Idaho winter evening. His Nikes made the long walk more palatable from visitors' parking, through the administration offices and down the long corridor to the chapel.

He conveys a true rural charm where hard work supercedes high fashion, where a handshake means something, where your character is more substantive than your choice of car.

Obviously, service to those in need

4. is part of Lee and Charlie are. But why service to prisoners? Surely there are other, more deserving avenues in which they could participate, especially this time of year: toy drives for needy kids, food collections for gift baskets, visiting the sick and infirmed, of finding blankets for the homeless or serving them meals.

I am always taken by the generosity of spirit of those who come in to minister to us. This system of incarceration is meant to remind us every day of our lives' worst actions. Society has chosen to banish us and hire people with guns to keep us here. And yet others from all walks of life choose to become prison volunteers or chaplains. Their role is clearly antithetical, to see us as fully human, as continuing to be God's sons, worthy of His and their love and concern.

Jesus carried the same message. He did not cater to the rich and powerful, nor to the righteous and blameless. He himself was of humble beginnings - there is little more humble than being born in a cave used for animals. He ministered to the outcasts of his day: the poor and sick, prostitutes, tax collectors,

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those of the "incorrect" faith or practice, even women! Come to think of it, many of these groups number among the oppressed in today's society too. I guess there is still work to be done.

There may be no higher devotion to Jesus than to carry his message of unconditional love to those who need it the most and have probably experienced it the least in their human relationships. When the Bible says to "take care of the least of these," one may be duly challenged to find a group of men more fitting of this charge for we are assaulters, molesters, drunkards, murderers, and thieves. Perhaps we are all prodigal sons, having sinned freely and carelessly, now hoping beyond hope to return to our Father's loving embrace.

"Come home, my son." What greater message of hope and acceptance can one offer to men with no homes, to men with shattered relationships? It is said God's arms are our arms, that it is we who connect heaven and earth. I see no truer visage of this than in Lee's visit that night. I don't know Lee and Charlie well enough to understand their personal motivations

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of their ministry to us. But what is evident is their love for us, their sincerity of spirit, and their desire to effect change in us. If we feel Christ's love for us through them, perhaps we too can see God's nature in ourselves, and in that tender breaking, we are compelled to love others.

I hadn't noticed before how exactly Lee prepares for communion. He opened a small, black lacquered case about half the size of a loaf of bread. Like a fine tool set, there was a foam insert with cutout places for each of the items. A petite stainless steel flask for the wine (or wine-tinged grape juice in our case) and a pouch for the round wafers were removed to prepare our makeshift altar. He then drew out a silver saucerlet on which to serve the wafers. I watched the delicacy in his manner as he prepared the elements, like a sacred alchemist, whose precision honors the lineage and tradition of those who came before him.

A few inmates were walking by in the hallway, talking with each other

or peering into our window. In addition, we could hear the officers barking instructions to the various comers and goers. But this noise and bustle did little to detract our ragtag cadre of prisoners from gathering in a dark corner of a concrete chapel to celebrate Advent and communion.

Later in the service, Lee stood, holding the ceramic chalice and silver serving plate. We followed his cue, and we approached singly to receive communion. He attended to each of us as unique children of God, equally deserving of redemption as any other.

The sacred need not be defined by soaring architecture and stained glass windows. Here it is found in Lee's gentle voice and in our gratitude to him. And as we approached another prison Christmas, it was found in the circle of travelers bound by the hope that the winter of our lives will unfurl into spring's restoration.

We were not expecting an Advent service in the middle of this week of turmoil, Lee and Charlie could have simply waited for the storm to pass, for the winds to wane;

8. they could have stuck to their ordinary routine. But out of the ordinary arises the extraordinary. That I find these services to be a solace was a precious truth that night. Love was found in the most humble and unsuspecting of places, just like it was on a cold winter's night so long ago.

SB 12/12