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Doing Time, Redeeming Time

Teaching in the Saint Louis University Prison Program

By Daniel L. Smith

“I was a stranger and you did not take me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me...”
(Matt 25:43)

In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, found only in Matthew’s Gospel (25:31–46), the Son of Man sits on a glorious throne and judges the nations. The work involves sorting out the sheep from the goats, the former for salvation, the latter for condemnation. The damning rebuke of Matt 25:43 highlights the goats’ failure to show hospitality to strangers, their refusal to care for the poor, and their indifference to the plight of the sick...and of prisoners.

As a first-year assistant professor at Saint Louis University, I had never given much thought to the plight of prisoners until I was asked if I might be interested in teaching for the SLU Prison Program. As a pedagogue, my curiosity was piqued, and as a New Testament professor, I was excited to have the opportunity to fulfill a gospel imperative – an imperative embraced by the SLU Mission Statement, with its call for the “promotion of faith and justice in the spirit of the Gospels.”

So, having agreed in the spring to teach in the fall, I spent the summer attending training, undergoing mandatory tuberculosis testing, and finally achieving certification as a Missouri Volunteer in Corrections. On August 12, 2013, I was on my way into the Eastern Reception, Diagnostic, and Correctional Center (ERDCC) in Bonne Terre, Mo, armed with syllabi, hand-outs, and a lesson plan for day one. After resolving a paperwork problem that left me stuck on the outside while my students waited inside, I reached the visitor room where my class awaited. We would meet only nine times – four hours every Monday morning for nine weeks, so I had to squeeze the equivalent of approximately four normal classes into each meeting.

It was exhausting. The beginning-of-class adrenaline boost could only carry me so far. At the request of the nicotine users, we took breaks every 60 minutes, and

I appreciated the chance to breathe and recharge. Yet the nicotine-free would grumble, disappointed to lose these precious minutes. This class was the highlight of the men’s week. Many of the incarcerated students prepared for class by working through assignments multiple times. Their comments revealed that they had not only read thoroughly and repeatedly, but some took time to look up every parenthetical biblical citation in the readings! I could ask a question, any question, and hands would fly up around the room.

Physically, Monday mornings were challenging, but the reward came in the form of a pedagogical nirvana, where students over-prepared for every class, engaged enthusiastically in class discussions, and eagerly sought out additional readings and feedback. Though stripped of many freedoms, the incarcerated do possess one good that the rest of us crave: time. I am reminded that our word “school” ultimately derives from a Greek word (*scholē*) meaning “leisure” – these men with “leisure” time and unfettered minds took delight in their “schooling.”

TEACHING THE MISSION

I taught the incarcerated class, the “insiders,” from 8am to noon. Then I would head for the public library to decompress (and grade), before completing the marathon Mondays that dominated my semester: I taught the “outsiders” class – composed of corrections officers and other ERDCC staff – from 5pm to 9pm. Obviously, this class was even more challenging for an embodied creature like me. But these students were no less inspiring. Most of them were piling an intensive nine-week course onto a full-time job, in addition to any other family responsibilities they might have. There was no question of doing the reading three times under those circumstances, but the desire for learning and growth remained powerfully present.

They say that corrections staff are doing time, too – they just do time “in shifts.” Yet all of us were working to redeem the time. For example, one staff member used a final writing assignment to bring the story of the crucifixion fresh into all of our ears, drawing from his own experience with executions to retell the passion narrative in a 21st-century context. Another time, two of my incarcerated students failed to come to class when we started our unit on Paul. As the rest of us read Paul’s letters from prison, these two remained in administrative segregation, reading Paul for weeks in isolation. Then they returned, having been cleared of any wrongdoing. I honestly believe their faces were glowing as they spoke of their

experience. And, of course, they did all their homework, too. Thanks to the selfless efforts of a staff member in my outsider class, they were even able to submit their work in timely fashion while in solitary confinement!

Teaching in the correctional setting brought me face-to-face with many of the complexities of our nation’s prison system – a system that affects the lives of millions of our fellow human beings. The need for reform has gained momentum in recent years, but the task of reforming such a massive institution can be incredibly daunting. The SLU Prison Program works with the Missouri Department of Corrections to provide educational opportunities that can transform not only the lives of “outsiders” and “insiders” but also the outlook of even more outsiderly outsiders like me. My nine weeks reconfigured the way I hear the New Testament, the way I read the New Testament, the way I teach the New Testament, and the way I try to live out the New Testament, including its call to visit the prisoner.

Daniel L. Smith started as an assistant professor of New Testament at Saint Louis University in fall 2012. He used an early draft of his second book, Into the World of the New Testament: Greco-Roman and Jewish Texts and Contexts (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), while teaching for the SLU Prison Program.



Jonathan Sawday discusses William Blake as part of the Inside Out Speaker Series