

My chest feels tight as I look around the room and realize there is no easy escape. To leave this gymnasium just to visit the washroom will require an escort by a guard and potentially another dog search. For the first time inside these prison walls I feel the entrapment...I cannot just get up and walk out the door to my next appointment. And I am just a visitor here; I've been here several times before. I take a deep breath and remember that soon I will be heading out, on my way home on a cold winter's night to kiss my children who are asleep in their beds and give a hug to my husband as I show him the Christmas gifts I picked up at the store today. The claustrophobic thoughts of being watched and guarded will have left my mind and the women who live here will be out of sight for a time. I am free.

I am sitting at a round table with the family of another one of the inmates: her mother, grandmother and 13-year-old son. They are happy to have the opportunity to wish her a Merry Christmas and share a meal, yet the reality of the setting shackles the joy of the season. As we remark on how well the inmate has done, her mother's eyes mist over and she makes a quick comment to relieve the emotion of the conversation...

I am waiting for another inmate, Jane, who is also out of the room. With no family and no friends in the area, I and two other volunteers received the invitation to come as her special guests for Christmas. It is an honor.

All of the prisoners who were allowed to attend the Christmas social were called out of the event for their four-o'clock count and now stand lined up against the wall in the hallway to be tallied. We can see some of them through the windows in the gymnasium, watching us back as we visit and wait for them. Minutes tick by as they stand still, watched and waiting. I feel their humiliation for having to undergo this procedure in front of their special guests and loved ones. Another parading reminder of who they are and what they've done...

The count takes over an hour and finally they return, anxious to see the ones who have been waiting at this special celebration permitted once a year. I greet Jane with a smile as she returns. Her eyes are bright and her smile is gentle and comes quickly. What a change from the downcast and anxious eyes some months ago. Too unsure to even make eye contact, she would join the little group, hidden in a hooded, bulky coat, and listen silently as we talked about the Father's love and how we can have a relationship with him through Jesus Christ. Like so many others here, grasping the Father's love has been so difficult—even imagining a loving Father-God, so unfathomable. Yet she has chosen to trust in Christ, to receive his forgiveness, his love, his identity. Now this one, who not long ago walked in shame, physically cowering beneath the weight of insecurity, stands tall and walks in confidence. She is a new creation, through-and-

through, and none can deny it. She is like a flower, opening to the warmth of the sun and allowing her beauty to be seen. I am in awe of God.

There are three trees lit with multi-colored lights in one corner of the gymnasium, the appropriate background for the inmates to have pictures taken with the few family or friends they've been allowed to invite. One of the guards brought in a camera and we gather 'round to have our photos taken together. Jane has been permitted four photographs to be taken. I smile with her in three, and the fourth Jane gives away to another inmate so she can have a family photograph with her mother, grandmother and son. This seemingly small act is a great kindness here, where each photograph is a treasure.

Others in the building are far away from the Christmas music streaming out of the CD player against the wall in this gym. Last week, a few volunteers had been allowed to give them their only touch of Christmas for this year. Down in Isolation, one inmate was permitted a single Christmas carol to be sung, and she peered out at the trio of singers through the food slot in her heavy door. As what sounded like the voices of angels echoed through the concrete hallway, Joy to the World was again proclaimed to a dark and needy world. Let every heart prepare him room. He came for one; he came for all.

I am reminded of my own darkness, my own need for the amazing grace, the gift of Christmas. My heart is filled with gratitude for the God who can transform lives and forgive sins. At the same time, I cringe at the thoughts I've often entertained in the past that these women are just getting what they deserve... the previously reigning opinion that there are consequences to our actions and I ought not to feel sorry for them with their three meals a day and a warm place to sleep. After all, others in the world have it far worse...

But after meeting these women and looking into their eyes and seeing such a clear reflection of my own humanness there, my own utter ruin without God, I shudder at my pride and self-righteousness in thinking I am somehow different. Yes, there is a system of justice in this world, and this is good and right when administered with respect for all who are made in the image of God. Yet may I always be reminded that the wages of my sin is death, and I have been saved from this horrid end that I absolutely deserve. His grace covers me. Oh, that I might freely extend this grace to others in my own heart that craves justice so fervently! And may I remember the tightening in my chest as I have felt a tiny taste of imprisonment in my spirit today. Only my slightest freedom had been taken from me for a few moments in time; this is all that was needed for me to be aware of the great implications of surviving prison daily.

It's time for me to go and I hug my friend Jane, wishing her a Merry Christmas and reminding her that she is a new creation in Christ Jesus. Though there are struggles, I can see that she knows it is true. I walk through the scanner, stop briefly at the security desk, and I'm out into the freedom of the cool night air.

O Lord, in my heart, may mercy triumph over justice. May your abounding love cover a multitude of sins. What joy to the world that the Lord is come, and come not to condemn the world, but to save the world (John 3:17)! Thank you, Jesus, for coming to us to offer your life-transforming salvation. Thank you for freedom and for breaking the chains of my imprisonment. Amen.

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