

# **‘I was in prison and you visited me.’**

## **Matthew 25:36,40**

*By Frances Dickey*

I have a deep and constant longing to deepen my relationship to God. While I have a strong need to withdraw and pray, I also feel a desire serve God through action.

I experienced this integration of the contemplative and apostolic when I began volunteering at Las Colinas, the women’s jail in San Diego, a year ago. From the moment the heavy metal doors slammed shut behind me and I was inside this locked facility, I found a freedom I didn’t know could exist. It was in coming together with these incarcerated women and the other volunteers that I have found my gift of compassion and humility. I felt I was where God intended me to be.

The women in Las Colinas have a hunger and yearning for God. I am bringing them God and Jesus by my presence, the Word of God and, most importantly, the body of Christ in the host. I don’t go to perform “jailhouse” conversions. My ministry is making God’s unconditional love known to the women who feel the most unloved and unworthy. I want my ministry to reflect a forgiving God.

I go to plant seeds of faith, hope, and love. I go to water the seeds and nourish the soil so the seeds in the women will give them the strength they need when they leave jail. The present is what becomes important. What happened before and what will happen later is not important. We are all together in those intimate moments with Jesus. We enter together into the “now”.

The prayers of the women tell their stories. They want, miss and cry for the children they have had taken away from them. They pray for these children and for their families and friends. They pray for leniency from the courts. They beg God to help them overcome their addictions. There are also times when we laugh and sing together. The tears and the laughter, along with Christ, help to bring them peace for the present.

I find God’s grace in their lives. It has been an amazing gift to me to find grace where I feared it might not be. The women’s faces and prayers have become engraved in my heart.

Jesus is a central role in my life and as I pay attention to this call to discipleship I have promised through my Baptism, I have no fears. I hope to be able to continue to make Jesus present to those who are incarcerated. I know my journey with the women in Las Colinas has just started. In January I will be retiring from my paid employment and starting formation as a lay chaplain for the detention ministry in the Diocese of San Diego.

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