

Prison, Power & The Pandemic

Most people come to prison from the “wilderness” of the street. The street has its own sources of power such as guns, knives, money, cars, and gangs. In prison, a person comes face to face with all the forces of oppression, both external and internal. The wall, chain link fence, their prison number and the confinement of a cell are all reminders of the external reality that they are bound and powerless. At an unconscious level they are introduced to all the factors that pressure them to become a victim of a system that now claims their body and soul.

Once in prison the search for power begins. Negative forms may involve bodybuilding, con games, gang involvement and other forms of struggle for power. The struggle may eventually take a positive path. A Swedish prison worker once told a psychiatrist, “Prison is sometimes good, but it is always bad.” For some in prison the search for power may take a positive path and involve educational growth, stronger family ties, deep religious experience, and a strong commitment to become a better person when they leave prison than when they came.

When a pandemic hits a prison the sense of being powerless is compounded. For years you have been living with the pressure of being a victim of a system and now a disease. When I was in seminary I heard a theologian lecture on the fear of death as the fear of being powerless and forgotten. When a person comes to prison the fear of death and the fear of being forgotten go deep as part of the human struggle. Larry White comments in his article, “Re-Entry To Re-Integration:”

I reached a point in life where the only hard part about growing old in prison was my concern that I would someday be unable to protect myself against men with a predatory nature.

In our Exodus Rites we are reminded that “the human struggle is painful and deep, that it holds death and life.” It also reminds us that “we stand before possibility and hope.”

When first faced with COVID-19, Jose Perez wrote from Sing Sing, “The only weapon we have in here is hope, but we have always known that.”