

Comments by Rev. Edwin M. Muller
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A number of years ago a chaplain was called to the warden's office to explain his annual report. The warden said that the statistics were right but something was missing. "I want to know the condition of the souls of my inmates; your report doesn't tell me that." Perhaps we chaplains need someone, once in a while, to remind us that our primary task is the care of souls even though we work in a hostile and difficult environment. My friend David Spenser once told me that prison is a place where you can lose your soul and Nelson Mandela reminded us: "Even when you are treated well prison is a terrible place to be."

It is in this arena that chaplains have been sent to care for the souls of prisoners. And I have discovered this is familiar territory to people of faith, because in prison you meet all the characters that are in the Bible. I have met Cain a thousand times. A man who because of his act against his brother became alienated from his family, friends, community, himself, and even God. Cain needed someone to help build a road back that he can travel, so he can be restored as a full member of the human community. I have also met Naboth, a man falsely convicted. I have met Ezekiel in prison. He was tired and in despair as he stood before the valley of dry bones. He had seen so much suffering and death to the point he just didn't know if his people would ever live again. I have met the man at the pool, so damaged and broken that Jesus had to first ask if he wanted to get well. I met the prodigal son who one day woke up in a pigsty and was confronted with the decision to move from death to life. They are all in the prisons and the chaplain has been entrusted with the care of their souls.

There is also a non-Biblical character that I have also met in prison. My young stepdaughter often asks me to tell her a story. Her favorite is the legend of Iron John. The story begins in a mysterious forest where strange things happen. One day a brave knight decides to enter the forest and unravel the mystery. As he passes a swamp a large hairy arm reaches out and snatches his dog. The knight decides to return to the castle to get help. He comes back with a group of men armed with buckets and proceed to drain the swamp. At the bottom they find a

large hairy man called Iron John. He is placed in shackles and taken back to the castle where the king puts him in an iron cage. Later, the young prince unlocks the cage and Iron John is set free and he takes the young prince with him back to the forest. From there he does some amazing things. He first demonstrates a profound sense of wisdom and care. He helps to win wars and he literally influences the course of history.

There are many Iron Men in the swamps we call prisons. I came to realize this as a chaplain. I also came to realize that it takes a lot of hard work to help set people in prison free. We cannot just take a bucket of religion and throw it into the swamp and expect radical change. We must dig deep, and help unbind the shackles of ignorance, fear, racism, and death. We must also have profound faith that the God we believe in is the God of Life and not a God of death. We must never underestimate the power of evil, and we must never underestimate the Grace that is available at the Mercy Seat.

I have seen great religions practiced in prison and I have seen people take their buckets into the swamp and dig deep. My friend Stephen is serving a life sentence during which he has had a deep conversion experience and become a man of faith. Several times a year a group of church members who have adopted him come to visit. Each time they take him into a room, pray with him, examine his soul, serve communion and wash his feet. Recently, Stephen was transferred to another prison where he was sent to an outside hospital for a kidney transplant. The church followed him and Stephen wrote to me: “Rev., thank God for doctors, and above all, thank God for my church.”

I have seen many Iron Men do time, leave prison, become people who care, people of wisdom, and affect the course of history. I have seen more than 100 earn seminary degrees, twelve earn law degrees, several MSWs, teachers, and many good family members. I see former prisoners in almost every religious delegation coming into our prisons as volunteers. There are the Iron Men. These are the answer to God’s question to Ezekiel: “Can these bones live?”

However, there are still many questions that need to be answered. These are questions not asked by the wardens of or prisons as they consider the effectiveness of chaplains. These are the questions Jesus still has for us to answer. “Have the hungry been fed? Do the blind see? Have the thirsty been given water to drink? Have the sick been visited and have the prisoners been set

free?” These are the fundamental questions every chaplain and every person of faith must answer.

There is an old Gospel song that states: “The tears of the Sower and the joy of the reaper, shall meet in the sweet by and by.” I have been fortunate to have shed some of the tears of the Sower, and I have been fortunate to have felt the joy of the reaper over these past twenty-five years. And I accept this award on behalf of the Iron Men with whom I have been privileged to work.