

"I wanna open my heart"

Souls aren't easy to bare, particularly in jail.

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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His eyes rarely leave the floor, even as he's baring his soul. He's young, tough-looking, brown skin marked with tattoos, black hair slicked back over the middle of a mostly shaved skull, rosary around his neck. It's the first time he's showed up at a group I participate in at the local jail. He's looked wary about the whole thing since he walked through the door. But he mustered up the courage to begin a sentence like, "I think I wanna say something..." And the story comes pouring out.

He tells of growing up on the streets, raising himself since he was 11 year old. About a mom and dad who seemed not to want anything to do with him. Or couldn't do anything with him. Of falling in with some violent people doing violent things. Of substance abuse and confusion and of neglect. Of coming out west and meeting a woman who loves him and whom he loves. He calls her "my girl."

He's heard about God, he says. There's never a shortage of words about God out there, after all. And he believed, he said. He really did. But then his girl got pregnant. And miscarried. And then again. And then again. The last time, he saw the stillborn body. And something snapped inside of him, he said. He descended into a spiral of rage and alcohol and hard drugs that landed him here in jail. He still struggles to sleep. He can't get that image out of his head.

He's still looking at the floor when he says that well-meaning people in his life—aunties, case workers, maybe priests or do-gooder volunteers like me—have always told him to believe in and pray to God. "The thing is, I prayed and I prayed, but I never heard from God. And how could God take our kids like that? What kind of God... That was my child, my little girl..." His voice trails off.

The room is dead silent. There's no more flipping through pages or smart comments or bad jokes. We know that there is something sacred about a moment like this. We know that souls aren't easy to bare, particularly in here. Finally another guy looks up and says, "Brother, thank you. If you ever need someone to talk to, just come find me. I'm usually in the laundry room..."

He doesn't look up, but he nods. He snuffles a bit and says, "So, I been here for a few months and I'm feeling a little less angry. I try to pray. I took one of them Bibles and I read the whole thing in four days. I think I get it, or some of it, anyway. It kinda makes sense. I don't know if I can believe in God. I guess I'm kinda on the edge or the outside. But I wanna open my heart."

There's an easy narrative out there that gets plenty of traction. The jail is full of bad people who did bad things and need to be punished. This script demands very little of us. Labels are affixed. Categories are preserved. Everything stays in its place. But I think the gospel of Christ compels us challenge the easy scripts that we choose or inherit—scripts that keep our lives and our view of the world mostly untroubled. This is particularly necessary when it comes to something as precious as a human life.

What I saw in this young man was not a rough twenty-something addict who had broken the law, who needed to clean up his act. That's an easy story, but it's not a true story. Not true enough, anyway.

What I saw was an 11-year-old boy who never had anyone to love him well, who was the product of a toxic, racist, and dysfunctional system. I saw a little boy whose heart was broken because he wanted to be the kind of dad that he never had and felt like that possibility was ripped away from him—by God, by circumstances, by who knows what. I saw a little boy who wanted to believe in God but was honest enough to say that sometimes it seems like bullshit. I saw a heart struggling to stay open when it had every opportunity to slam shut.

During worship, I invite people in our church to the communion table with these words that have been spoken in churches all over the world:

This is the table,
not of the Church, but of the Lord.
It is made to be ready
for those who love him

and who want to love him more.
So, come,
you who have much faith
and you who have little,
you who have been here often
and you have not been for a long time,
you who have tried to follow
and you who have failed. ...

Those who love him and those who want to love him more ... you who have much faith and you who have little... you who have tried to follow and you who have failed. These words came back to mind as I listened to this guy's story. It's funny how the same words can sound completely different in different contexts. They sound one way coming off the lips of a "religious professional" in a church sanctuary full of people who are well-practiced in hiding (from ourselves, from each other, from God). They ring a bit different in a room full of guys in blue coveralls who have done a lot of trying and failing—and whose failures are a lot harder to hide than the rest of ours.

I've often heard people say that places like AA meetings or support groups in the jail are more honest than any church service. Maybe that's true, I don't know. But I do know that the church ought to be a safe place for those who have tried and failed, those who can't quite believe, those whose faith feels weak, those whose hearts are struggling to stay open. Which is probably all of us at various points along the way, if we're honest.

I hope that if one of these guys ever shows up to worship once they're out that they will be able to take their place alongside all the other saints and sinners trying to keep coming to Jesus. I hope the church can be a place where hearts that wanna stay open can find refuge.

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