

Shocked by grace: A visit to death row

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



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Much of the story is hard to recall, but certain details are engraved in my memory, stamped right into me. I was a new pastor interested in writing, so when a magazine asked for an interview of a death row inmate, I jumped at the chance. I was asked to visit an Ohio prisoner named David Steffen. In the 1970s David had been convicted of brutally murdering a teenaged girl. Twenty-one years later, at the time of my visit, he was still awaiting execution.

I had never been in a prison before. It was raining, and guards drove me through the empty, gloomy yard on a golf cart. I was frightened. It was a barren place. The loops in the concertina wire looked vicious. One guard drank a can of Mountain Dew as we drove. She didn't speak, just stared at me malevolently. When we arrived on death row I walked through several gates and checkpoints before meeting with David in a classic government room with fluorescent lights and gray plastic furniture. Death row looked more like the DMV than a dungeon and was all the more menacing as a result.

The killer looked younger than his age. His skin was smooth, and he wore his brown hair short. His face was framed by a pair of thick, heavy glasses, the kind hipsters wear. We sat across from each other at a small table. As we spoke he kept his eyes

on my hands—ready, it seemed, to react defensively if I picked up my pen or reached for a bottle of water. But aside from this wariness he was remarkably peaceful for a man living under such intense pressure.

I was there to ask him about God. I noticed right away that every time God's name was mentioned, David referred to God's mercy; he spoke of "God's mercy" over and over again in a sort of litany. Each time the words *grace* or *mercy* were mentioned he prefaced them with adjectives familiar to any Protestant: "unmerited," "freely given," "undeserved."

Banding sacred language back and forth with a murderer unnerved me. I loved doing this with members of my congregation. But there in the prison, church talk became unwieldy, uncontrollable. The ease with which David spoke the spiritual language bothered me and pushed hard against my faith. All those years ago I was sure that I knew who deserved unmerited mercy—and I was not certain that David deserved it. So I pushed back.

I scolded him with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's caution about cheap grace: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. . . . Cheap grace is without discipleship, without the cross, without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." Then I asked him if the weight of his sin had perhaps caused him to seize upon God's love too easily. Had he grabbed for mercy before truly reckoning with the horror of his crime?

I was about to learn that a young pastor didn't need to chasten a murderer who'd had 21 years to ponder these things. He knew all about cheap grace. He had found the concept organically through years of reflection and had wrestled with it, walked right through it and come out the other side. Here's what he said to me:

The gospel requires us not simply to be sorry, but to be transformed by our sorrow. For me, this is a daily transformation. I'll never forget my crime. It is always deeply, deeply disturbing to me. But there has to come a point where you receive forgiveness and then forgive yourself—not in order to justify your actions, but in order to accept God's love.

Then he told me a story, gesturing with his hands so that the chains tying them together clanked and rattled in accompaniment. Outside his cell, said David, there are two fences, each about 20 feet high and covered with roll after roll of barbed wire. The space between the fences is empty, a no-man's land designed to strand

escapees.

A rabbit lives between the fences, David said, and he watches it every morning. “The rabbit has no sense of where it is. It doesn’t know it’s living out its life in a maximum security prison. It eats clover and dandelions and wakes up early. It has no sense of being restricted by all these fences. It’s the same for me. I’m in prison, but I’m not letting myself be restricted simply because I’m wearing shackles and handcuffs. I’m a person, and I’m a person who is loved and forgiven by God.”

I was shocked. In front of me was a man who had brutally killed a teenager; in front of me was a man who is loved by God. I was so startled that I jumped back from the table and stalked out of the room.

This man had claimed the love of God as his own. He had claimed what I preached. And yet when the evidence was in front of me, I could not believe it. I’d spent a lot of energy trying to *contain* God’s presence. I had carefully learned rituals and chosen music and crafted sermon sentences that aimed to cultivate grace.

What I had either forgotten or never learned is that right next to all of this is something that’s out of control: *the power of God*. It’s a surging and crackling energy, a wildness that the church hints at but doesn’t own. When I felt it come alive in that prison it made me jump because it defied a deeply ingrained, childish belief in justice and decency. How could a murderer grab hold of the same love I’d been given?

Sitting there with David, I’d felt the pressure of a greater reality pushing against the neat division in my heart between those who are unworthy of God’s love and those who are worthy. David Steffen had been forgiven. He’d claimed the love of God as his own, and that claim threatened me. I never would have guessed that the most unnerving thing I would encounter on death row was the grace of God.

When I walked back through the prison yard the rain had let up, and the guard who had maintained a steely silence on our way in was now pleasant and talkative. Dogs were playing in the prison yard, chasing tennis balls thrown by inmates. The guard explained that these dogs had been removed from abusive homes and were being trained by prisoners before returning to the world. I fought back tears. Suddenly everything seemed brighter.

Instead of leaving David behind, it seemed as if he had come with me. Or at least the fact of his salvation had. Or perhaps the One who had accomplished it walked nearer now.

Today I still think about David, and about how I stepped onto death row with my heart in my throat, anticipating the worst but found a broken sinner redeemed and pieced back together by the love of God. I anticipated meeting a monster and found grace instead.

Occasionally, someone will tell me that he or she does not believe in God or is struggling to have faith; I am never sure what to say. Usually I mumble the typical liberal Protestant pieties: Paul Tillich says that “doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith,” and so on. But sometimes I tell them David’s story, about how I once saw the results of a miracle. Water into wine? How about a man transformed? Which is to say that the one inquiring is right: God is hard to believe in. Not because God is vague or elusive or contradicts the claims of science, but because God can be so obvious, so dangerous, so free.