



FORGIVEN! RESTORED! TRANSFORMED!

GOD'S LOVE AND GRACE SURROUND US

BY FEATURES EDITOR, BECKY WEHRSPANN

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

Not many youngsters, if any, aspire to spend three decades in prison, though, as adults, a few may answer the call to work in such a facility as a guard or warden. Deaconess Lori Wilbert “wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

An LWML grant in the 1980s landed Lori behind the walls of Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, Illinois, transitioning from the parish to prison ministry. She’s been there ever since.

Thanks to an LWML Northern Illinois District (NID) grant, Chaplain Bob Kramer was able to train and work with Lori for 10 years. “Bob was the prison chaplain of the NID,” Lori says. “He took me on with LWML seed money to do prison chaplaincy work with him at Stateville, and I continued that work after Bob retired. LWML is near and dear to my heart, because they have played a major role in enabling my ministry to continue through all these years.”

The LCMS NID has had a chaplain at Stateville since the 1930s. Chaplains are not state paid, but they receive compensation thanks to donations of congregations and individuals.

“Thankfully, this ministry has lasted as long as it has,” Lori says.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Colossians 3:12-13).

Lori has worked in several correctional facilities concurrent to her time at Stateville. “Men, women, youth — I’ve had experience with all three. When Bob first trained me, he said, ‘The key to prison ministry is the one-on-one relationships you develop with these men, women, and youth — it’s based on acceptance.’ I establish rapport — that is key to this ministry — based on respect and acceptance of where they (inmates) are in their life.

“We already know they offended — we don’t need to know why or how. Unless they tell me, I don’t ask. In the same way, I don’t launch into why they should be saved or if they’re saved or not saved — that’s not the starting point. The starting point is always love and acceptance. You earn respect, you work at rapport, and, through that, you build a relationship.”

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).

One myth Lori would like to dispel is that most inmates say they are innocent or wrongly imprisoned. “In our current court system, they (defendants) are urged to plead not guilty, no matter what, but for many inmates, it’s a relief to say ‘Yes, this is what I did; let’s deal with it.’” As she builds rapport and relationships with them, many tell her why they’re in prison. “They want me to know, because everyone has a need to confess. That is true for me in the pew each Sunday before I take communion — I go to the foot of the cross and say, ‘I’m nothing but a sinner.’ The consequences of sin are different, but sin is sin, and God’s grace is God’s grace. That is such a liberating message for the people I’ve served throughout the years.”

During her decades of service in the prison system, Lori has used various class curriculums with the inmates. In 2003 she began using the book *Houses of Healing*. “It’s a wonderful curriculum that addresses long-term offenders, which is what most of my guys are. It covers parenting from behind the wall; drugs — addictions and recovery; forgiveness; anger and violence management — there are whole programs on that. It ends with Restorative Justice, which is another way of looking at the criminal justice system.

“The basis of restorative justice is restoring the victim, offender, and the community from which we all come. Retributive justice is throwing them in, locking them up, and throwing away the key. I compare restorative justice to confession and absolution. You are restored as you confess your sin. You’re already forgiven — Jesus died (for you) — forgiveness is there! We work with the criminal justice system to restore people rather than only punishing people. We’re about change and transformation — about what the Holy Spirit can do in our hearts. Restorative, transformative justice is about Jesus’ love for us.



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“If we just lock up people and throw away the key, we’re allowing a piece of our humanity to be forgotten and saying they’re not worth it. Christ says everyone is His child, and everybody is worth it. If we invest in people who are incarcerated, we may not have such a high recidivism rate — over 80% go back.”

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered (Psalm 32:1).

Lori has not met much resistance to bringing the Gospel message of forgiveness and grace to Stateville, either from the inmates or the staff. “I don’t think I would have lasted there 34 years if they didn’t work with me. There are some staff who can make it challenging, because they don’t get why I’m there, but the population — the men in the cell houses and units and quarter house units — are very open and respectful.”

And there have been staff who encourage and support the classes Lori teaches. “God has always made a way with certain staff members who have reached out to help. Those are the gentle souls who understand why people come in to minister. I look back, and that was God’s hand bringing individuals who would help,” she says.

Last March, the State of Illinois implemented a Lockdown Quarantine Status for its state facilities due to COVID-19, and only essential staff were allowed into the prison. Lori could not enter, and cannot send mail directly to the inmates, per prison regulations. She feared losing contact with her students. As a result, permission was granted for staff to work with Lori to continue her class through the mail. “I send the assignments to the staff, and they get it to the cell houses. The men do the work, get it back to the staff, and they send it back to me. Since I’m sending all of the homework and assignments already, I’m also able to give them sermons and devotionals as well.”

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

“We are very punitive in the United States. If you go to other places, they are much more progressive in their criminal justice thinking and what can be done with an offender in terms of rehabilitation,” Lori says. “We are blessed if we came from a solid home, with two parents and grandparents and family who love and supported us. Not everyone comes from that.”

While many Christians encourage and support Lori and prison ministry, she says, “There are always a handful of people who question God’s grace. God the Father sent His Son to die. We tend to judge people who are in prison. I urge all of us to be careful before throwing that first stone. The premise of the Lutheran faith is grace and what that can look like. It doesn’t mean we’re not held accountable — we all are — but at the same time grace is available for all. The whole point of what I do is to share God’s forgiveness.”

“As challenging as it is to go to prison after all these years, it is gratifying and satisfying. It’s hard work, but the people I’ve met behind the wall have been such a gift to me — people I would not have met otherwise. There are good people there; they’re the real deal. We’re all a work in progress. We’re all sinners, and we could all be more real about that sometimes.”

Lori is very much looking forward to getting back into Stateville when the quarantine is lifted, because she has missed the face-to-face contact with her students. “I want to go back. That’s my prayer — when I get back in to Stateville — that God and I can continue what we started years ago.” **Q**