

Assisting the priest, proclaiming the Gospel, preparing the altar, and distributing communion draw me close to the mysteries of our faith. But liturgy is only part of a deacon's vocation. Service at the altar strengthens deacons and sends us into the world to serve Christ in our neighbors.

Every Friday, I drive out to the state prison to catechize and share fellowship with about forty of our neighbors. The men at Perry Correctional Institution are more than just people I serve. They're my friends. We pray together, encourage one another, and share struggles and joys. The guys rely on me to show up each week, and I've come to rely on them too. Their faith, honesty, and perseverance have shaped my heart in unexpected ways.

In Matthew's account of the final judgment, Jesus says, "I was in prison and you visited me." See, I'm not bringing Christ into a place where he's absent. Christ is already there, waiting for me to show up. He's present in the men who gather with me to pray, read scripture, and seek God's mercy. The Holy Spirit is at work in forgiveness, in tears, and in lives being transformed. Behind the walls and barbed wire, I've encountered deep and sincere faith that humbles me. Those overlooked by society reveal an amazing trust in God.

Jesus speaks of "the least of these," and I sometimes wonder if there is a holy irony in his words. I've encountered amazing faith, humility, gratitude, and perseverance. More than once, I've left Perry thinking that maybe these men are actually among the "greatest of these." I always leave the prison with more than I bring in. I've seen hope replace despair and watched men strengthen each other in faith. I'm humbled by their gratitude and challenged by their trust in God. My friendships with the men at Perry have reminded me that Christian community isn't about circumstances. It's about a shared Savior.

People sometimes say, "I couldn't do prison ministry," and I once felt the same way. But as we often hear, God doesn't call the qualified; he qualifies the called. Scripture is full of stories about God equipping imperfect people for all kinds of roles. When we just show up with sincere hearts, God gives us the words, patience, and courage we need. The men at Perry aren't looking for experts. They're looking for sincere presence, listening, prayer, and a reminder that they're not forgotten. The Holy Spirit provides those gifts in every visit.

I invite you to come with me and meet the men. The only requirement is a sincere heart. Listen and pray with us. You may discover, as I have, that Christ is calling you to join him there.

Deacon Brian