



Promise in the Prison

By John F. Kutsko

“And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

— Matthew 25:39-40

We were surrounded by concrete, bars, and barbed wire, not stained glass and wooden pews. Nonetheless, we were there as the church—a community of healing through mercy, grace, and love.

We had come to the Gadsden Correctional Facility, a women’s prison near Tallahassee, Fla., as part of the Find Your Way Home Prison Tour, sharing the story of Magdalene/Thistle Farms with incarcerated women in need of hope. Magdalene is a nonprofit residential and recovery program for women who have survived lives of violence, prostitution, and addiction. Thistle Farms is the nonprofit business through which Magdalene residents learn business skills making and selling bath and body care products.

During the visit to Gadsden, Magdalene’s founder, the Rev. Becca Stevens, shared her message of healing and hope, graduates from the Magdalene program told their personal stories of recovery and community, and musical artists Julie Roberts, Marcus Hummon, and Don Schlitz brought the stories, through song, into the heart of the prison. The Magdalene women also read from *Find Your Way Home*, a book written by the resi-

dents of Magdalene, about the principles of their community, which can be summed up in two statements: First, *love is the most powerful source for social change in the world*. Second, *love heals*.

The tour has now visited seven cities, including New York, Atlanta, Memphis, Tallahassee, and Birmingham, with stops remaining in Houston, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Sponsored by Abingdon Press and funded by the Cal Turner Family Foundation, the ten-city tour reminds women who are incarcerated that they are never so lost that they can’t find their way home. The message is about unconditional love, grace, redemption, second chances, third chances, and one-hundredth chances. It says the lost can be found, and that no one is alone.

When we left the women’s prison outside of Tallahassee, a passage from a classic novel came to mind that opens with two images—a prison and a cemetery. So begins *The Scarlet Letter*: “The founders of the new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.”

I left that Florida prison, the first official stop of the tour, thinking that the next cell for many of these women—whose lives have been a series of cells created by sexual abuse, prostitution, and drug addiction—would be in a cemetery. They had almost hit bottom. They had one more step to go. Moving up would be a difficult journey. To

take the other journey, the women would need a community, just as a community led them to where they were now.

Stevens says she has rarely met a woman on the street who was not raped between the ages of seven and eleven by a family member or family friend. That is a stark statement.

But starker still are the inmates’ letters. A week after we returned from Memphis, the second stop of the tour, a woman named Tammy wrote to tell us her story:

My mother held me down and let men have their way. I was nine and she made me live with him like a wife while she was in the other room with another man. My oldest daughter is by a rapist and I’m still here. I covered the pain with pills. My life has been upside down for so many years but I’m trying to keep it together. It’s hard. My baby is in the 11th grade, but I’m trying to keep things together. No one thinks I can make it and do the right thing, but I keep telling myself I can. Sometimes I don’t think I can.

Thistle Farms takes its name from the weed. Thistles grow on the streets and in the alleys where the women walked. The thistle’s deep root can grow through thick concrete and survive a harsh environment. And in spite of its thorns and tough exterior, a royal and soft purple center makes it a mysterious and gorgeous flower. It is a symbol of the hope and promise that endures despite the harshest conditions, a gospel that is good news to the poor and the prostitute.



Photography courtesy of John F. Kutsko

That gospel permeated the heart of a woman named Lisa in Memphis:

Today I felt walls coming down within me that have been built for so long. Today I was able to see through my own eyes people that have gone through your program and are still clean today. There are no words to describe the joy that it brought to my heart. I'm putting more effort into staying clean and sober today than I ever have. My mind is open and my heart is grateful. I've been hopeless and bitter for so many years. I've been in and out of prison and jails since I was 14 years old. I have a history of sexual abuse starting at the age of five. At 14, I hit the streets on my own. All I want is a chance. I want and need to love and be loved. It starts today. Will you please help me continue to grow and learn and change. P.S. I'm ready to begin finding my way home.

What struck me hardest was that many of the letters we received from the women

in prison after our visit ended with "I am praying for you." How odd. Wasn't it these prisoners who were in need of prayer? Or was it? Each of us wears an orange or white or blue prison jumpsuit. Each of us is given second chances again and again. Each of us knows the prisoner, the prostitute, the sick, and the naked. And we are all part of a community of healing to mend the community of hurt.

All of us who started out on a prison tour called Find Your Way Home were hoping the stories told and the songs sung would reach the most hurting, the least of these—the battered, the weary, the imprisoned. What we learned was that we were the least of these. Even if we had never walked the streets or known the brutality of a rapist, nonetheless, we too are lost in our own way—but never so lost that we can't find our way home. □



John F. Kutsko is Executive Director of the Society of Biblical Literature, and coordinated the Find Your Way Home tour when he was Associate Publisher at the United Methodist Publishing House.

For more information about Magdalene/Thistle Farms, visit www.thistlefarms.org, or contact Marlei Olson at marlei@thistlefarms.org