

The Captive Audience

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The Lord works in mysterious ways.

Almost two years ago, Randal and I, unbeknownst to the other, found ourselves drawn to newspaper articles on the growing gang “problem” in Elk Grove and south Sacramento. About the same time, Randal met with students at CRC with previous gang affiliations, did Bible studies and learned about their perspective. He called them “The boys from the hood”. When we discovered each other’s new passion, there was nothing to do but take it to the Father to see what He had in mind for us. Since then, it’s been a rollercoaster ride of new experiences (we are now chaplains in the Youth Detention Facility - YDF, formerly Juvenile Hall) and new relationships (partnering with Christ-following ex-gang members as well as networking with city and county probation and other non-profit organizations). God keeps opening doors and we are blown away as we contemplate what His next steps will be.

But God’s ministry callings are always to love people, not to solve “problems”. What began as a fascination with the “gang problem” has turned into a broken heart for these kids – His children, His battered, broken children. Come with me as I paint a picture of Sunday morning at Juvenile Hall.

9:00 A.M. **“CLANG”**. It’s a little disconcerting until you get used to it. Huge metal doors crashing behind you, one by one, as you make your way down the sterile corridors. There are numerous boys units in the YDF, and several girls units totaling about 325 kids. Roughly 80% are boys. Three of the boys units are high security and are for the boys who have been accused of committing the most serious crimes – assault, rape, murder, armed robbery, and the like. They are confined to their “rooms” within their units most of the time, but can be released for an hour on Sunday morning (again, only within their respective units) to attend church. (The other units are free to attend the large combined-unit worship service within the YDF.) Randal and I teach three church services on Sunday mornings to the boys in each of these lock-down units.

“CLANG” “CLANG”. Two sets of doors in these units. (Ten double-rooms on the top floor and ten on the bottom, all face into a common area where the staff sits behind a high circular counter.) Security cameras and computers monitor each room. No privacy here. Plastic chairs are carefully arranged to maintain order and the staff releases the boys who want to come. They shuffle down the stairs and make their way to the teaching area. We greet them with a hand-shake (no hugs allowed, though I don’t do well with this rule!) and a smile and a welcome. Randal follows the staff around as they collect the boys. He’s like a carnival barker – “No church today? Hey man, we’ve got a good one today!” I collect the worn Bibles from the locked back room and give them to the boys who haven’t brought one from their rooms. (Some of the boys have their very own Bibles, lovingly given by Carol, another chaplain, who has written a personal note to each boy who has one. They are treasured.) There are 5 to 25 boys, depending on the unit and depending on the day. The boys ask, “Did you bring Kirk today?” (Kirk Franklin, a popular Christian rap artist). Randal – “No, today we have ‘Sevin’. No worries. He’s cool. You’ll like him.” (We have a whole collection of Christian Rap artists now – who would have thought?) Randal turns to one of the boys. “Hey, dude, nice ‘do. Could I do that with my hair?” The young boy answers seriously, “No, man, you need nap for these curls – ya got no nappy.” “Hey, man, but I’m better lookin’ than you.” They laugh, “Hey, man. No way!” The boys love it. Randal has a knack for connecting with them. (Again, who would have thought?)

Now the picture takes on more serious colors. I look out at the sea of black and brown faces (only an occasional white one). I pray, and then Randal begins. Today we study 1 Corinthians 6:9:

“Don't you know that evil people won't have a share in the blessings of God's kingdom? Don't fool yourselves! No one who is immoral or worships idols or is unfaithful in marriage or is a pervert or behaves like a homosexual will share in God's kingdom. Neither will any thief or greedy person or drunkard or anyone who curses and cheats others. Some of you used to be like that. But now the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of God's Spirit have washed you and made you holy and acceptable to God.”

I watch the boys' faces as Randal teaches – he is on fire – I can feel the Spirit's presence so strong on these mornings. It seems as if he has been made for this. The boys are riveted – they are hearing that the worst of sins can be washed away. These boys are told that if they have accepted Christ they, too are holy and here for a purpose. When they were on the outside, were they listening to God? – No! God had to bring them to this place so He could speak to them, and so they would listen. It's all His purpose, and Randal says he is part of the plan – he is the messenger of God's love, but he points to Jesus as the Message. When our hour is up, they can still be with Jesus, and with a Father who they can know, who is not in prison, or dead, or missing, or non-existent. Randal tells them they are a “captive audience” for God's purpose. Now what will they do?

There is interaction, too – a question here, a comment there, some laughter, sometimes tears. One boy is there “just to check it out” – again. He was so hard the last time (wouldn't buy this Jesus “s--”) and was distracting and mean-spirited during church that morning. Randal met with him one-on-one afterwards, several times on weekdays, and came home thoroughly discouraged. He could not break through the barriers, the walls erected to see if someone *really* cares when they say they do. But today he is listening intently – Praise God. You see, these boys want to change, to be different than they were, to learn to love God. These boys are choosing life over death, purpose over just existing, truth over lies, light over darkness. Oh, how beautiful they are! No hardness in their tender young faces, and you wonder in amazement – how could they have done such things to have landed them in this place? But God is turning them towards His beautiful face – and they are seeing His Light, and it is a joy to behold.

At the end of our brief hour we pray, for moms and dads, sisters and brothers, and children (yes, many are fathers). We pray for court hearings, and we pray for holiness. For this hour, we are family.

And then the magic is broken. The staff barks out their names one by one, and they return to their “rooms”. Behind locked doors again, they watch us through their little windows and we wave good-bye. Their faces pressed against the glass, they wave....

CLANG!

We walk out into the noon-day sun; freedom taken for granted no more, our hearts full of those trusting faces, emotionally drained yet full of joy, having witnessed the power of God.

I hope you have enjoyed my painting. Please pray for our new ministry, and contact us if God is calling you to pick up a paint brush. These boys need a mentor when they leave the YDF, a father-figure to coach them through the days, weeks, and months in which temptation lures them back to the streets, and the Spirit's whisper begins to be drowned out by the sounds of the world. There are so many of them, and not enough of us....