

## A Man Among Men

It looked like a small settlement—rows of matching buildings on one side and neat vegetable gardens on the other. In the distance was a basketball court. Out further yet, a vendor sold fruit.

I walked up the dirt path behind my father, who chatted with some men as he walked. Small crowds gathered as we passed by. They stared and whispered. Men always stared and whispered.

I didn't know what they were saying, but I walked on, trying not to show any sign of fear.

Was I afraid? Of course! I was 15 years old, these were no ordinary men, and this was no ordinary village. This was the country's national prison, where men were put away and forgotten.

My father and I walked on until we came to a small chapel. A few men had already gathered there, waiting on the benches for some kind of entertainment. It was hot and I wished I were at home, sipping orange juice and watching TV rather than trying to escape the stares of these fellows.

I listened as my father spoke with the inmates. He had a naturally amiable manner. They laughed heartily together, the way men do when they are sharing a good joke. As an ex-seaman and now a traveling counselor, my dad conversed comfortably with everyone from politicians to drug addicts, and he taught us kids to do the same. But I could not understand the passion that drove him to make these visits to the prison so many days every week.

My father and mother were moved by the plight of others. Our large family could only afford the basics and a few small luxuries, but when they saw the need in others' lives, they tried to help. Dad spoke of building a Sunday school for the inmates' neglected children. He said he would try to organize activities such as sports tournaments and workshops for the men who had whole lifetimes to spend there. He talked of involving my sisters and me with charity projects at orphanages and hospitals. Whatever he did, he tried to do better. Wherever he worked, he could work harder—and he did.

Dad turned and motioned me towards the front. "Come help me sing," he said.

I stood by his side, facing the crowd of prisoners. They were hushed, expectant. He pulled out his beat-up nylon-string guitar, strapped it on, and thumbed through the hymnal till he came to the song he had in mind. He wasn't a particularly talented musician, but that didn't matter. Dad had spirit in everything he did, and when you were around him, you felt it. A few riffs broke the silence. He began to sing:

Oh Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the works Thy hands have made,  
I see the stars; I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed. ...

His eyes signaled to me. As I joined in on the chorus, so did some of the men. They closed their eyes, as if picturing a wonderful and loving God, a God who ruled the entire universe, yet wanted to be in the heart of every man.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee,  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art.

And then my father read from the Scriptures about such a God and such a love—a love with power great enough to forgive any sin and love any sinner.

That day I understood that this was not just a nine-to-five job for Dad, but a consecrated mission. I could see that he felt compelled to walk among outcasts as Christ had done thousands of years before him. It made no difference that their past was reprehensible and their future bleak. When he looked at each one, he saw a human being, a unique and beloved creation of God, and he wanted to make their present world a better place.

Years passed. Dad's visits to the prison chapel marked time for the men. Many of his dreams eventually became realities. The sports league was organized; Sunday school activities were led by the inmates themselves. As a result of my dad's dogged work to raise public awareness of the plight of those in prison, national celebrities came and gave their time and talents to bring some cheer and comfort to those once forgotten men. Sponsorships grew. Dad's seemingly insignificant efforts created a ripple effect that reached into thousands of hearts. Men changed. My father was granted access to any prison ward in the country, and he traveled often into those dark corners, continuing his mission of hope. If he were ever imprisoned for his fanatical faith, Dad sometimes joked, he would feel right at home.

Once I overheard him telling Mom about someone who had served his term and was now a free man. He needed a place to stay while preparing to start a new business and get on with his life, and Dad wondered if we could spare a room in the house for a couple of weeks. I wasn't sure I liked that idea. But if there were any two people practicing what they preached, they were my parents.

It was a true act of unconditional loving kindness when they accepted that man into our big family and little house. He lived with us awhile and observed everything, like the peculiar way all 12 of us children gathered around the eight-seater table for a typical Filipino breakfast of rice, omelets, and dried fish, listening as Dad told his usual "corny daddy" jokes and read the morning devotional.

When this man left our home, he left with a promise that he would give his life to the Lord and support our family in any way he could. When he was eventually able to start a bakery business in the city, he was true to his word and regularly supplied us with fresh bread.

From instances like this, I realized that Dad was changing the world in the best way possible—on a person-to-person basis. Sure, he gathered the crowds, but what he did best was win hearts—one heart at a time, one day at a time.

What drove my parents to carry on with that work despite the many challenges we faced as a family was a passion that I questioned in my early teen years, but I don't anymore. It has been awhile since I left home, and I have since had a book's worth of recollections similar to this one about that day on the prison grounds.

Yesterday, I received an email from my dad, mom, and brothers and sisters still at home. Their volunteer work continues to be taxing, but they will never give it up. It is not just their work; it is their life.

Dad still puts in those hours. Mom still supports him every second. The prison ministry is thriving. Dad writes about taking the kids on the road to every corner of the country, to faraway, exciting places. There they will learn how to reach out to others, how to have a life that is worth living.

Thinking about the lives that have been changed for the better as a result of the way my parents have continued to help others everywhere they walk, be it a high road or low, reminds me of another who walked among men, the One commissioned to bring God's love to the world long ago.

Jesus said, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. ... Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:34-36,40).

-- **Nyx Martinez**