

Jeanne Marcus on Solitary Confinement



Jubilee

October 23, 2022

The seeds for this sermon were planted in 2019, shortly after I became a covenant member of Bread of Life Church, a sister church in tradition of Church of the Saviour. At the time, another member of the church was sounding a call to a new mission group there. The vision of this group was to welcome and accompany people coming home from incarceration; specifically at a residential facility that was slated to start construction in Adams Morgan neighborhood in early

2020. But Covid became pandemic in March 2020; and D.C., fearing that tax revenues would plummet, cancelled funding for all projects like ours.

As a way to stay with the mission while sheltering from Covid, I thought to write men who were in prison. I contacted the Interfaith Action for Human Rights, who I knew set people up with pen pals and provided initial training. I began writing Jason 2.5 years ago, when he was in a maximum security federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana, in his 20th year of a 72 year prison term, a ridiculously long sentence handed down under a distortion of the provisions of the punitive excesses of the 1990s so-called War on Drugs. I continue to write him as he's moved down to a medium security prison in Tucson, Arizona.

From there, I began writing to other men in prison as well, not through IAHR, but through personal connections. Of those I've connected with this way, my biggest celebration is of a young man released on parole a year ago, who is currently majoring in sociology at the University of Maryland at College Park; we get together once a month at a diner near where he works. Another is on deferred release status, and will be released on parole in January, after decades in prison.

Today, my focus is on Tyrone. I first wrote to Tyrone in March of this year. I'm friends with his mother, and she was concerned for him. Tyrone is imprisoned at a Maryland correctional facility located in Allegany County in rural Western Maryland.

In late August, I was scheduled to preach at Bread of Life, and the lectionary readings were for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost. The Epistle reading was from chapter 13 of the Letter to the Hebrews: here are verses 2-3

“ Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

This scriptural advice to *Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison*, stopped me in my tracks. It served as a call for me to take everything I had learned about incarceration, and especially what I was learning about Tyrone and his situation—to take it in more personally and viscerally, and to start doing something with what I learned.

The facility in which Tyrone is imprisoned is 135 miles from downtown Silver Spring or midtown Baltimore City, longer to most points in Prince George’s County. Its location reflects what seems to be a trend of states using prison construction as an economic development money to pump up rural areas. The location makes no sense for those in prison and their families, who have to travel to Allegheny County. Also important to note is that Allegheny county is 88 % White, while perhaps that percentage or more of those who are imprisoned are non-white.

Tyrone is in solitary confinement in that prison. The institution itself has been proudly described as a “hyper-max prison.” At the time construction was finished in 2007, it was said to be one of the most technologically advanced prisons in the world.

If I were coming onto the grounds, I would first pass through the outer fence, 15 miles of fence covered with rolls upon rolls upon rolls of razor wire rising out of the flat land. I have read that the master control tower I see ahead of me has an unobstructed view of every point on the entire grounds, as well as complete [surveillance](#) over CCTV of every area accessed by inmates. The tower has control over all security doors,

cameras, and even the flow of water into individual [cells](#).

If I were sitting with Tyrone in his cell, we would be in a space that is 60 square feet. This is the size of a very small parking space. That small amount of space is made more claustrophobic by the fact that the cell door is not made of bars: it is made of solid steel. It has a window of bullet-proof glass. There is a slot in the door to pass meals through; or through which guards can shackle a person's hands.

There is one short wide barred window to the outside that lets in light but does not allow views of the outside. The concrete cells are constructed offsite so that there are no seams or imperfections that, in theory, could conceivably hide contraband. The concrete is coated with a strong [epoxy](#) paint that, it is said, even acid couldn't break through.

The beds are bolted directly into the concrete and the bolts are then rounded down so they cannot be removed. Storage is a space under the bed. The toilet/sink combo is stainless steel; there is a steel shelf that serves as a table.²

Even imagining that I'm hearing the steel door with the bullet-proof window clanging closed behind me creates anxiety. Not only is there no physical escape, but it feels like the space is designed to allow no mental escape as well.

But the horrific thing is: this is the space that Tyrone must remain in for 23 hours a day, each and every day.

I can't wrap my head or spirit around what it would be to have this experience every day for even one month without serious psychological or emotional breakdown. There is increasing data that shows that a person in solitary confinement begins to show signs of significant and sometimes irreversible mental and emotional harm **beginning as early as 15 days** after beginning such confinement. Solitary confinement has been repeatedly shown to cause serious, often permanent

psychological trauma, especially in people who already experience mental health challenges. It [leads](#) to increased risk of depression, anxiety and psychosis, that escalates over time.

It's not rare that individuals do snap under the continuing trauma of the deprivations of this isolation and tight confinement.

Remember: by 15 days, there are already effects. Tyrone has been in isolated confinement (solitary) for **over 3½ years**. Imagine hundreds, thousands of mornings one after another of waking up in this deliberately small, deliberately harsh space, knowing that what you're seeing is pretty much what you're going to see all day; pretty much where you're going to be able to move around all day, pretty much where you are going to be alone all day. I try to imagine how that would be for just one day: just the one day.

Here's something infuriating: Tyrone is being subjected to this experience under the label of Administrative Segregation—Ad Seg for short. Ad Seg means that the state is not naming this prolonged extreme isolation as a punishment; they are doing this under the guise that this arrangement is for Tyrone's protection, from alleged enemies who would cause him harm if he were released into the general population.

Though it's not supposed to be punishment, yet in this status, the men are unfairly deprived of any program offerings that exist in the facility. Nor can they work jobs for which they could earn amounts of money, however paltry, that would allow them to make commissary purchases for themselves. And while they are in Ad Seg, the possibility of earning "good time" off of their sentences is unavailable—in this way, their sentences are being lengthened in practice.

One of the things that the men find most aggravating is the monthly Administrative Segregation Review. As one of Tyrone's

friends has written to me, "Every 30 days, you go to a sort of kangaroo court where a room full of white people stare at you and say "No Change"! FOR 5 ½ YEARS! It is infuriating and undignified."

That tells me that there have been attempts to create accountability—or at least the appearance of accountability, in the Maryland prison system for decisions about a person's stay in Ad Seg. Predictably, which no change in the power structure of the prison system, or in the mindset of its leaders and staff, that provision has failed to do anything more than create a small monthly event that no one believes is about anything real.

In early September, the Washington Post ran a piece by its Editorial Board favorably reviewing the findings of an important study that had just been released by the Yale Law School's Center for Public Interest Law on the use of solitary confinement. In this strong editorial statement, the editors named solitary confinement for what it is:

"This grotesque practice is a form of torture – one that is too common in the United States."

Remembering Tyrone as if I were sitting next to him in his cell, I find it impossible not to try to do something about all of this.

What I already knew was that Interfaith Action for Human Rights, the same organization with the pen-pal program, also has established the Maryland Coalition on Solitary Confinement. That Task Force is readying a bill in to introduce in Maryland's next legislative session, that will build on the provisions of the new law in Connecticut that limits the number of days a person can spend in isolated confinement to no more than 15 consecutive days or 30 total days within any 60-day period. There is a sister organization in Virginia, the Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement.

A good faith argument can be made that there will always be a need for facilities for incarceration, though significantly fewer than we have now in the United States. But solitary confinement should be prohibited except in rare circumstances—such as when an incarcerated person poses a real and imminent threat of physical harm—and then only for a little time as necessary.

As the Washington Post editorial rightly names it, prolonged isolated incarceration is a grotesque form of torture. It is wrong, and it should be ended. Broad decision-making about its imposition and length of duration can't responsibly be left to actors in an the American carceral system that we know continues to be pervasively shaped by its conception as the means to buttress a system of racial enslavement. And when that system was legally abolished, then it worked to maintain the replacement systems of racial oppression and subordination.

When I began writing to Tyrone, what was foremost on his mind is getting out of his situation in solitary. I was sharing with him that I was learning more about the use solitary in Maryland when I shared with him what I'd learned. I told him when I would be attending a meeting of the Interfaith Action for Human Rights, and explained what they were doing with the Maryland legislature.

In his next letter back to me, he included letters from two men in his cluster who he was friends with—John and Patrick. Each of them had written about their own situation: each of them had spent more than 5 years in solitary confinement. Each of them wrote about the feeling of having been thrown away, ignored, consigned to a locked basement and no one knew they were there. I could feel the energy rising off their letter, just to know there was someone who was paying attention, believed them, and had done something in response.

Just three days ago, I received two letters from Tyrone, and

in each envelope was included another letter—in one envelope, a letter from John, and in the other, a letter from Patrick. Tyrone had shown them each a copy of an article I'd written that covers some of the same ground as I've shared today. I was so moved once again by how much it means to them that someone is listening, and believing what they're saying; and also that something, somewhere, might be moving in a direction that could change their lives for the better.

Last night, an idea came to me, that gladdens me, and it involves your involvement to make it happen. Knowing how much encouragement the men get in knowing people are aware and care about the existence of the slow, steady torture of prolonged solitary confinement, I suggest a tangible sign.

{description: at close of worship, individual memo-sized pads available, with opportunity for persons to craft their messages of acknowledgement and support, to be mailed together to Tyrone. 16 messages were written}