

GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

Ron Nikkel

During a recent visit to New Zealand and Australia I stated that in my visits to more than a thousand prisons in over a hundred countries – “I have yet to meet a monster.” To some people who have been terribly victimized by crime this has been taken as a very controversial if not offensive statement. Yet I stand by what I said, for it is true. Yes, I have met many people in prison who have committed horrific crimes – abusive child molesters, cold blooded killers, sadistic rapists, and persons who have committed all manner of offences against humanity – but even these offenders are human beings, not sub-human monsters.

Since the beginning of time each of us, as human beings have carried within us the possibility of doing both great good as well as great evil. While most of us live out our lives doing more or less good and only occasionally things that may be illicit, immoral, disrespectful, or hurtful toward others - we are human beings none the less or none the more. The issue arises when a person does great evil, or does significantly more evil than good so as to inflict unspeakable grief and suffering on their victims. There are people who commit vile and monstrous acts of evil, some of them repeatedly, but even they are no less human than the rest of us.

I've met such people in prison who have inflicted terrible loss and pain, and who must be kept imprisoned in order to prevent them from causing further harm to others. Yet no condition of imprisonment or punitive response can ever undo or repair the damage that that they have done – even penalty of death cannot erase the pain and loss. Likewise, our impulse to demonize and dehumanize offenders such as these only gives

expression to our retribution and our outrage – it doesn't restore the victim, nor does it change the offender. The fact remains that the offender is still a human being capable of good and evil. A person's twisted moral sense and propensity to do evil is neither untwisted nor resolved by reducing that person to a "monster".

When I say that I have never met a "monster" in prison, I am not saying that I haven't met persons who aren't capable of and culpable for their evil deeds. What I am saying is that, while I have met offenders who are guilty of the vilest and most violent offences imaginable, I have met them on the level ground of our common humanity, as human beings who are loved by God beyond any measure of our offences. That does not mean those offenders are not responsible for their deeds or that they should not be punished. What I do mean is that they are human beings whose life story is yet to be completed; a story with all of the possibilities of grace and redemption – transformation, reconciliation, and restoration which Prison Fellowship stands for.

I am a witness to such stories for I know "incorrigible" repeat offenders of the worst kind who have been completely transformed by the grace of God and the love of people who did not define or confine them based only on their deeds. Grace is always for the undeserving - for if grace is only for the "deserving" and for those who are doing good there would be no hope in the garden of human good and evil; there would be no possibility for lives becoming untwisted, or "bad" men being made "good," or victims being healed, or for any of us to be forgiven for our greater and lesser sins against others as well God.

If this message is offensive, I apologize. I am not "soft" on crime, nor do I care more about offenders than about their victims. I am also a victim and know the pain of

family members and colleagues who have experienced violence and personal violation. Our anger doesn't change what happened, it only perpetuates what happened. While we cannot forget we can forgive, and in forgiving we find ourselves unhooked from animosity and anger. Forgiveness does not release the offender from his guilt and consequences, but it opens up the possibility for a human being to find redemption.

When I look into the eyes of an offender I don't see a "monster" – I see a fellow human being with a life story that is not yet finished.

Ron Nikkel is the President and CEO of Prison Fellowship International. He was in Wellington recently to speak at Parliament and encourage the work of Prison Fellowship New Zealand which works with victims, prisoners, and their families.

See: www.pfnz.org.nz