

## **What are we journeying towards in our faith?**

Jesus' parables are short, simple stories he shared to teach and illuminate how we as Christians can go through the day in our work environment seeking to walk with Christ and let the Holy Spirit guide our work decisions amidst the pressures and challenges faced in the work environment.

As we begin a new year, what are we journeying towards in our faith?



The 2023 BELIEVES season, focused on “Living Our Faith According to Jesus’s Parables,” began on Tuesday, Jan. 10<sup>th</sup> from 7:30-8:30 AM with a focus on the [Parable of the Pearl \(Matthew 13:45-46\)](#), and what we are journeying towards in our faith.

All in attendance were able to engage with Amy Ard, Executive Director of Motherhood Beyond Bars, in a quest to discuss, discern, and answer what we are journeying towards in our faith, and how we put God first and yield our will to Him to live and work with the intent towards God.

Ard, who grew up in Atlanta, later moved away, including time pursuing her undergrad degree at Denison University – where she was also a college chaplain for a year, and a Master’s of Theological Studies at Vanderbilt’s divinity school.

“Looking back at the parables was fun to go back and dig in like in divinity school,” Ard opened by saying. “They’re fiery ... literally, they’re fiery.”

As Ard worked through revisiting the parables in preparation for the session, she pointed out that in the end we get down to the Parable of the Pearl and that’s where it all wraps.

“In the parable before the Parable of the Pearl, one stumbles on something of value. Then this one’s where something of value is sought,” said Ard.

She added, “I thought about how pearls are made. It’s a lot of muck. A piece of grit gets in an oyster. It’s an irritant causing the oyster to secrete, and it gets refined until the pearl is formed.”

The process of the pearl being made is what resonated with Ard when reading the parable.

“My work is with, and in, prisons,” she told everyone. “A lot of folks seem as irritants, but there are a lot of pearls.”

Ard then spoke specifically of one woman who she has worked with – Ashley.

“When I walked into a prison for the first time it was in 2017,” recalled Ard. “I had never been in a prison before (Lee Arrendale State Prison). Lee Arrendale looks like a college campus. It’s massive. No phones. No watches. I arrived not knowing what I’d do. I just knew I’d be leading a postpartum support group.”

Ard shared that when she walked into the room for the support group, women started trickling in.

“I was surprised how many were white, and older than I thought,” she recalled before adding, “but actually 65-70% of women in prison in Georgia are white, which is not true for men.”

When everyone in the session began introducing themselves, Ard said Ashley told everyone her baby would have been four years old. After the session, she came up to Ard and said she had just learned her baby had died.

She asked Ard, “Can I still keep coming to the group?” and Ard, said “Yes.”

“No one had told Ashley her baby had died,” Ard emphatically told everyone. “No one from the mental health department had talked to her. Her family had tried to tell her, but it was when she made a phone call home that she learned the news.”

Ashley later told Ard when she was out of prison that the postpartum support group was the only place she felt human in prison.

Ard went on to inform everyone that Ashley was sexually assaulted by her granddad at age five. She used drugs at age seven. Her mom was an addict. The child she lost was her 8<sup>th</sup> child. The other seven children she had weren’t in her custody. She was hoping this child was a way to a new life.

“When she got out of prison, she got pregnant with someone she was committed to,” continued Ard. “She was living with her mom in a place with a whole lot of irritants around – a ‘track house.’ After a year, Ashley succumbed and wound up in prison again. She gave birth to a child while in prison. The child’s been raised by the paternal grandmother.”

To provide some perspective before sharing the next part of Ashley’s story, Ard let everyone know that Georgia has the most people on parole and probation than any other state.

“Something as simple as a rolling stop can lead to someone being back in prison,” she said.

Returning to tell more of Ashley’s story, Ard mentioned that when Ashley was out of prison she was taking care of her dad.

“He had issues with his legs,” stated Ard. “She had a medical supply bag in the back of her car when she was stopped and the officer felt one thing in the bag was a Class 4 narcotic, which it wasn’t. This landed her back in prison. Her dad died while she was in prison again.”

The night before the BELIEVES session, Ard had a chance to speak with Ashley.



“The growth I heard, her commitment as a mom, her willingness to self-examine, was amazing,” Ard told everyone as she got emotional. “She is one of the most remarkable people I know. She is the most hopeful person I have ever met. That’s the shine right under the surface.”

Ard added that Ashley is not alone like this.

“Underneath the surface of each woman in that group was the shine of a pearl. Where we go to find the pearls is important. Where have you found surprising pearls in your life, in your work?” Ard asked as she concluded her remarks.

Ard was then asked a question by one of the attendees that prompted her to tell a bit more from her times with the women in prison.

“When I go into prisons, I try not to find out what people did to get there,” she answered. “We’re trying to move forward. There are worldly things that get in the way of human connection.”

Commenting further, she shared, “The times where everyone was chipping in was the week before someone was leaving. You’d think the person would be excited, but they were more nervous. People would surround them with encouragement, also giving phone numbers of people or programs to contact who could help on the outside.”

Ard was then asked what kind of support she thinks those who work in prisons need.

“Lots of people want to find out what the problem is,” she responded. “We’re giving people jobs to do with not enough resources. The starting salary of a corrections officer in 2017 was around \$32,000. You can make more at Chick-fil-A.”

She went on to say there’s no secret that there are a lot of ways to make money in prisons beyond salary.

“During the pandemic, contraband went up without visitations being available, so that meant it’s via the guards. A pack of cigarettes is worth \$400 in prison.”

She also commented that there’s a 350-to-1 mental health counselor to prison inmate ratio, and there have been times when there are seven corrections officers managing a prison of 1200 inmates at one time.

“So, if we talk about budget, it comes down to us – what are we willing to pay for? 95% of those in prison are coming out and will come out worse and with more mental health issues.”

With time for one more question, Ard was asked what she does now to advocate for women.

“There’s been a 700% increase in women who are incarcerated in recent years,” Ard replied. “When a woman goes away, there’s a ripple. For example, there’s a 5x increase in a child’s likelihood going into foster care when a woman is incarcerated than when a man is incarcerated.”

Specific to her work with Motherhood Beyond Bars serving women who are incarcerated and pregnant, Ard informed everyone that the majority of babies go home with a family member or friend. This person can often then become overwhelmed, resulting in the child ending up in foster care.

“No one’s supporting this family member or friend,” she said. “Sometimes they don’t know they’re getting a baby until they get the call.”

Once Ard and her team began their work in the prisons, she became aware of the rules of the prison that if they made contact with those on the outside of prison, they couldn’t also come into the prison.

“In March 2020, we couldn’t get in anyhow, which was very prescient,” she commented when reflecting. “So we then did what the mom’s had been asking, ‘Help take care of our babies.’”

Today, Ard and her team provide the infant and caregiver with a support system once the child is born during the mom’s time in prison.

“No family will have to buy a pack of diapers,” she said firmly, noting also that this simple thing is an entry way to authentic relationship.

“Our goal is to give the infant what it needs, create sustainable relationships between the mom and the caregiver, and keep the kid out of foster care.”