

Let's Go Deeper...
Wednesday, July 5, 2017
David Shirey

Vacationing over the Fourth of July, Jennie and I celebrated the gift of freedom by... going to jail. The Missouri State Penitentiary to be exact, or MSP as Doug, the retired guard, called his former place of employment.



With a free morning in Columbia, MO, before heading on to St. Louis in the afternoon, I googled nearby Jefferson City, the state capitol, to look for an interesting place to visit. To my surprise, the top-rated Jeff City attraction according to Trip Advisor is none other than the State Penitentiary.

MSP is closed now. Built in 1836 and closed in 2004, the foreboding grey walls cap a 47-acre bluff overlooking the Missouri River. The first prison west of the Mississippi and for many years the largest, Doug the Jailer told us it held title to the dubious distinction of being the most populated prison in the world when over 5,000 inmates were behind its overcrowded bars. It was also called "America's bloodiest 47 acres" back then, an epithet I understood when I toured the macabre two-century old cell block and imagined thousands of men convicted of heinous crimes tethered in close quarters to fend for themselves.

We saw the cells that housed gangster Pretty Boy Floyd, Sonny Liston (who learned to fight while imprisoned at MSP and became a heavyweight champion after his release), and James Earl Ray (who escaped from MSP by using his contortionist abilities to fold his body into a bread crate which was then loaded by an accomplice onto a bread truck that unsuspectingly carried him to freedom outside the walls. He was on the lam when he assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Doug the Jailer told us about "the Auburn System," a philosophy of "rehabilitating" prisoners popular in the 19th century utilizing solitary confinement, flagellation, and other practices whereby conditions were made so brutal that any self-respecting person would vow never to commit another crime that would land him back in such a hell hole again.

Apparently it didn't work. Not for "Firebug" Johnson anyway. He garnered his nickname by setting a fire that caused \$500,000 worth of damage and the deaths of several inmates. Convicted of arson and given an additional 12 years, his repeated violations of prison protocol landed him in one of the musty cells in the basement of the cell block known as The Dungeon where prisoners were caged in solitary confinement in total darkness for 23 hours a day. Doug the Jailer told us Firebug spent a total of 18 years of his sentence in the darkness of The Dungeon. After his

release, he wrote a book entitled “Buried Alive for 18 Years in the Missouri Penitentiary.”

The tour ended with Doug the Jailer taking us to the Gas Chamber where 40 men received capital punishment for crimes ranging from kidnapping and rape to 1st degree murder from the mid-1930s to 1989. Embedded in the sidewalk leading to the chamber building was a white cross. We walked over it (or around it) without comment. Just outside the doors of the building was a small plot of ground framed by a one-foot high white picket fence in which a few flowers were planted.

Why the flowers and decorative fencing? I have no idea.

Why the cross? Was it one last prod to repent?

I turned the word *penitentiary* over in my mind as we left that day, free to go where we pleased. It contains the word *penitent*.

When King David broke about every one of the Ten Commandments in the span of a few days of aberrant, lecherous, murderous behavior midway through 2 Kings (2 Kings 11), what did the Lord God do? Wring him by the neck? Publicly humiliate him? Lock him up with a half dozen other adulterer-, liar-, and murderer-types and give him a good taste of “the Auburn System?” Throw him in The Dungeon next to Firebug Johnson?

Nope. That’s not what God did. God sent the prophet Nathan to David to try to work repentance—penitence—in David’s heart (2 Samuel 12). Psalm 51 is the biblical witness that Nathan’s confrontation of David worked. Changed his heart. Rehabilitated him.

Our nation’s prison system was begun by—guess who?—*Christians*. Quakers built prisons back in the late-1700s for the primary purpose of leading convicts to repentance — a change of heart and life. As such, they were called penitentiaries.

It was a novel concept at the time and it still is: the belief that God’s first impulse toward wayward, sinful human beings is not to inflict punishment, but to evoke repentance.

I will never profess to understand the vagaries of the human heart and how to crack the code that cracks our stubborn resistance to admitting wrong and turning to the right.

Nor will I ever be able to fully grasp the mystery of grace that is the Bible’s telling us that none other than Jesus Christ was descended from the convict David and his Nathan-motivated penitence (Matthew 1).