

Prison Ministry
Story for Presque Isle Church June 19, 2018
By Pastor Diana J. Perkins

Both of my parents were ordained Pentecostal pastors for as far back as I remember. Due to the things that I encountered, thought about and reasoned, I had a lot of weeding out to do when I reached adulthood and could make my own decisions. However, I loved the Bible and spent quite a bit of time reading and studying it during my teen years. I also have wonderful memories of my aunts and uncles coming to stay with us sometimes for months at a time. They were just so much fun and we had such good times. Even though Aunt Maxine was older than I, I always felt like I needed to watch out for her. Some of the things that happened at our house when she was there was more comical than any “I love Lucy” stories. No one could make these things up. One time she came for an extended period of time we shared my bedroom that was located on the front side of our house. We didn’t have running hot water so a big blue with white dotted canning kettle was set on the wood stove and that heated the water for anything we needed. Aunt Maxine decided in the middle of the day to take a sponge bath so she filled a basin of water, got a wash cloth and towel and let everyone know that she needed privacy in my bedroom. She pulled the shades that operated on springs and began to wash up. She was completely undressed when all of a sudden one of the shades sprung and let go and then another one did the same thing and the noise sounded like a gun shot when the shade reached the top. Unfortunately our neighbor, Raymond Ronco was standing on a ladder in front of one of the windows painting the house. He had a can of red lead paint in his hand and when he heard the “gun- shot” and heard Maxine scream at the top of her lungs, he lost his balance and fell off the ladder bringing the can of paint with him. Aunt Maxine raced out to the living room, trying to cover up with an article of clothing she had grabbed on her way out the door crying, “Don’t look! Oh, please don’t look!” My uncle Allen, Dad’s younger brother, was visiting and he and dad stopped the conversation short while Dad threw a blanket from off the back of the couch to cover up Maxine. Aunt Maxine went back to Garland that night and I didn’t think any more about it until the next day when I went out my door and felt a hand grab me around the back of my neck. I looked up to see Raymond Ronco, with the angriest look on his face. He had red streaks in his black hair and traces of red paint on his body. He screamed at me that I better not think this was funny because he almost killed himself falling off the ladder. He thought someone had gotten shot in our house. Because I was noted for pranks, I couldn’t convince him that it was an accident that hadn’t involved me at all. I tried to tell him that Aunt Maxine wasn’t trying to pull a prank. He wouldn’t even listen to my explanation. He didn’t know Maxine and he thought I was making up a story to cover up for myself. He threatened me if I ever pulled a stunt like that again I would be mighty sorry. He and Avis, his sister-in-law, blamed me for this until the day they died. Every time I saw them

even as an adult, one of them would mention that I was the culprit and Raymond would get angry all over again speaking about how hard it was to get the paint out of his hair and off his body saying nothing about his clothes. Lead paint didn't wash off with water. I stopped trying to defend myself and the story proved to come in handy when I wrote bulletins for prisoners.

My grandmother Giles was a God fearing woman and provided spiritual guidance for my life. I spent as much time with her as I could growing up and she always taught me the right way to have a good relationship with God and with people. I remember grumbling to her about my lot in life one day and she invited me to go outside with her. She took me to a large dandelion patch and asked me to pick the yellow blossoms from the plant. I did it thinking she wanted to have a bouquet for the kitchen table. That she did, but the next day she took me back out to look at the dandelion plant for the second time. There were new flowers on the plant. She then told me to be careful of what I allowed to grow in my heart because just like the dandelion plant, picking the blossoms off will not get rid of the problem; you must dig it up by the roots. She told me not to allow bitterness and anger to take root in my heart because it would cause me problems when I got older. I didn't really understand the lesson until I was much older, but I remember the story. Every day around 3:00 PM, Grammy washed her hands and got out her Bible to read to me. After she read some verses, she would head to her bedroom to kneel and pray. I followed her and knelt beside her while she prayed for every one of her children and grandchildren. She started with Uncle Wendell and his family, then Mable and her family, Phyllis and her family (and I would wait to hear my name) then Dwaine and his family, Olivia and her family, Harry and his family, Maxine and her family, Herbert and his family and then Rodney. She never missed thanking God for all of his blessings and by the time she had finished, my grandfather would be driving into the yard and wanting supper. Grammy always had a meal ready for Grampy when he got home from the mill.

With the Giles family having 10 children and my Grandmother Webber having 17 children (14 boys and three girls), I gathered a lot of material for writing stories and Biblical applications later in life that many prisoners enjoyed reading and sharing with their families.

I worked in various capacities in my parents' church for several years after I left home. However, there were things that happened in our family that caused me to decide to leave the church and reconsider like Pilate "What is truth?" I moved away from my home town and kept mostly to myself. However, there were times that God's people reached out to me and conviction would grip my heart, but I was stubborn and thought I would do well to keep to myself. Then God got my attention! My 17 year old son, Charles, got in a car accident and the prognosis was not good. He had severe head injury and the doctors told me that he might not survive, he could very well end up like a vegetable after the operation on his head or be severely disabled and I would have to take care of him for the

rest of his life or put him in an institution. He was operated on Friday. It had just so happened that a church had asked me to fill in for their piano player on Sunday. I had given my word that I would do that as long as they understood that I was not interested in joining their church. Their piano player knew my Aunt Maxine and loved the TV program of "Soul's Harbor". That sweet lady convinced the pastor that my family was great Christians and both of my aunts, Mable and Maxine were very talented. I got drafted for the job due to the connection I had with my aunts who wrote songs, recorded songs and appeared on the TV screen weekly. Though the doctors had asked me to spend as much time as I could with my son talking to him and communicating with him to keep his brain activated, when Sunday morning came around, I asked God to watch over my son while I followed through on my promise to play the piano at that little country church. That day the congregation prayed sincerely for my boy and their concern touched my heart. Following the service, Leroy and I went to a restaurant for lunch before returning to the hospital to be with Charles. A group of people came into the restaurant and sat down at a long table right next to ours. An older gentleman was surrounded by people and they were enjoying fellowship when I leaned over to Leroy and said, "I sense the spirit of God around those people. I am going to ask that gentleman if he is a preacher." I approached the table and placed my hand on the man's shoulder. He looked up and I asked him if he was a pastor. He answered, "Yes, I am." I told him the story of my son in the hospital and he agreed to go pray for him right after they finished lunch. He followed us to the hospital and I stayed outside the door while he ministered to Charles. He returned after a few minutes and said to me, "God has heard our prayer and Charles will live and do okay. However, young lady, God is calling you. You need to follow the Lord." Later I found out that he was the former director where our Sunday school teacher, Ruth Ann Price, had attended Bible school and our Sunday school class sent offerings to help support the school.

I dedicated my life to God from that point on and determined to be a laborer in the field for Jesus Christ. God changed my life, he gave me a new attitude and a joy that has been with me since I learned what having a relationship with Jesus entailed. It is not following a list of rules; it is not by works that we earn salvation; it is a gift of God. The Holy Spirit will lead us and guide us into truth as we obey God's word. One day I was praising God and asking what I could ever do to repay him for all the blessings he had given to me and the amazing grace that had been bestowed upon my life. The Scripture opened up to me from Matthew 25: 31-46. It is the story of the Son of Man when He returns to earth in his glory and all of his angels when he will sit on his royal throne and judge people. He will separate the sheep from the goats and He pronounces blessings on his sheep and invites them to enter the kingdom that his Father has prepared for them from before the foundation of the world. He says, "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you

welcomed me and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me.” Then the people asked, “When did we do these things for you?” The king will answer, “Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me.”

To the goats he will rebuke them for not feeding him when he was hungry, not giving him something to drink when he was thirsty, not welcoming him in as a stranger, not giving him clothes when he was naked, not caring for the sick and not visiting him when he was in jail. They also ask, “When did we see you in need and not minister to you?” He answers, “When you didn’t minister to the least of my little ones, you didn’t minister to me.” He then casts them out into outer darkness.

These verses motivated me to begin the journey that has spanned over nearly 20 years. I wrote bulletins and sermons for our church and family and one day using childhood memories, interesting or thought provoking illustrations that I connected with Biblical principles and people began to respond to them in a positive way. During this time I was working in a state office in Augusta, Maine when a letter crossed my desk from an inmate at the Maine State Prison. The young man requested information concerning employment upon his release in the future and wanted assistance. Before I passed the letter on to an appropriate unit, I felt impressed to send a note telling him that God loved him. I was too afraid to do it because I had so many thoughts about prisoners and really hesitated to step out in faith on this one. I copied the envelope and put the address in my purse. A while later, while cleaning out my purse the address fell out. The same unction came to me to send a card to the man and tell him that God loved him. I finally did and a few days later I got a reply. Much later I learned that Ricky had been raised by members of a gang called “Hell’s Angels” from California and was in prison for 10 years for drug trafficking and robbery. He didn’t reveal it in that first letter, but he asked me how I got his name and why I wrote to him. I explained the details of how I happened to send the note and the next letter he wrote was interesting. He had never heard of Jesus Christ, salvation or anything about our Savior, but the morning that he received my card, he had felt so alone and wondered if anyone in this world cared about him or loved him. This began a journey for me as I began to send him my weekly sermons, Bible puzzles, and stories that I wrote. He sent them to an aunt in California and eventually she and also Ricky’s mother gave their hearts to the Lord before they died. One story that I wrote about my Uncle Rodney and his dog got placed on a bulletin board in a doctor’s office in California when Ricky’s aunt placed it there after her appointment with the doctor. Ricky began passing them around the prison and leaving them in places where inmates would pick them up and read them so soon I had a mailing list. One day I wrote to Ricky and asked about a man named Charlie that I had grown up with in Dexter. I had prayed for him off and on for salvation and wondered if he was still alive. Ricky wrote back and told me that Charlie was a dynamic Christian and he would ask him if he wanted to hear from me. When

Charlie determined that I was not out to cause him harm he wrote to me. That began another experience for me for soon he asked me to visit him at the prison. I was not comfortable with that request, but I felt God nudging me to go so I made out the paperwork and set up a date to visit Charlie, a man who had viciously attacked a beautiful young woman in our town years before with a hunting knife killing her in front of her two young children. I prayed that God would give me grace and mercy and the words to say to Charlie when I visited. The day came when I sat across from Charlie in a prison visiting room. He thanked me for praying for him and he shared a story with me that I have never forgotten.

He was a hated man and a hunted man once he committed his crime. He spent much time in segregation for his own protection as there were many threats to his life. He was full of anger, bitterness and hate and he trusted no one. He was allowed out in a fenced in area for one hour every afternoon escorted by a guard and after the hour the guard returned and escorted him back to his cell. No one was ever allowed in that yard when he was out there. One day he was sitting with his back towards the fence so he could be sure no one would sneak up on him, when he saw the prison door open and a man slowly descended down the stairs and he headed in the direction where Charlie was sitting. Charlie explained how he braced himself ready to defend himself wondering who this person was. This was the first time anyone had entered the yard when he was outside. As the man came closer, Charlie felt the anxiety and heightened fear subside and he had no strength to fight this man. The man walked right up to Charlie, put his hand on Charlie's shoulder and said, "Charlie, the Lord is calling you." He then turned around and walked back the way he had come, went up the stairs and through the door. Charlie was puzzled and rattled for he didn't know what to make of the experience. When the guard came to take him back to his cell, Charlie asked him "Who was that man that came out to talk to me a while ago?" The guard looked at him, squinted up his face and said, "Charlie, there was no one allowed out in this yard in the past hour." Charlie didn't respond any further for fear of being placed in the mental ward of the prison if he persisted. Yet the experience never left him. He pondered about it for several years and then the day came for him to be moved to the new prison in Warren. There one of the guards suggested that Charlie attend a Kairos weekend. This is a weekend where Christians come together to share the Lord with prisoners and witness to them concerning spiritual things. Charlie attended that weekend and he sat by himself in the back corner of the room again with his back towards the wall so he could watch everything around him. One of the speakers towards the end of the sessions was preaching the gospel when he suddenly stopped and said, "There is someone here that God is calling. Tonight is your opportunity to join the family of God. If God is calling you, don't resist him. Come forward and we will pray for you." Charlie said it was like a gush of emotions starting in the pit of his stomach and reaching to the top of his head that very moment. He began to weep and cry and he couldn't resist

getting out of his seat and he rushed to the front of the room. A group of Christian workers gathered around him, praying and crying out to God to save Charlie. Charlie's life was changed and that night God took away the anger, the bitterness and he felt the weight of remorse and sorrow being lifted from his soul. Jesus Christ had forgiven him. However, he said, "Don't get me wrong. Every day I think of where he brought me from and how sorry I am for what I have done. But God placed a desire in my heart to be a light for him in this dark place and that is what I aim to do." He continued, "I had never held a knife in my hand since the day that I used my hunting knife to take a life. But one day a prison guard handed me a whittling knife and a piece of wood and said, 'Here, Charlie, try your hand at working with wood.'" Charlie said it was like God had instantly given him knowledge on how to create art through whittling. "I had a mallard duck in my hands in no time. I began to make carvings, wooden ducks, geese, and all sorts of wildlife out of wood and they looked so real. I always loved wild life and with wood I could create creatures that I would never see in real life again. Soon my work was published in the newspapers and displayed in the Prison Store and people began to order and buy the things I made. I began to accumulate quite a bit of money and I was able to send donations to St. Jude Hospital for children who were burn victims and also to make restitution to my victims. That family forgave me. The more that I shared with others, the more my healing progressed in my spirit. I have diabetes and I am not a well man. I have no hope of ever getting out of prison; I will never see freedom on the outside, but God has given me freedom in my heart and I am so thankful. I even had an opportunity to see a child one day. I was taken to Portland to the hospital because diabetes was destroying my limbs and I needed amputations. A prison guard was with me and I had shackles around my ankles and my waist and my hands were held in handcuffs. (Charlie was a very large man and stood over six feet tall. He sported long white hair and a beard. He would intimidate anyone not familiar with him.) We got into an elevator and a young woman entered with a small boy. I figured he was around 4 years old or maybe a bit older. He looked at me and then he looked at the guard and his eyes dropped to inspect the gun and holster that was strapped to the guard's side. I tried not to stare at him, but it had been a long time since I had seen a small child and I was curious as to what he was thinking. He looked at the guard from head to toe and then his eyes focused on me. I sensed the discomfort in the mother, but there we were riding up the elevator together. Finally the little boy asked, 'Hey, Mister, are you Santa Claus?' We all burst out laughing and I have to tell you that God has a sense of humor and that child made my day. The tension from the mother's face even softened. I have repeated that story over and over again and I always get the same response, peals of laughter. Even in the darkest times of our lives, God brings sunshine."

From that day on, I signed up as a volunteer to visit the prison, taking the gospel to prisoners, answering their letters, sending stories and sermons to those who requested

them. Some of my most special letters came from men on death row or serving life sentences. They would write things like, "I love your stories; I look forward to going to heaven. Know who I want to see most of all besides Jesus Christ? I want to see Grammy Giles." Charlie has now gone to be with the Lord and his prison sentence is ended. He is free at last. He became a brother to me. My younger brother was killed while serving the army at just 19 years old. I grieved for him for years, but God has filled my life with brothers that bring me so much love and laughter. Charlie guided me towards prisoners that would be appropriate for me to communicate with; he answered any questions that I had when I was stumped for meaning of actions etc.; and I was comfortable holding services on Saturdays at the prison because Charlie was there to help me. The first time I went there, the average attendance was just a handful. By this time I had quite a mailing list and spent a lot of time writing letters too. The chaplain escorted me to the chapel and 50 men were in the chapel.. My husband had not been approved to accompany me and the chaplain was concerned for my well- being. No woman had been there by herself until I volunteered. A few years later he told me that he was amazed that I wasn't afraid to be in that room filled with inmates without my husband with me. I told him that I was okay after I looked around for there was Charlie and some of his friends with their chairs lined up on one side of the wall. Also God was with me! After the service, Charlie approached me and said, "Don't worry Diana, you are safer with us than if you would be out on the streets. Nothing will happen to you in here." My life has been blessed; I have seen miracles of God that thrills my soul, and the best miracle of my service to the Lord is witnessing and being a part of Charlie's testimony. To God be the Glory; Great things he has done!

For the past year and a half, Leroy and I have ministered every Monday night at Somerset County Jail. A couple weeks ago an older gentleman came to service. This was his first time ever of being in jail. I passed out my sermons and after we finished our service, he came up to me. "I am not a believer," he said, "I have a lot of doubts and don't know really what to believe." I encouraged him to read the Bible and to talk to God and share his concerns with him." This past week, he came up to me after the service and told me that he is now a follower of Jesus Christ. He hasn't got all his questions answered, but he realized that he had a heart that was filled with sin and he is a new man. He doesn't know what is ahead of him, but he is trusting in Jesus to guide him the rest of the journey until he dies. He said, "I think I had to come here to find out how to make peace with God so I can go to heaven when I die. I'm ready now." The harvest is truly plentiful but the laborers are few. Are you fulfilling the calling of God on your life? The rewards are for the faithful!