Basu: Women's road to redemption, behind walls of prison

An inmate approached Pastor Lee Schott, who heads a United Methodist congregation inside the state women's prison at Mitchellville. It was the anniversary of the inmate's crime, Schott said. "She wanted to tell me what she had done."

The pastor's eyes welled up last week, remembering: "It was a horrible story. She needed to come to terms with it."

Schott didn't divulge the details, but when asked how she could embrace the offender, she said simply, "My faith tells me when we confess our crimes and seek forgiveness, we get it." The pastor spends her days with women who have done terrible things, and women to whom terrible things have been done. She doesn't judge, but she supports, trying to help them be accountable for what they did and get back on track. That is the essence of forgiveness, but we don't see it in many of our laws and policies and sometimes it's hard to summon it in ourselves.

At our meeting in Mitchellville last week, Schott brought two inmates from her congregation, Women at the Well. One is in for the murder of her parents, and the other for physically abusing her 3-year-old child. Had her parental rights to her daughter not been terminated, says 35-year-old Elicia Gibson of Davenport, "she would have wound up dead." Gibson arrived four years ago on a 25-year sentence. She can't explain why she did it but doesn't deny she did, and gets tearful talking about it. She'd been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder but had stopped taking her meds during pregnancy and never resumed. She didn't plead insanity. "I knew what I was doing was wrong. I just don't understand what snapped inside of me to cause me to do that."

Adopted at age 3, Gibson said she was herself abused as a child. Ninety percent of women at Mitchellville are survivors of domestic violence, 80 percent have addictions and 64 percent have been diagnosed with a mental illness, according to Schott. And for many, it's all three.

"Someone said, 'People don't have to be defined by the worst 15 minutes of their life,'" she said.

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In 1997, I sat in on the trial of Rodney Borushaski, convicted in the infamous State Fair murders of his in-laws, who were funnel cake vendors. I wrote about the strange disconnect of hearing his wife, Jamie, a 23-year-old nurse, testify in his defense even as she described her loving relationship with wonderful parents. She was later convicted of murder, too, for knowing his plans and not intervening.

She's 41 now, and she's in Women at the Well's leadership circle. She has served 18 years and will never get out. "I've been in trouble for years, bucking the system, being defiant," she said. But while in solitary confinement for six months, she promised God that if she got out, she'd go to church. She did and Schott said she saw a huge shift in Jamie, who'd previously had a paid job at her ministry.

Schott knows first-hand about huge shifts. At around 40, she abandoned practicing corporate and bankruptcy law and went to seminary, finding her way four years ago to Mitchellville, where Women at the Well has been active for eight years. "I walk out of here every day knowing that it matters that I was there," she said. "I didn't feel that as much on the outside."

Around the world and in Iowa, religion is invoked to judge, condemn and hurt people. It's refreshing to see it used to forgive and promote second chances. "Someone says, 'I screwed up again,' and I get to say, 'But the difference is, this time you see it,' " Schott said. At weekly meetings, inmates find community and hold each other accountable when someone has hurt another or been in trouble. But they still credit the woman for coming clean, and they reaffirm their belief in her.

One member chose the group to disclose the details of the sex crimes she was sentenced for, but had never admitted to.

Because most Mitchellville inmates will be released, and a quarter will return to prison, part of Women at the Well's mission is preparing members for re-entry. Since last January, when the four-week program began, 120 have gone through it, and trained re-entry teams help support them on the outside.

In the name of justice — but increasingly, it seems retribution — our laws send offenders to their deaths, or lock them up forever even as children. In

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Forgiving can be hard in the face of a terrible crime. But unless we condemn all serious offenders to death, we are eventually going to have to deal with them. Having the world's highest incarceration rate hasn't made America more peaceful or law-abiding. Investing in helping get people back to their better selves might. At any rate, it might help the rest of us get to ours.

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