

Jail warden Nneka Jones Tapia: 'I think God is all around us'

Cook County Jail warden, Nneka Jones Tapia, was raised Catholic, became Baptist, and now finds God at home through her Bible, and among the cell blocks.

Tapia didn't have any grand plans to move to a big city or become a jail Warden. "I'm from a small town in North Carolina, and I had never been to Chicago." She was attracted to Chicago as an intern, and believes that God brought her there.

Tapia credits her friends' and family's interactions with the criminal justice system as influencing her desire to work in the prison system. When she was young her dad was arrested for drugs and sent to prison. "I developed this desire to just want to help people who were incarcerated and their families because I knew what that felt like. Not knowing what's happening with your loved one who is behind this dreaded wall, and you don't understand what is occurring. You're lost."

Even with a divided family and a difficult upbringing, Tapia remembers taking picnic baskets to visit her father in Prison for Sunday family dinner. Raised Catholic, Tapia's family attended mass every Sunday. "I went to my catechism classes, and we just had a wonderful church family. But I also recognized I had different portrayals of spirituality in my home than what I think many young African-America, in particular children, experience."

Walking into her childhood home, there was a large picture of Jesus, portrayed as a black man with long, flowing, gray hair. "For me, it showed [...] that God was in me despite all of these things going on around me. I knew that I was His child."

Tapia still maintains a rich faith life, though she no longer attends church services very often. "Today, every day, I read my Bible in the morning, and I say prayers for me, my family and for our community. That's my ritual every morning, and that helps ground me. It helps me start my day on a positive note, which you can imagine is pretty difficult. So, if only for 15 minutes in my day, it's me and God."

Though she doesn't credit faith in particular as driving her to the field of correctional institutions, Tapia sees so many hurting people in her community that are in need of help and maintains an unyielding commitment to wanting to make life better for them. "I think it's multifaceted, it's spiritual, it's hearing my dad in my ear saying we come from kings and queens, and that's how we should project ourselves." Tapia sees God all around her life, especially in her inmates and their rehabilitation.

"I have pictures on my phone, and one of them is of a man. He is first coming into custody, and he's behind a wired fence . . . a holding area. Older, white man. His face is down, his cane is hanging up on the wire, and he just looks like he has no hope, no sense of a desire to want to go on." Another photo, though, shows inmates in their Department of Corrections uniforms playing drums, smiling. "To me, that's God — to take someone, [...] transitioning them to that smile."

There are hundreds of religious volunteers that come in to the jail and offer an array of spiritual services to detainees, including Muslims, Jews and Christians. Some inmates participate in religious services at the jail simply to have a change of pace, but often Tapia sees that even they get something out of it. She believes that Faith can be transformative for inmates if they're ready to make a change.

Around 30% of the inmates of Cook County attend a religious service at some point each week, and many Bibles and Korans can be found in the windowsills of many cells.

One of Tapia's favorite Bible passages is Joshua, chapter 6. "[Joshua and his army were] marching around Jericho [...] and God spoke to him and kept telling him, 'Keep going,' and finally the city just fell to him. And so that's inspiring to me because so many days you feel like you're not making headway . . . a difference," but eventually you do.

Though nobody ever wants to go to prison, Tapia sees it as a place where troubled people can get their lives back on track. "We, in the free society, we don't often times get an opportunity to quiet our world and to really think about what steps we need to take to have the best life." In jail, quiet time is easy to come by.

As a Christian, Tapia knows that redemption is a central element of her faith. “I try not to let the job infiltrate me, but I try to put myself into the job, but there are those moments and those people that just hit you in your core, and I pray for those people.” She doesn’t, however, believe that its for her to say whether everyone in prison deserves forgiveness. “There are victims . . . If that were my loved one . . . it would be difficult for me to forgive, in all honesty. But that’s not my role.”

For her part, Tapia believes that, “their walk is their walk, and I believe that we all have [...] consequences of the decisions that we make.”

As Episcopalians, our baptismal covenant calls us to ‘strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.’ As Episcopalians, how should we feel about prison, prisoners, and those who have wronged us?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 39:20-23

And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper. (For context, read 39:11-23)

After being sold into slavery, then imprisoned though he had done nothing wrong, Joseph still maintained his faith. Not only this, but he showed kindness to the prisoners that were with him by interpreting their dreams.

Questions: Have you ever been unfairly grouped with people who do not share your values? How did this change your perspectives? If you were wrongly incarcerated, would you find it easier or harder to cling to your faith?

Matthew 25:35-40

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave

you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (For context, read 25:31-46)

When speaking about the judgment of the nations, Jesus is direct in saying that those who do good for the lowly, even those in prison, will have favor on the last day.

Questions: How are we, as the Episcopal Church, responsible for caring for those in prison? As individuals? As a nation?

Hebrews 13:3

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. (For context, read 13:1-6)

In chapter 13 of Hebrews, Paul calls on the people to “Let mutual love continue,” before listing ways in which they could accomplish this, one of them being the passage above.

Question: How can empathy help us to better serve those who are fundamentally different from ourselves?

Prayer for Prisons and Correctional Institutes (BCP p.827)

Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal:
Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment.
Remember all prisoners, and bring the guilty to repentance and amendment of life according to your will, and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release; forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice.
Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate; and save them from becoming brutal or callous. And since what we do for those in prison, O Lord, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask for your mercy's sake. Amen.