

It didn't happen that way.

By Belden Lane

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It didn't happen that way. There were supposed to be 46 inmates in a concrete gym deep in the heart of a maximum-security Texas prison. They were gonna be tough as nails—there on charges of drug running, capital murder, burglary, aggravated sexual assault. They were gonna see right through these white dudes who came to talk to them about the Desert Fathers and the way of council. They would scoff and we'd shrink deeper and deeper into ourselves in fear and embarrassment. We'd wonder what ever had made us think of doing such a thing.

But it didn't happen that way. The setting was the same—they *did* see right through us—but they didn't scoff and we weren't paralyzed by fear. God did something that blew every one of us away. We were overwhelmed by the power of forgiveness, a God of unconditional love, and an image of men living authentic lives in the midst of a desert. Men like Abba Moses, a huge black man who had been a robber and gang leader (even doing time) before his conversion. "Stay in your cell and your cell will teach you everything," he had taught his fourth-century brothers. You hear that in a different way when you've been living through a Texas summer in a 6' x 10' concrete cell in G4 without windows or A/C.

We were men from Illuman.org, coming to offer a two-day retreat at Michael Unit, a state prison housing 3800 men 100 miles south of Dallas. Dennis McCain had done the ground work, having led a group of inmates practicing contemplative prayer there over the last four years.

The experience was like a 48-hour twelve-step meeting on steroids. We sat in silence together, shared our stories (often heart-breaking), heard tales of lives that had been changed, and went through a ritual of forgiveness that had grown men in tears. We ate, laughed, and saw ourselves in each other....over and over again. My heart sang when one of the men said near the end, "You aren't what we expected. You're just like *us*." We, of course, were thinking the very same thing about them. They *were* just like us. Men hungry for meaning, for love, for something they could trust. We sat at their feet and marveled, witnessing the power of the lives some of them were living in a desert wilderness.

God was in this thing!! Great God Almighty was there, laughing and crying right along with us! We were like Paul and Silas watching prison doors thrown open and chains unloosed. Thank you all so very much....

those of you who were holding us in prayer and support. Men on three continents had our backs! We saw the power of this work as never before. It was a school of miracles! *Una escuela de los Milagros*. We saw it with our own eyes. Thanks be to God.

