

Blue Sheet on Wheels — Fall Travel Report #3

This report begins in Pocatello Idaho. It's a college town about as far east as you can go without leaving the state. It is home of the **Don Aslet Museum of Clean.** See it next time you pass through. It is also home of the **Pocatello Women's Correction Center.** We happen to have a friend in residence there. She's a long way from family and friends. We've made it a point to make a visit almost every year that we can.

Our check-in time is 8:30 a.m. The waiting room soon filled with parents, husbands, children and friends of residents. We furnish our ID and receive a locker key so we can empty our pockets. We are scanned one by one then escorted into a locked room. Shortly we are escorted through another door leading to the visiting room. We select a small table with three chairs and wait. Soon our friend's smiling face is peering through the window between us and the room where inmates gather before allowed to join us.

We hug and begin catching up, reestablishing our history of relationship that goes back at least 40 years. **There's biblical precedent for visiting prisoners.** Matthew's vivid judgment day parable has the famous line, ***"When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?"*** (Mt 25:39)

You may also remember the saying, ***"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."*** Like most isolated verses we may remember, we forget the verse that precedes it (***"Let brotherly love continue."***) and the verse that follows: ***"Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them."*** (Romans 13:1,2,3)

As a practicing pastor I have been a visitor to jails, prisons and juvenile detention centers many times. Also to mental hospitals. It's part of the job. If you have a pastoral connection, you go. Some make a regular ministry of such visitations. I could have done more. It was Sunday when we visited this time. A half dozen mostly men in dark suits and ties carrying big Bibles were among the visitors. They went to some separate space to provide their varieties of ministries to different residents.

The United States of America has the highest incarceration rate in the world. A disproportionate number are people of color, poor, young, or mentally ill. The prison industry is strongly unionized and increasingly privatized with lobbyists helping create laws that guarantee to keep facilities full. The Tacoma News Tribune had a series of articles in September about a private detention center in Tacoma housing about 3,000 possibly undocumented workers. It's run like a prison and guarantees the private operating company about 3.5 million dollars a year. There's a need for places to keep some people off the streets. But too many are locked up without any kind of treatment or help toward rehabilitation for returning to the community.

It's not the easiest setting for relaxed conversation. An hour seems long enough, though it flies by. We stay almost an hour and a half. I renew her "ordination" as a "moment minister" in that place to live a presence of faith, hope and love. She smiles and accepts my blessing. It's hard to leave her there as we are released through the doors, reclaiming our driving licenses and keys as we go on our way.

We walk back to our car in silence. I look back at the high fences topped with razor wire. Visiting a prisoner in Pocatello reminds me to remember not to forget.

WE TURN WEST FROM POCATELLO TOWARD HOME. Skies are turning cloudy; speed limits of 75 are exceeded by many. We try to stay out of the way. Jean has a snack for us as we drive. Keeping nutrition and hydration is important. I've mentioned our "Nap-along" means of staying alert. I should call them mini-naps because they rarely last more than 5 or 6 minutes.

I think of Rest Areas as an entitlement. Some states have tried closing Rest Areas to save money. After thousands of miles on the road this year I think of Rest Areas as life-savers, literally. Politicians can talk about reducing health care and social security and food stamps without a revolution. But I'll bet you won't find any politician who would suggest closing Rest Areas!

It was mid-afternoon when we passed Boise. We thought of Dennis and Patty Finegan fresh back to the lower states after a career in Alaska. Others on our Blue Sheet list also live in that area. A bit of guilt there for passing by.

CROSSING THE TIME ZONE gave back the hour we lost several days ago. We were in Oregon again. Weather threatened. What could we expect after weeks, even months of life without rain? We stopped at Baker City. It would be our final motel on this journey. It had been quite a Sunday.

PACKING THE CAR FOR THE FINAL TIME tells on you. If you can fit everything in after more than a week on the road you're organized. We were taking things home from the cabin, clothes appropriate for a memorial service, clothes for the lectures in Yakima, and clothes for various weather situations while driving. It all fit!

It was spitting snow as we left Baker City changing any thought of coming home via Highway 20. We didn't have our snow tires installed yet.

I like the sweeping curves up and down the mountains on I-84 down into Pendleton, then into the Columbia River Gorge. Traffic kept building and rain kept falling and visibility was no fun. A couple of brief "Nap-alongs" got us to a late lunch at the **McMenamins Poor Farm** in Troutdale. We stayed there once about 10 years ago when I did a wedding. It's sobering to think of a time when being poor was a crime. It is a bookend for a trip that started with lectures on the "Prosperity Gospel." We shared a sandwich and leisurely lunch before our final drive from Portland to Corvallis. We took our final afternoon "nap-along" at the Wilsonville Rest Area.

HOME AGAIN after 5 months away since late May, mostly at our place on Puget Sound. We've never been gone that long. Time to re-establish the World Headquarters of Moment Ministries back in Corvallis Oregon.

This fall trip took the long way to Corvallis from Puget Sound. We touched some bases in Bellevue, Yakima, Spokane and Pocatello. We enjoyed fall colors and mostly sunshine in Washington, Idaho, Montana and Oregon. Freeways were basically in good shape and driving easy except for some miserable rain for a bit coming over Snoqualmie Pass and down the Columbia Gorge. Our little car added miles graciously and gave almost 30 mpg while swinging low from carrying too much stuff. We saw no accidents the whole trip and for the first time in our memory no wild animals.

These reports leave out more than they include. We were glad to report what we did.

Art Morgan, October 22, 2012