Jerry McAuley

McAuley Water Street Mission was named for Jerry McAuley, born in Ireland in 1839. His father, a counterfeiter, fled home to escape the law, and Jerry never knew him. His mother evidently languished in prison, and the boy was raised by his grandmother. When she couldn’t control him, he was sent to New York where he lived under the docks, drinking, fighting, and stealing from boats. In 1857 he was caught and sent to Sing Sing.

Sing Sing inmates were forced to live in unbroken silence in cell blocks five tiers high. Each cell was a little coffin—three feet wide, six feet high, seven feet long. It was wet in the summer; icy in winter; always grim. There was no plumbing, just buckets. Cells, never disinfected, filled with vermin, lice, and fleas. Infractions were punished by flogging, the “iron collar,” or the “shower bath” in which prisoners were repeatedly drowned and revived.

One Sunday McAuley was herded into the chapel. He was moody and miserable until he glanced on the platform and recognized a well-known prizefighter, Orville Gardner. The boxer told of finding Jesus, and McAuley listened attentively. He soon began reading the Bible, page after page, day after day. He read it through twice; then in great agony he fell to his knees—but jumped up immediately in embarrassment. He did this several times.

Finally one night, resolving to kneel until he found forgiveness, he prayed and prayed. All at once it seemed something supernatural was in my room. I was afraid to open my eyes; the tears rolled off my face in great drops, and these words came to me, “My son, thy sins, which are many, are forgiven.”

He was released in 1864, having been incarcerated seven of his 26 years. He devoted himself to rescuing other incorrigibles. Twenty years later on September 18, 1884, the huge Broadway Tabernacle was packed for his funeral, with multitudes flooding surrounding streets. His Water Street Mission, a pioneer among America’s rescue missions, has been a haven of hope for over one hundred years.

“I tell you that all her sins are forgiven, and that is why she has shown great love. But anyone who has been forgiven for only a little will show only a little love.” Then Jesus said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” Luke 7:47,48