

FROM PRISON

Texts on Sunday, April 10, 2011

Lent 4

Lamentations 3: 1-9; 16-24; Mark 5: 1-20

Every week or two for many years, I have spent a couple of hours in conversation and reflection with men in the prisons at Attica or Sing Sing. It has been my privilege to learn with men who are keen to think and feel their way through the possibility of changing their lives. In this, the men I know show more inner freedom than the average person on the outside; they are more ready to step away from the insistent voices of need and fear which constantly chatter in all our minds. They know what not all know, that in and out of prison, we are all doing time; that we can all come from prison.

The men I see filing through the prison halls are black, black, Latino, black, white, black, Latino, black, black. I want you to see them and feel their condition. Some of you no doubt are their mothers and grandmothers, their sisters or brothers, their daughters or sons. I say this not because you have told me, but because 1 in 14 black men is in prison (2006) compared with 1 in 106 white men. One third of American black men are under the control of courts or prisons or parole boards. During the presidential campaign, Mr. Obama, like Bill Cosby elsewhere, chided black men for going missing from their family duties. But he stayed silent on why, saying nothing against this nation's systematic seizure of black men into prison. His silence was like the churches', where mostly people feel unsafe or ashamed to talk of family members in jail.

Most U.S. citizens are white-washed in the belief that justice is color blind; that prisoners have just plucked the bitter fruit of their bad behavior. No! An injustice far more insidious is hidden inside the iron bars. America is drowning its poorest black and brown citizens in poverty, violence, and sorrow. We could flood the whole hour with facts and figures that hurt to hear. Here are a few:

- Of those who use crack, 15% are black, but 85% of those in prison for crack are black. Whites make up 65% of crack users, but only 5% of those in prison for crack are white. So we have a lenient drug policy—marked: *Whites Only*.
- In Illinois, between 1985 and 2005, the numbers of black men sent each year to prison jumped 2000%.
- In Chicago, 80% of adult black males of working age have felony records.
- Graduating from all Illinois colleges in 1999 were 992 black men. Same year: 7,000 men were released from Illinois prisons into the hell of legal discrimination in housing and jobs—their debt to society never to be paid.
- A felon, on release, will never vote again in many states. In fact, “more African-Americans are legally disenfranchised today than in 1872, the year

the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified.” (Alexander, p. 178)

In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander studies each cord that binds our people to this evil. In the space of a sermon, we cannot trace all her evidence; we have a gospel message to proclaim. Therefore, if your mind boggles at what we say this morning, open for now your heart and let the feeling in. Then go read Alexander’s essential book. Then, let us talk. Let us break the silence of racism, guilt, and shame.

The mass incarceration of blacks in America is a system of racialized control—a “racial caste system,” in Alexander’s words—caused not by unusual amounts of crime among blacks, but by policies and practices in all branches of government, driven by ambition, fear, and greed. When Ronald Reagan declared a war on drugs in 1982, drug use was at low tide in all communities. Only 2% of Americans then thought drug use was America’s number one problem. Reagan’s declaration of “war” was then met with surprise. Yet at the end of his presidency, not 2% but *two-thirds* of Americans thought drugs were America’s number one problem.

“From the outset,” writes Alexander, “the war on drugs had little to do with public concern about drugs and much to do with public concern about race.” In the aftermath of 1960s civil rights advancements, the resentment that poor whites felt against blacks, no longer officially inferior to themselves, found expression in racialized electoral politics. This was the so-called “southern strategy.” The Nixon and Wallace presidential campaigns welded the face of the black man to crime and coupled that feared image with the promise to crack down on crime. This promise won men power. For forty years thereafter, every president gained his seat in part by supporting and developing policies that sweep black and brown men into prison by the hundreds of thousands.

Did you know that in the war on drugs, the federal government has directly paid a bounty to police precincts for every man sent to prison for drugs? What temptation! Did you know that federal law now permits cities and towns to keep the property forfeited by every person they arrest for drugs? Did you know that through the last twenty years, the Supreme Court has removed all Fourth Amendment protections against random drug searches, and has disqualified anyone from challenging any policies as racist, unless an executive actually states in court that it was racism that motivated his abuses?

In function and in character, mass incarceration of blacks in America is a direct descendant of slavery. Alexander summarizes it this way: “Hundreds of years ago, our nation put those considered less than human in shackles; less than 100 years ago we relegated them to the other side of town; today we put them in cages.” (P. 238) Since 1985, the American prison population has grown from 0.35 million to 2.3 million. This racial caste system has devoured and destroyed millions of lives, impoverished public coffers, and deranged our

national purpose. What but a death wish could so drive a nation?

Jesus tells it like it is. That man with demons bruising himself with stones out among the tombs—if ever a motherless child was, he is the one. The story says that the townspeople have restrained the man with shackles and chains, but that he has broken them in pieces: “No one had the strength to subdue him,” we read. But unless he is a cartoon giant, or the author has gone silly with exaggeration, something else is going on here, for surely shackles of *some* size could settle him. More likely, the town is not serious about restraining him. Deep down, they don’t want to stop him or help him or heal him. They want him “out there” hurting himself. They need him out there.

We have seen this before. It is the basic tragedy of societies, that in order to keep peace “in here,” the people project their evil out there—on the “evil empire,” on the “axis of evil,” on the black criminal. They hold themselves innocent and often actually set out to destroy the demonized “other” through rituals of exile, torment, execution, and war. Between the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001—between the end of the evil Communist and the dawn of the evil Terrorist—America threw far more than one million black men in prison. This is a nation in spiritual disease.

In our story, when Jesus restores that man’s mind by sending the demons into swine, one might think the town would rejoice to have their citizen healed. Instead, they are afraid. They beg Jesus to leave town. With no evil man at the outskirts, the town is reeling out of balance. They will have to own their own evil—or force their politicians to pass laws to sweep legions of citizens out of sight where they can be safely despised. But Jesus has healed the man and the man wants to follow Jesus now. For once, Jesus refuses. “Go home to your friends,” he says. Compassion knows that healing and saving which is solely personal cannot fulfill God’s will on earth. Healing must also be social and communal. The demonized man must come home, free and welcome. The community must learn to live with and love with what psychology calls its “dark side.” To be free, the oppressors must become aware of their own violence and greed, their own fear and self-hatred.

Fifty years ago, James Baldwin spoke of this. “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.” (*The Fire Next Time*, p. 22)

Now Jesus says, “Go home.” Yet for the man from prison, going home is an unrelenting terror. I have walked this walk with parolees. I have seen how superhumanly alert they must be to the slightest threat that can send them again behind bars. For most, the test is too exhausting. In 2000, as many people were returned to prison for parole violations as had been put in prison

in 1980 for all reasons combined! America is lost in wrong-doing on a sea of racial indifference to the suffering of millions of men and women of whom the majority by far are black and brown men, who broke drug laws whose harshness is unmatched anywhere in the developed world. Read this book. You will weep like a mother whose son has been taken hostage by violent and unruly men.

What gospel message can come from this confession? To the man who had demons, Jesus says, "Go home to your friends." Friends, we must bring the brothers and sisters home from prison! But where do you meet men from prison? Not in churches, mostly. The vast public silence that represses public thought and prevents healing is in full force in most churches. Why, in this nation so eager to call on Jesus' name, is the womb of compassion closed to the formerly incarcerated? Let us here kindle a conversation about liberation that will become the baptizing fire of truth to cauterize the wound of racial caste which America has left open for four hundred years. Alexander writes, "To begin an honest conversation about race in America . . . the topic should be how *us* can come to include *all of us*." (P. 244)

In theory, the Christian church, more than any other entity of our society, can take that shape of open heart and open ear, a real body that can welcome home a person from prison. Let us find out how so to change ourselves that we become a living invitation to those who have been in prison: *Come home, brother, sister*. But let us not be too simple in breasting the problem. May Martin Luther King's words spoken from this very chancel inspire our wills:

On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring..

Let us begin. Let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the [children] of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response . . . Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours. (From "Beyond Vietnam," delivered April 4, 1967 at The Riverside Church)

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