

Prisons and Preaching

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Several years ago on my weekly trip to death row, I took along a friend who is a well-known, extensively published, highly respected theologian. I wanted him to hear first hand some of the stories and struggles of my parishoners on the row.

We made our tedious way past guard towers, down long corridors, through clanging gates, past ID checks, through metal detectors, past glass cages where we exchanged keys and identification for metal slugs, through more gates and into a narrow concrete and steel visiting room.

After a good long wait, we finally greeted Billy Mitchell, whom I had known by that time for a number of years. Billy was a strong, proud black man who knew more than most people about human dignity and was known to his friends for a keen political insight and brutal honesty.

We sat down together. Billy fixed my friend in his gaze, and with no further ado, he demanded: "So . . . what's the good news?"

After all the bustle and hassle of getting in, it was suddenly very quiet. The question hung in the air like a curious object while a slow surprised expression took over my friend's face. His mouth hung slightly open until he began to wrestle aloud to find an appropriate response.

The answer, of course, is not what I remember. The question will never leave me.

Billy Mitchell is dead now. He went out with 2,300 volts of state electricity: 2,300 volts once, twice, three times through his young healthy body until he was sufficiently dead to satisfy the judicial decree: the will of "the People."

But Billy's question still begs an answer: not just from those of us who have specialized ministries among people in prison, but from all of us who are the church. What have we to say to the condemned of the world about good news? And what does our answer have to do with our congregations?

If we are part of middle and upper class congregations, especially white congregations, it is easy enough to think that we are not directly touched by the lives and struggles of people in prison. But the fact is that the criminal control system is reaching such tremendous proportions that the very shape of our society is changing.

According to the United States Department of Justice, an additional 750 prisoners are being added to our prison population *each week*. On any given day, 850,000 men, women, and children are locked up: a population that would comprise a city larger than San Francisco, Cleveland, or Denver. If we count the additional 2.5 million adults and children on probation or parole, the criminal control system supervises 3.2 million people in the United States every day.

Many more people every year are arrested and jailed but not convicted of

misdemeanor crimes. When we count all of them, nearly nine million people are put in jail or prison each year.

Most of these people are, of course, poor. Nearly half of all prison admissions are nonwhite persons. The alarming reality for one born black and male is that he will have a fifty percent chance of being arrested at least once before the age of twenty-nine. But at almost every federal, state, and local level, we are building prisons at a feverish pace with no regard for the serious issue of racial and class segregation that we are creating. New prisons represent in many (especially rural) communities “a good clean industry,” as one of our Georgia prison officials says. “It’s good for the economy,” he bubbles, “We have a waiting list of about fifteen counties that want them.” Meanwhile, enthusiastic entrepreneurs are jumping on the bandwagon to offer privatization of prisons—for profit.

We are frantically building up a system which demands human bondage to keep the wheels turning. Jeffrey Reiman of American University argues in *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison* that our economic system produces certain conditions which make crime flourish as the necessary underside of its prosperity. But rather than owning any shared responsibility for the predictable responses to these conditions, we turn on the “offenders” and say “You are totally evil. We will lock you in jail like beasts; or, more recently, we will electrocute you, or stick needles in you, or find some other way of getting rid of you.”

It would be easiest to remain with the overwhelming silence of the church and raise no question as the “lock-’em-up-and-throw-away-the-key” rhetoric continues from every level of leadership. But Scripture is demanding and full of promises to the imprisoned. Our God promises liberty to the captives, listens to the groans of prisoners, and frees those who are condemned to die.

To those of us who are not in prison (as Billy Mitchell used to say “out here in minimum security”), the demands are specific: “Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3). Matthew demands that we visit the Christ in prison just as surely as we must feed the hungry.

Neither of these biblical mandates invite us to a general interest in or pursuit of “criminal justice issues,” as important as that may be. Rather, they invite and command us to personal relationships with prisoners. To remember prisoners as though we were in prison with them demands knowing a great deal about someone. And of course in the Christian tradition, any command to remember is ultimately a demand for reconciliation. To re-member a prisoner would mean to share her/his suffering while we work for their restoration to freedom and life in community.

When Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel lists visiting the prisoner among the works of mercy that we must practice, the choice of words is interesting. This is the only place in Scripture that the Greek word *episkeptomai*, which we translate “visit,” is used to describe a human activity. Every other use of *episkeptomai* or the Hebrew equivalent *pqd*, describes God’s action, as in God’s “visiting” the people. The implication of God’s visitation is always one of salvation and liberation. Matthew, then, is hardly suggesting a casual social

encounter. In the early centuries of the church, this passage was understood literally as a commandment to get people out of prison. Tertullian writes of collecting money to procure the freedom of prisoners.

This biblical insistence on liberty to the captives embarrasses us and makes us uncomfortable. It sounds impractical and politically naive, and if exegesis could make it go away, we would surely be rid of it. But there it is, again and again.

Even more problematic is the way God had of finding the most guilty and socially unattractive folks to carry the tradition. Jacob was a thief on the run. Moses was a murderer in exile. Rahab was a whore. David was an adulterer and a murderer. Zacchaeus was a petty government agent guilty of all manner of fraud, petty theft, and selling out his own people. Mary Magdalene was another demon-possessed hooker. Paul was a schemer who dabbled in political intrigue, fraud, self-promotion, and murder.

If this crowd had lived in the United States of the 1980's, they would surely have been taken care of by our criminal control system before they could have taken on God's redemptive call.

Jesus, the innocent one, became a prisoner, was judged guilty as charged, condemned to death, spent a night on death row, and was executed by the state between two other criminals. This was God's ultimate act of identification with the guilty, the condemned, the outsider.

We do well, I think, to pay close attention to the stories of the people God uses to remember who we are called to be. Perhaps it could help us to be less embarrassed to embrace the guilty ones who represent among us the imprisoned Christ.

The most compelling reason I can think of to preach boldly and act courageously in response to our criminal control system is that we are institutionalizing hopelessness. We are rounding up larger and larger numbers of men, women, and children, the great majority of whom are never charged with acts of violence, and condemning them to long periods of time cut off from their families and communities and warehoused in institutions that breed hopelessness and despair. What we are saying institutionally is "We give up on you." The death penalty is of course the ultimate expression of such hopelessness. It says "We have so little imagination, so little vision, so little hope for the possibility of your redemption, that we will simply rid ourselves of you."

It becomes a serious matter, not only of what will become of those millions of people affected each year by this system, but what will happen to all of us who participate with our voices or with our silence in such a system.

Joe Freeman Britt became well known in recent years as a district attorney in Eastern North Carolina. His success in obtaining death penalties has made him a popular figure in some law enforcement circles. In explaining his method he once said: "There is within every person a little flicker that says we should preserve human life. It is the job of the prosecutor to extinguish the flame."

This is not the raving of a lunatic fringe. This is from a man who has been hailed around the country as a courageous law enforcer and who now sits as a Superior Court Judge.

While Britt's articulation of the function of law enforcement is perhaps extreme, he captures the spirit that is driving the mad growth of the system. If we choose not to confront it, we must be ready for the sad implications of the shape of the broken and alienated society we are building.

Archbishop Oscar Romero described his pastoral task as "feeding the hope of the poor." Here is where we need to take hold and hear the biblical promise for our common life. What we soon find is that when we get about the task of nurturing the hope of those who seem most hopeless, we find hope growing in ourselves. In the same way, when we participate in killing the hope of others, we ourselves become hopeless.

I have found great hope over the years from the very people who have seemed to have so little to hope for. Like my friend Alpha Stephens.

Alpha grew up poor and black in Macon, Georgia. He was regularly and severely beaten by an alcoholic father until his mother, fearing for his life, dressed him, packed him a lunch, and put him out. Alpha became a six-year-old homeless wanderer.

It would not surprise you to learn that Alpha became a violent man. He learned to pass along what life had dished out. And finally he became a murderer. He took the life of one Mr. Henry Asbill—a human being, a child of God.

And for that crime, he went to death row and lived for ten years. And finally, for that crime, he was killed, in our name.

But that is not all!

God was not finished with Alpha Stephens when Alpha committed murder. Just as God did not give up on Moses, David, or Paul when they committed murder. Just as God did not give up on Jacob the thief or Rahab the hooker. God has such an odd sense of humor and loves to embrace the worst offenders to show the beauty and power of redemptive love.

In the case of Alpha O. Daniel Stephens, God used another prisoner, Charlie, to move Alpha toward hope and redemption. Alpha described it like this:

"Yeah, I changed. The thing that made me change the most was what Charlie did.

When I came to Jackson (prison) I was violent. Goodgawda'mighty, I was violent! Most everybody jus' lef' me alone. "Cept Charlie.

I stayed in my cell all the time. He started comin' sittin' in front of my cell. Jus' sittin'. Lookin'. At me.

Finally I say, 'What you starin' at?'

'You,' he say. 'Jus' tryin' to figure how can anybody be so mean. You crazy or jus' ain't got no sense?'

I didn't say nothin'. He didn't go 'way. He didn't *never* go 'way. Seem like he jus' work so hard to *make* me be his friend. So finally I jus' give up. Me an' him was always friends after that. That changed me. Man, I jus' couldn't *be* mean aroun' ol' Charlie.

Everybody in prison call be Daniels. But Charlie, he call me 'Brother Alpha.'"

Brother Alpha is dead now. But I have to remember the beauty of hope reborn and life restored where there seemed only to be death and bitterness.

I'm grateful for the beauty of Georgia State Prisoner #D-9164 being called Brother Alpha. I am simply a more hopeful and joyful person because of the beauty of a word of life spoken to one discouraged to death, life-giving water on the parched earth of a human soul.

When we face up to the facts of the criminal control system, they threaten to overwhelm us. We must struggle with the real and serious questions about the restraint of the few whose violence is a real threat to others. We must struggle with the many whose "crimes" are more related to a lifestyle of poverty and degradation than criminal behavior. And most of all, we must return to that good news that calls us to the kind of solidarity that builds a community of hope and reconciliation that can restore us all.