**Matthew 25: I Was A Prisoner**

**Isaiah 61:1-3; Matthew 26:47-56**

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**The Olivet Discourse**

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats is my favorite parable. Every couple of years I’m able to see or feel something different when I read it. It’s also significant because it’s the last parable that Jesus delivers in the Gospel of Matthew. It’s a heavy apocalyptic parable, sometimes referred to as the “Judgment of the Nations.” Jesus is sitting with his disciples teaching on the Mount of Olives and has shared with them some of the signs of the end of the age: wars and rumors of war, nation rising against nation, desolating sacrilege, and so on… Jesus stresses the need for watchfulness and wisdom, to be wary and not be led astray by false prophets, and to use one’s time, gifts, and abilities well. Soon after he delivers this parable Jesus himself has become a prisoner.

**Jesus the Prisoner**

How did he get to this point? Well, Jesus was a Jewish man. His people in the past had kingdoms and kings, had endured displacements and exile, captivity and slavery, wars and invasions. Now, in Jesus’ time, Judea was ruled by the powerful Roman Empire. Jesus was the son of Joseph, a *tekton* or carpenter of the lower class. He was therefore a poor, ethnic minority within the powerful Roman Empire. And so when Jesus upset the powerful and was arrested, the odds were stacked heavily against him. Jesus’ trial consisted of coming before the high priest, scribes and elders, and then being questioned by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. Pilate, however, decided to give the gathered crowd an opportunity to release him, which they chose not to do. I would therefore say that what ultimately imprisoned and killed Jesus the man was the intersection of power, politics, and public opinion.

**I was in prison and you visited me**

As part of this sermon series we’ve talked about practical ways of responding to Matthew 25 by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger, as we would Christ. And this week we’re addressing visiting those who are imprisoned. So practically, how would we do that? Well I did some research and unless we have a relative or a client in prison it’s almost impossible for most of us here. A couple of months ago, I was able to visit a prison. The purpose of my visit was to learn about prison chaplaincy. I was grateful for the opportunity as I was very curious about it all. I was first of all, struck by the sheer size of the complex, and the large numbers of prisoners I saw.

**The Prison Industrial Complex and The New Jim Crow**

This really shouldn’t have been surprising, as I already knew that the US has the world's highest rate of incarceration. I had also anticipated the racial disparity, as I knew that African Americans make up 40% of the prison population, but only 13% of the US population. When I started observing the prisoners much closer though, my chest began to hurt.  In them I felt like I saw all the black men I knew, relatives, friends, and my son. I wanted to know who they were and what they were doing in here, but unfortunately this I also already knew. I knew that their story was so much bigger than any of their crimes. While at seminary, my Detroit classmates who were involved in prison and prisoner reentry ministries, and one who was a parole officer, had all shared their experiences and history with me. Michele Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* as well as the movie *13th* shares the bigger story well and I’ll try to summarize:

Their story starts with the kidnap of their ancestors from Africa. The first slaves arrived in 1619 and by the time slavery ended in 1865, 600, 000 African American slaves had worked for free building the infrastructure of this nation, generating wealth, and establishing our capitalist economy.  With the end of slavery and the significant loss of labor in the south, the economy was under threat, and so chain gangs of prisoners were enlisted to fill this gap. This of course created a demand for more prisoners. From this emerged a campaign to create an image of black people as deviant and criminal to justify the system; and the prisons began to fill. With no post-slavery support, discrimination, and segregation, African Americans were relegated to impoverished areas and urban ghettos with poor infrastructure and services. Discrimination in education made it incredibly difficult for most African Americans to have access to the right opportunities in order to rise up out of poverty.

When drugs started to flow into urban areas, President Nixon in 1971 initiated the war on drugs. This specifically targeted poor black communities. The crack cocaine epidemic of the 80’s and 90’s resulted in huge sentencing disparities for possession of crack cocaine (used mostly by inner city blacks) compared to possession of powder cocaine (mostly used by suburban whites). The 1994 Federal Crime Bill (that Bill Clinton now admits was a mistake) resulted in the massive expansion and funding of the prison system, as well as the militarization of the police. The introduction of legislation such as the three strikes laws, the elimination of parole, and mandatory sentences resulted in power being taken away from judges, and a rapid surge in the rate of incarceration.

Prison labor has been described as being as profitable as third world labor as inmates in prison work programs are paid between 95 cents to $4.73 per day. Federal law also allows prisons to deduct up to 80% of their wages for taxes, government programs to assist crime victims, and the costs of incarceration. If this sounds a lot like modern day slavery that’s because it is. Why is this not illegal? The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution effectively excludes prisoners from the ban on slavery. Not only do prisons benefit from cheap prison labor, it cost Michigan (taxpayers, that’s us) an average of $36,106 to incarcerate a single person in Michigan in 2017. Is that really how we want to spend our tax money? Angela Davis describes how “The prison industrial system materially and morally impoverishes its inhabitants and devours the social wealth that could be used to subsidize housing for the homeless, to ameliorate public education for poor and racially marginalized communities, to open free drug rehabilitation programs, to create a national health care system, and to expand programs to combat HIV, to eradicate domestic abuse -- and, in the process, to create well-paying jobs for the unemployed.”

Crime rates have actually been steadily decreasing and today are half the rate of the early 90’s. Incarceration rates however do not match this trend. A friend recently brought my attention to the [Department of Justice report on Ferguson, Missouri](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf), released following the police shooting of Michael Brown. The report found that officers in Ferguson were focused on a practice known as “policing for profit.” According to the report, “The harms of Ferguson’s police and court practices are borne disproportionately by African Americans, and there is evidence that this is due in part to intentional discrimination on the basis of race.” Another friend brought my attention to preliminary data from the Vera Institute which reported that the single biggest segment of Wayne county’s jail population is there for traffic violations. The very first time I was stopped by the police and issued a ticket after over 10 years of driving in this country was when I was visiting a poorer neighborhood of Detroit. I was able to pay the hefty fine, but many people just can’t. And if you don’t show up to court or pay the ticket, a warrant for your arrest will follow. If you can’t afford to pay a ticket you probably can’t afford bail either. And so then you’re stuck in jail, unable to earn money.

The school to prison pipeline also results in more young black men being disproportionately imprisoned. Zero tolerance disciplinary policies and the presence of cops in schools tend to affect young black students from impoverished backgrounds more than anyone else. These are often kids with learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and who really need additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, labeled and demonized, and then pushed out of the educational environment and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Speaking of kids, I’m pretty sure most of you here have been following the news and have seen the images of migrant children being taken away from their parents and detained in detention camps. This is another way this beast of a system is being fed. According to the Global Detention Project, the United States possesses the largest immigration detention system in the world; and the majority stakeholders in this are the private prison companies. Those who are unfairly imprisoned, the refugee, the migrant child, like Jesus at his arrest, are all victims of misuse of power, of politics and public opinion. What can we do?

**Proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free**

Jesus knew the struggles of those who are oppressed being himself a poor ethnic minority under the rule of a powerful empire. Jesus was also a radical who was not afraid to turn the rules of the powerful empire upside down, and he calls on us to do the same. Although he ended his ministry as a prisoner, he started his public ministry by reading the passage from Isaiah 61 that we heard in the Scripture reading this morning and announced that this scripture had been fulfilled.

***In it Jesus talked about bringing good news to the poor.*** Commitment to social justice is a core value of this church, and there’s so much our church is currently doing including: Habitat for Humanity, Love thy Neighbor, House by the Side of the Road, Alpha House, Immigration Hospitality Team, Youth service projects and so much more. Criminal behavior is the result of poverty. Continuing to do what we can to break cycles of poverty is foundational to preventing people from turning to crime in the future.

***Jesus also proclaimed release to the captives***. We have to ask the question: what are we really trying to do with our prison system? Punish people so badly that they will change? Recidivism rates indicate that this just doesn’t work. And the cost is that lives are destroyed possibly for generations. It also supports a new type of apartheid or segregation, what Michele Alexander calls the New Jim Crow, as well as a newer manifestation of slavery. If we really want to repair the harm done, rehabilitate and heal the offender AND also bring justice and healing for the victim, we can instead support more restorative justice projects. We also can continue to use our power, our voice, and our vote to challenge issues like unfair policing, criminal justice and prison reform. We can continue to work on breaking the school to prison pipeline. Our United Methodist Women have been doing great work on this front. In May hey hosted a School to Prison Pipeline Workshop, and also the School to Prison Pipeline presentation in September.

In other good news, two weeks ago the governor of California signed a bill that bans private prisons and immigrant detention facilities from operating in California. Probably related to this, a few days ago, the biggest public pension fund in the U.S. dumped their stocks in the two largest private prison firms. These companies have also been having trouble sourcing funding lately, and their stock price has fallen 30% since June. All of this is thought to be due to the negative publicity around the immigration detention camps and the efforts of activists. That’s the power of public opinion.

***Reading from Isaiah 61, Jesus also talked about recovery of sight to the blind.*** The way I interpret that is that Jesus brings new ways of seeing; of being woke and watchful, as he encouraged throughout Matt 25. We can change the way people are seen by refusing to allow the demonization and labeling of people for instance like ex-con or felon, break the negative stereotypes of African Americans in our culture. We can also continue to work on racial healing. We co hosted an event called Bridging the Differences with Bethel AME in 2017. And we can continue to press on and seek other opportunities to heal and bridge the racial divide. We can also keep having those difficult conversations, especially around race. There is a group that does this here at the church called the Vital Conversations group; they are meeting next Sunday if you’re interested. And we can also take our conversations outside of the church and influence public opinion.

***How do we let the oppressed go free?*** A recent study by two U of M Law professors found that expungement of criminal records leads to higher earnings and lower recidivism rates. Let’s support expungement legislation and give people a fresh start. For instance, our senator from Ann Arbor in July proposed a bill that would allow roughly 235,000 people to have their records for marijuana use and possession automatically expunged.  We can also support prisoner reentry programs that assist incarcerated individuals transition back to their community after they are released. This has also been shown to cut recidivism rates. So, we may not be able to visit any prisoners, but we can definitely work on dismantling the system that creates and imprisons people unnecessarily. Politics, and the power of our vote and voice can proclaim release to the captives.

**Be Jesus**

The last and most important thing we can do is honor the Christ in all people. I mentioned at the beginning that the Sheep and the Goats was one of my favorite parables and that I see something different every time I revisit it. A couple of years ago, when praying with this Scripture*,* a practice where you imagine yourself in the scene. I imagined the sheep and the goats being judged with Jesus standing with the least of the brothers and sisters. The sheep asked “Lord, when did we see you?” and I felt a strong, “No! I don’t want to be a sheep in this scene. I want to see Jesus all the time in everyone. I want to be like Jesus and take injustice and suffering so personally that I feel like one of the least of these.” We can all be Jesus standing there with our brothers and sisters. Amen.