



What is Mass Incarceration?

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Good afternoon. When I go home to Philadelphia, Pastor Kelly, I'm going to tell my friend Willie Richardson that I met you. Thank you for doing Philly proud. We get a bad rap in some places. Sometimes I think that in the Gospel of John it says, can any good thing come out of Philadelphia.

While touring in Caesarea of Philippi with His disciples that occupied area on which every corner stood a Roman soldier reminding the Jews of their limited liberty. Jesus asked the question, "Who do men and women say that I am?" You know the story well. Peter was willing to volunteer the answer, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God". Jesus said to Peter, "Flesh and blood has not revealed that to you but my father who was in heaven. Thou Art Simon, son of Jonah but thou shalt be called Peter, which is a rock. And upon this rock I shall build my church."

We have debated in the church what that rock is. The Catholic tradition of building the rock on Peter the man is something that we dispute in the Protestant tradition where we argue that it's the truth revealed to Peter, which is the rock on which the Church is built. May I suggest this afternoon for our purposes and looking at the role of the church, that the rock is both the truth and it's embodiment in the man. The truth floating around as some ephemeral reality does not solve problems. That only went truth is embodied in real human beings is the church alive and well and it's upon that rock truth embodied in human beings that Jesus builds his Ecclesia, the called out ones.

Jesus chooses also to make this conversation happen in a situation of occupation, of limited liberty, with constant visible reminders of the fact that this land is occupied and that the Jews serve at the behest of their Roman oppressors. Two million adults woke up this morning with visible reminders of limited liberty. Visible reminders such as walls and wires, bars and guards. Weapons and windows that remind them that their liberty is limited, that rather than the 150 decisions the average American makes, today, they will make between 20 and 30. Reminders that they are separated from their loved ones, reminders that they are separated from their home communities.

In a situation of limited liberty, Jesus announces upon this rock I will build my church. The role of the church can only be understand therefore, if in fact we understand that the church exists

within structures of limited liberty. The first thing the church has to do in addressing mass incarceration is to let go or at least hold lightly to its outreach model and recognize that the church exists behind bars. In those situations of limited liberty, the church is alive and well and in some cases more healthy than the churches we attend every Sunday on the outside. We have to let go of the idea of bringing Jesus into the prison because Jesus is already there. We have to stop seeing the prison as a place of outreach when it is our children and grandchildren, our loved ones and community members who make up the inmate population.

The fact of the matter is that many of the men and women and many of the young people who are in our local jails, state and federal prisons are from our neighborhoods. Vince Bacote mentioned earlier that when I was here at Wheaton a couple of years ago, I asked about people knowing someone that had been incarcerated. It seems like, there's something about my timing in coming to Wheaton, when I came to Wheaton two years ago, it was two days after someone had been arrested on campus and now I'm back and you all just had another. So that's a kind of easy questions. Or maybe I shouldn't be coming to Wheaton. Every time I show up somebody's been arrested.

But, you're just experiencing here what people in other neighborhoods experience on a regular basis. And the fact of the matter is, it happens in your community just it's not talked about. One of the reasons that we do outreach to the prison is because we've objectified the prisoner. We have failed to recognize the humanity of the man, the woman behind bars. We fail to recognize their image bearing as Dr. Bacote mentioned earlier. And we've bought into the stigma that the society gives to men and women who have been convicted of criminalized behaviors.

The reason I use the term criminalized behaviors is because as Dr. Levine mentioned earlier, behavior patterns haven't changed so much as our laws have since 1979. The fact of the matter is that if we were to turn back the clock and have the same criminal codes that we did in 1979, 80% of all inmates today would have to be released immediately. They would not be under custodial supervision under 1979 statutes. Behavior is the same, we've changed the laws. So many of those who are convicted of criminalized behavior are stigmatized by society and the Church has bought into it. We use the same language, they're convicts, thugs, prisoners, felons rather than human beings created in the image of God.

One of my students told me that she could never do the work that I do. I said, why not? She said, because I can't deal with "those" people. When I reminded her that I had a criminal record, she said, yeah, but you're different. The people that I'm talking about, they're bad people and I can't deal with those who are locked up. I said, well, if you can't deal with people who are locked up, then you've bought into the stigma that society has given them and one of the things that we have to do in the church is to de-stigmatize people and help them reclaim that sense of their human dignity and being created in the image of God. She couldn't see it yet.

So I asked her if I could borrow her Bible. She said, why? I said, this is seminary. It's our job to destroy your faith. And so I'm going to take things out of the Bible. That's what you all say we do. I said, if you don't like inmates, well then first take out the book of Genesis because Joseph

was an inmate. If you don't like inmates, we're going to get rid of the book of Jeremiah because Jeremiah was in solitary confinement. If you don't like inmates, we're going to get rid of the book of Daniel because Daniel was a two time loser and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were on death row.

If you don't like inmates, we're going to get rid of the book of revelation because John wrote that while in custody. If you don't like inmates, we're going to get rid of first and second Peter because Peter got locked up and the church prayed for him all night long, but when it got early release, he was coming back to the church and not let in so things really haven't changed. If you don't like inmates stop telling everybody you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you because it was written by an inmate. And if you don't like inmates, by all means, don't go to church on Good Friday because Jesus died in custody.

When going over that list with a group of church folk in Delaware, I got the same pushback. But those are bad people. We have to take the stigma down. Otherwise, we'll start labeling people as bad people like the one person we did talk about in that Delaware group, a man who was walking down the street one day and saw a friend of his being beaten by his boss. He jumped in the middle of the fight and killed the boss. The Delaware folks said that guy should be locked up. I said, you just locked up Moses. Or the musicians who saw a beautiful woman, decided that he wanted to get with her. In fact, they tell me he actually wrote a song about her first. The Lord is my shepherd, I see what I want. Today, we call that conspiracy to commit murder. David.

Paul would've received a charge of accessory for holding the coats when they killed Stephen. Peter should be very happy he was not born in Contemporary America because if they will choke you for selling loose cigarettes on Staten Island, if law enforcement will shoot you in the park in Cleveland while you're 12 years old holding a toy gun, if they will shoot you in South Carolina while you're running away from police in the back, if they will shoot you in Minnesota while you're reaching for your wallet as being instructed by the police, you know they would've shot Peter in the garden of Gethsemane when he pulled a knife on a cop.

We're not talking about bad people, we're talking about people who are always the object of God's love and redemption. So the first thing the church can do is work on removing stigma and recognizing the humanity of men and women who are in the system. Harvey Conn, the missiologist who taught at Westminster Seminary often referred to people in this vein, as being sinners who were sinned against. We're very good at the sinner part, less so at the sinned against part.

And so, once we come to grips with their humanity, we have to recognize ways in which our system sins against them. That's when we begin to look at public policy issues, that's when we began to look at our collective practice as a matter of social justice. That's when we begin to look at what C. Wright Mills called the ways in which personal trials become a public issue. "Every public issue," says Mills, "is the amalgam of personal trials." And so when we begin to lean in to the lives of men and women who are incarcerated, when we begin to lean into their families, when we began to lean into the lives of returning citizens who are coming home from

jails and prisons, the numbers which we saw earlier today take on faces. The numbers become narratives. The statistics become stories. The facts become faces. And now we're faced with the reality that there are countless numbers of men and women with faces and stories and narratives whose lives are being impacted by our policies.

If we are to be serious about being the church, we have to engage in the criminal justice system out of the realm of option and into the realm of standard equipment. I'm old enough to remember when air conditioning on the car was an option. I'm old enough to remember when a radio in the car was option, let alone a full blown entertainment system that lets you see where you're backing up in the parking lot. All these things were once options and now you would never buy a new car without them.

For too long, we as the church have treated engaging the criminal justice system as an option and if we had even the weakest of prison ministries, we could stand on the ground of self-congratulatory behavior because we have a prison ministry and you don't. The inadequacy of that approach hopefully is being made apparent in our conversation today and we are beginning to gain a sense of the church's capacity to engage the human beings who are currently in the system.

It's interesting that when Pastor Kelly talked about his individual transformation, we clapped. When he talked about his individual call, we clapped. As evangelicals, we're good at clapping for individual achievement. We're good at clapping for one person who makes it. But let me remind you that when Rosa Parks needed help after being discriminated against on the bus, the answer was not to get her a car. That would have solved her individual problem, but it would have left the system just the way it was and we probably would not be having this conversation today.

We can no longer afford to simply focus on individual successes in spite of the odds and begin to look at the systems, which sin against human beings created in the image of God. For indeed, they become the seabed of transformation for whole communities and blessings to us. Howard Thurman, the Christian mystic, grew up poor in Daytona Beach, Florida. While he was growing up being raised by his grandmother, he lived next door to a family that did not like the Thurmans, that did not like their Christianity. Thurman and his grandmother were constantly rebuffed by their neighbors.

One day their neighbors decided to show them contempt in the best way they knew how in that rural part of Florida. The grandmother, the matriarch of that family instructed her grandson to wait until the Thurman's were out in the backyard in full view and go to the chicken coops and scrape the chicken manure off the floor of the chicken coop and dump it into Thurman's backyard. Dutifully, he obeyed and watched the Thurman's look on with disdain.

Sometime later this woman became ill and grandma Thurman out of her own sense of Christian charity decided to be a blessing to her antagonist and she brought her some chicken soup and some flowers. The woman could not resist this act of kindness and she said, "Thank you for the

soup and the roses, the flowers are beautiful." Grandma Thurman said, "I grew them myself." She said, "How did you get the flowers to grow so rich and full. And how did you grow those stems to be so long and green?" Grandma Thurman said, "Remember that chicken manure you dumped in my backyard? You saw that as something evil but God saw that as fertilizer and that became the ground from which I am now able to bless you."

We are dumping men and women into the backyards of society, throwing chicken manure on them instead of rehabilitative possibility. Dumping chicken manure on them instead of the possibility of transformation, education and production. But out of those grounds, in spite of the policies, not because of them, God is growing roses and they are the roses which will bless this nation and make it the redemptive place it was created to be. Until we are willing to deal with the chicken manure dumped on American citizens in our prisons and jails, we will always fall short of the church that Jesus founded in occupied territory surrounded by the visible evidence of limited liberty. Thank you.