

“Church & Criminal Justice” (3June18)
Luke18:2-14; Hebrews13:1, 3;
Psalm142; ELCA Social Statement*

These Bible readings help us enter the social statement or—better—to enter the whole situation of criminal justice.

We started with a widow pleading for justice, begging constantly for her case to be heard and to receive what she deserved, but the legal system ignored and disregard her.

While we likely see the widow as vulnerable, a lonely female at the mercy of perhaps a patriarchal structure, we should also be sure to notice that God’s identity is repeatedly defined through our Old Testament as the defender of widows. Widows are the poster children for God’s concern. Actually, I suppose orphans are the poster *children*; widows are the poster adults, for whom God is especially concerned. Repeatedly, “widows and orphans” define those who should not be denied justice and assistance. Refusing to help the widow and orphan is Old Testament shorthand for deserving of worst accursedness. That makes the unjust judge in Jesus’ story clearly despicable; he isn’t just ignoring a widow. He is ignoring God.

And that reinforces for us God’s intentions and redirects our attention. The subtitle to the ELCA’s social statement on the Church and Criminal Justice is “Hearing the Cries.” If we’re not hearing the cries, then we’re like the cursed unjust judge.

The second part from Jesus warns us again, against thinking we’re so proper and are doing the right thing in worship while shunning those who have done wrong, that we’re not sinners, thinking ourselves more preferable to God than others, including criminals.

Further on priding ourselves on not being like those, we had the stunning little Hebrews verse: “think of those in prison as though you were in prison with them.” We create a distance that causes difficulty in conceiving criminal justice. It can be hard to put a face on what is mostly an

unknown reality for us do-gooder church-goers—or, maybe more specifically, us white folks.

I remember a time being sick to my stomach in court, I was so confused and terrified and had no idea how anything worked, what I needed to be doing. It was something I’d never had to deal with, but many in that full courtroom—many of them people of color, and people with much less education and less financial resources and even less English ability—were more at ease, because they’d had to become familiar with this brutal and rigid operation.

You may not have been in many situations of being arrested and the rest. Beyond that, this remains not our reality because it is so easy to remove from in front of us. Prisons are meant to keep people out of sight and out of mind. They’re left faceless and vague, disparaged as bad guys. Vulnerable people like the widow in the parable remain easy to ignore.

So as we’re “hearing the cries” in the words of the social statement, as those cries and our God call us to be aware and active, it seems helpful to wonder how we might put a face on this, to show us whom we must love, as we said in our words of confession.

In this congregation, you regularly have a couple possibilities. You are part of supporting the work of Madison Area Jail Ministry. With prayers and with every dollar you put in the offering plate, you are helping care for both inmates and the sheriff’s department staff in the Dane County Jail. In this work of more than 50 years, you might associate faces of previous chaplains, John Mix and Julia Weaver. You might now know Christa Fisher.

Your offering benevolences also contribute to Madison-area Urban Ministry, or MUM. For decades, MUM has focused on re-entry programs for those who have been imprisoned, to foster a transition into a society that often denies the tools and too much even directly inhibits the ability to re-adapt to life. Here at MCC, you might picture the face of Ken, our most regular Just Bakery vendor who has worked up to become kitchen manager. You might also have seen a new MUM

* <http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Criminal-Justice>

program about urban gardening in the Cap Times*. With Ken, director Linda Ketcham, Nasra from last year's women's salad supper, and others, you are part of these relationships.

And you might have other faces you associate. One of my friends works at the prison up in Stillwater; I hear about the stresses of his job. In my role, I've gotten to visit inmates to talk on phones through plexiglass, some of them church members and some people who were looking for a connection and support.

For me, the clearest now is Department of Corrections #618778: Bruce Burnside, my first pastoral colleague and once bishop, arrested and given a 10-year prison sentence after he killed a pedestrian with his vehicle. I saw Bruce a couple weeks ago at Jackson Correctional Institution, on my way back from fishing. Though intimidated by all the guards and razor wire and getting buzzed through so many doors and being watched and questioned, it was good to see him. Even in his blue pajama inmate attire, he is still Bruce. His letter this week said the heat wave made the cell like a brick pizza oven, without the pizza.

I know it can be either easier to forgive or to condemn Bruce. You could say he should've known and behaved better. Or you could point to good things he did in his life and say that his crime was an anomaly, so he deserves leniency. Whether we'd think his particular situation is just or unjust, still it is the present reality. As always, it's complex and sad and not something somebody should have to deal with alone. So I'm grateful he gets lots of visitors and cards and attention and is in prayers and on people's minds.

But that makes me mention Lamont, Bruce's cellmate. I think Bruce had said that sometimes Lamont would hear from his mother on his birthday, the only caring contact he had in an entire year. So Bruce's step-daughter Janna started visiting. It began with seeing Lamont when she went to see Bruce. But Bruce told me Janna had been there the previous week and he didn't even know it until after she was gone,

having driven five hours just to visit Lamont. Janna is hearing the cries.

As important and useful as it can be to put a face on this issue and recognize the sound of a voice as you hear its cries, this social statement isn't only about personal relationships and bonds. Neither is it the religious services we might give to perpetrators of crimes or victims or families or those who work in law enforcement, though the statement does offer care and concern for all those groups.

So I want to mention a few points in this 64-page document and highlight a couple aspects of how it considers we might respond to hearing the cries.

First, we can say that a Lutheran perspective is in favor of criminal justice. We aren't anti-cop. We can't say that every prison cell should be thrown open because God forgives. Lutherans see laws as a way to restrain evil, to provide safety, to foster life, and therefore as good gifts from God and a way that God operates in our world.

But we also recognize a "no" along with this "yes." The criminal justice system as it currently stands may be reasonable and have plenty of dedicated workers and vital work. But all is not well. Most primarily, the social statement stresses that the system is too focused on punishment. That should not be the only aspect of criminal justice. Paying a debt to society or paying for a life taken away is only one metaphor, and certainly not the sole way to obtain justice and order and set things right. Restorative justice, alternatives to incarceration, practices of rehabilitation beg for our attention.

The social statement also enumerates many areas where, rather than offering solutions for society, this system perpetrates worse injustice. These include racial issues we've come to recognize somewhat more through the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which are also in the social statement on race (which we won't get to take up this summer). There is mention of the death penalty, which also has its own social statement. There is drug policy. There is the criminalization of mental illness. There is

* http://host.madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/urban-agriculture-as-a-life-saver-planting-program-for-formerly/article_52f63a2f-3a89-50c5-872c-125707684189.html

disenfranchisement of 5.3 million citizens from voting, sometimes permanently.* There is the escalation of children getting tried as adults, and ending up in life without parole. And of children who are affected when their parents are taken away. The statement remarks on immigration detention, and we're certainly hearing the cries more these days of those families separated at the border.

There is the crazy amount of money we waste on this, including for profiteering private prisons. In spite of that, the statement also asserts that economic benefits of reducing costs should not be our main motivating factor for change. Instead, it reminds us of our theological perspective, with a moral evaluation of what helps people, and the core belief that all people are created in the image of God and there is nothing that can change that central and eternal identity.

Finally the promise of faith is larger than anything inflicted on us, than any of our failures, than any fears of violence, than any of our suffering as victims, than any of our possible responses to set things right. Not just consolation, the statement reminds us, but empowerment, the promise in Christ of being reconciled to God, a time when every tear will be wiped away, and the promise that God will find a way to right all that has wronged us not only is hope for the future, but also gives us courage to cope with partial justice and to meet the challenges of a world harmed by crime.*

We hear the cries, and respond.

We pray, O God, gathered as your church. We pray that we may not consider ourselves better, as strictly law-abiding, as dismissive of suffering. We pray that you open our ears and hearts to hear the cries of those in prison, of victims, of affected

families, of whole zip codes, and of people stressed and striving on our behalf in the criminal justice system.

We pray for nations around the world, for places who arrest people without any care for justice or wellbeing, for the worst of oppressions and torture and execution.

But we also realize that in many ways, the worst is right here among us, in this good country we love, especially for people of color and the poor. We pray for advocacy and reform, for care in government, for just judges who listen, for systems that are about the common good of society and not simply about locking people up.

We pray for those in prison, thinking of them as though we were in prison with them. We pray for those faces we recognize, and for all those who remain unknown to us but are held in our thoughts today. We pray for those who have committed crimes. We pray for those who are suffering punishment. We pray for those who are being treated unjustly. We pray for families that are separated, including immigrants being detained.

We pray for all who work in the criminal justice system, including as chaplains and as religious organizations working to help re-entry, but also for guards and officers and lawyers and administrators and all responding to vocations, callings from you on behalf of community, who hold this difficult work in their hands.

We pray for Madison Area Jail Ministry and Madison-area Urban Ministry and our efforts to join their work. We share prayers for Ann Ward, Margaret Smith, Sara Hulsether, Robin and Kathy Alexander, Andy Remington, Christine Hartelt, and Georgia Grahn, James Hamre, Corkey Custer and family at the death of his brother Mike, and Lindy Wilson and family at her mother's memorial service

For these in our MCC community whom we are holding in prayer this week: Cynthia Kaump; Finnoulay; Rolf Killingstad; John Szalkowski &

* https://www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/votingrights/wi_flyer.pdf

* see p21 for these

Kristen Knoepke; Sam; Darrel & Robin Thurow;
Kris & Kim Todd

And for those traveling, including John and Mary
Rowe, the Krbec family, and Christa Olson

Renew your image in all of us, O God, that we
may rejoice in being your children in this world,
and in hope of the reconciled life to come,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.