

Imprisoning Mercy

A Morning Message for Worship with Communion on the Fourth Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 6, 2016

Text: Matthew 25:35-40

When we read this text from Matthew or we consider the Works of Mercy themselves, the mention of visiting prisoners is undoubtedly the most difficult for us to wrap our heads around. In our minds and hearts, prisoners are obviously bad people, in prison because they deserve to be for something awful they did. So, why would we visit them? Surely that's not what Jesus meant, we think. Surely he must have been thinking about some other kind of prisoner. Like a political prisoner, or someone who's committed civil disobedience for a noble cause. Or maybe he meant someone who's a metaphorical prisoner of something beyond his or her control – like illness or infirmity or poverty or *something*. Jesus can't mean actually going to prison to see inmates, can he?

This fear, I think, is behind our reactions to this one phrase in this powerful parable Jesus told so long ago. That's why we gravitate so easily to the other actions it advocates – Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick – those we can do! Those are just fine, almost easy to do. But visiting a prisoner? Come on...

Well, the thing is, I do think Jesus meant exactly what he said which is to visit prisoners. All the other things that might metaphorically keep someone imprisoned – poverty, illness, homelessness – he’s already mentioned them in this same text. So prisoners must mean prisoners. Now it is true that there were many political prisoners in Jesus’ time, people who got on the wrong side of imperial Rome often for minor offenses, and some folks would argue that only these people are the ones Jesus was talking about visiting. But, again, not what he said. He said prisoners with no qualifications or restrictions and I think we need to take Jesus at his word. So what does that mean, exactly?

I am the first to admit this is not easy, not by a long shot, since many of us have little if anything to do with prisons or even local jails for that matter. And if we have, it’s most likely because we were either the victim of a crime or we have a family member who is a police or correctional officer, both honorable and important professions not for the faint of heart. So, for most of us our knowledge of the correctional system is limited to personal experience of varying types. No surprise, then, that the idea of visiting prisoners is more than a little unnerving not to mention overwhelming.

I can also tell you that as a person who has visited with prisoners incarcerated for real crimes, it is unnerving and overwhelming. In October of 2006 I was taking a year-long

course in the Women's Leadership Institute at Hartford Seminary. One of the requirements for this course was to participate in a cross cultural experience of visiting with inmates at the York Correctional Institute for Women in Niantic, CT. The prison would only allow us to visit in groups of 6 or less, and since our professor had to be one of the 6, that meant we participated in groups of 5.

Before going, we had to complete detailed questionnaires which were submitted to the CT Bureau of Corrections for approval. Upon arriving at the prison on our assigned day, a Sunday, we had to meet first with our contact person, the prison chaplain. At that time it was a female UCC ordained pastor and I do not remember her name. I do remember that she was in her 26th or so year of doing that work. I remember she was petite and attractive and clearly an expert on the environment God had called her to. We had to meet with her for almost an hour before being allowed to interact with prisoners because she had to give us the rules of what we could and could not do, what we could and could not say. The "could not" list was by far the longer. After our meeting in her office, we walked across the campus to the first building we visited which was where the prisoners who were on the road to being released met for a writing class. When we arrived at the building – think nondescript massive brick building with barred windows – we were led inside and into the room

where the writing class prisoners were already waiting for us. We were each assigned someone to talk to but what to say was a real problem. I could only remember the “could not” talk about list and big on that was NOT asking them what they were in prison for. If they told you on their own, that was okay but you could NOT ask them. You could ask them about their work in the writing class, a safe topic, so I did. But the short answer I got from my conversation partner didn’t provide much fodder for follow-up. I asked her about the artwork in the room and she told me about the other classes offered there. Then silence once more. Finally, desperate to learn something about the situation I found myself in, I asked her why she had agreed to take the class and to come to talk with us today. I didn’t think that was on the “not” list although I wasn’t completely sure. She looked at me for a moment and said, “because I hope to get out of this place soon. Anything extra like this I can tell the parole board about. I need them to believe I’m ready to be out with normal people again.”

Well, needless to say, that knocked the wind out of my sails pretty fast. Luckily it was at that moment the one-on-one conversations ended because it was time for the promised refreshments for us to share with the inmates – cookies and lemonade. It was during those next 10 minutes or so when more information quickly surfaced as the women, who knew and trusted our professor, opened up more to her with the rest of us

clustered around. It was here that I learned that two of the women were there for embezzlement they committed in order to finance gambling addictions. Another had killed an abusive boyfriend after years of beatings. Several were there for drug related charges. All were hoping to get out as soon as they could to begin the long road back to a life reconstructed in the aftermath of prison. Most of them had children they missed desperately. All of them, awkward as the hour had been, were grateful we had come as we shook their hands on our way to our next experience – Sunday evening worship in the main prison.

I remember that experience vividly too, but it would take far too long to describe it in any meaningful way now. Emotions I felt then still jar me if I dwell on them too long. Fear jolted through my body in the face of armed guards slamming shut the massive doors behind us as we entered the main incarceration building. Anxiety's fingers walked up my spine as the inmates from super max walked into the room, clearly slowing down to size up these visitors in the first row. Surprise warmed my whole body as I realized most of the women gathering to worship were happy to see us especially those who were part of the choir. And they were *phenomenal!* Shock washed over me as the service itself unfolded, led by the all male clergy from a New London black Baptist church. Their entire message was one of sin and retribution for sin and they really cranked it up as only certain powerful black

preachers can do. And the more they ramped it up, the more the inmates responded. Finally, the sermon ended, more singing, a little praying – again only for forgiveness of sin – and then the service was ended. We were escorted out first and were soon on our way home. It took me weeks to process the whole experience and as I prepared this sermon, I realized I am processing it still. But this experience is clearly why I can tell you beyond doubt that when Jesus said to visit prisoners in this parable in Matthew, he meant prisoners because they are some of the loneliest, hurting people I have ever met. Nowhere is God's love, God's forgiveness, God's mercy more needed in abundance than in those prisons. And sadly that is too often not the case.

Prisons are scary places and prisoners are scary people. That's just truth. That's just fact. But, in this parable, Jesus is reminding us quite forcefully that prisoners are people too, beloved of God just like you and me. Even the angry and unrepentant ones. Even the repugnant and evil ones. Even them God reaches out to, just in case they will ever reach back. Evil and pain most likely will blind them forever to God's love, but that's not our problem. That's not our task. Their relationship with God is between them and God. But we are supposed to do something. Jesus makes that very clear and what might that be? I think there are several possible answers with visiting one option but most likely not a real option for most of us. But praying intentionally

for inmates of prisons and local jails is. Learning what you can about how the prison system in this country works is another. For example, did you know that in the York Correctional Facility, and any other prison in the state of CT, there is no visiting permitted on holidays? Ever. For another, visitors can only visit within strict time constraints and the time when an inmate can see visitors on weekends is determined by only one thing – whether their inmate number ends in an odd or even number. Never mind if their loved ones can only come on Sundays. With an even inmate number, they can only receive weekend visitors on Saturdays for as long as they are there.

Now I am not saying we should feel sorry for inmates. I am not saying we should be soft on inmates. I am not saying prisoners aren't in prison for good reason. I am not saying all the restrictions on life each day are unwarranted. I *am* saying Jesus wants us to remember that even these people, even these criminals, have access to God's mercy. No one can take that away from them. Jesus is also saying that sometimes God's mercy to even these people becomes real, tangible, only through us. Consider for a moment that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. 6.8 million people or 1 out of every 36 adults in the US are part of the correctional system either as inmates, parolees or probationers and every single one of them needs our prayers. Their victims need our prayers. Their families

need our prayers. Their futures need our prayers. And let's not forget that correctional officers and administrators also need our prayers as they work each day in these difficult environments.

As we consider the works of mercy which are our focus for this week – visiting prisoners and forgiving injuries – I invite you, I urge you to ponder deeply how it is that you might be imprisoning mercy by putting boundaries around it that God doesn't put there. Dear friends, when you think that prisoners are less deserving of mercy because of the crimes and injuries for which they are already being punished, you are imprisoning mercy. And you are assuming God's role of judgment and punishment too. On a personal level, when you are quicker to tally injuries and slights and hurts coming your way from others, whether they are intentional or not, then you are imprisoning mercy. When you think of forgiveness from you, by you, as something someone has to earn, has to prove they deserve, you are imprisoning mercy. And that, Jesus has made clear, is not what God needs or wants from us. God needs us to be as abundant with mercy as God is, deserved or undeserved. God needs us to love without counting the cost. God needs us to do the right thing *just because* it is the right thing. Mercy in abundance for all – *for all* – is what our world and everyone in it is crying for. What will we answer? Amen.