

MAKE THE INSIDE OUT

Texts on Sunday, November 9, 2013

Isaiah 58: 1-9; Luke 12: 54-59

Forty years ago, in the wake of the rebellion at Attica Prison, Rev. Robert Polk of the Riverside clergy founded the Riverside Prison Ministry. Throughout this past weekend, the Prison Ministry has been celebrating this anniversary by anchoring a year-long campaign to bring light and change to life-destroying parole practices in this state and in this society.

Forty-one years ago, in response to that rebellion at Attica, a Rochester man named Steere began a ministry at Attica prison. It still goes on. Volunteers and men inside join each week in a conversation about one thing only, what it is like to be in your own skin, with your own burdens, and how you learn from it. From what I learned and experienced during ten years with that program, I have brought you a number of things over the years.

Forty years of ministry is a good thing. But let's let that number, "forty years," seep into our skin alongside the ancient scriptures we have just heard, for our societies haven't much to show for long exposure to the word of God; and in these United States, the last forty years have looked more like years of wilderness wandering with no Moses and no true law at all. Since those terrible days at Attica, the criminal American justice system has multiplied its prison population sixfold, from 350,000 to more than two million. Those being watched by parole and probation exceed five million men and women. They are blocked from public housing or help with the price of food. "The box" blocks them from working. It's that box on employment applications—"Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" States block the formerly incarcerated from voting, ever, as if to say *You will never have a place among us*. It seems the society aims to destroy them.

One bright January day in Buffalo, with the thermometer at 15°, I went to pick up a friend being released from the Erie County jail after some months there. He had asked me to bring him a coat, because jail regulations only allow a man being released the clothes he had on his back on the day he was caged. They do give him a free one-way bus fare to downtown Buffalo. For so many, they might just as well pay the whole round trip up front. Fortunately, my friend would come to my home for a stay.

The writings of Isaiah and the teaching of Jesus have been with us for thousands of years, yet what sign is there that this Jesus-loving nation hears the word of the Lord? *Undo the thongs of the yoke? Loose the bonds of injustice? Break every yoke? Let the oppressed go free?* The punishing habits in America smash at these precious commandments like a man in drunken

despair destroying his household. What an astonishing caricature of justice American voters have installed in the halls of power! If a family came to a counselor vexed by reckless behaviors resembling those of our society, and if the father blamed all his problems on his children, what therapist would not dread to take the case, with such an ignorant, dangerous man at the head of the household?

Of course we are in a crazy family! Of course the very seat of violence and crime is warmed by the powerful, and of course it shows up hot as crime and war only outside the paneled halls of power, like steam from a pressure cooker. Of course the force of racism is driving this family to the brink of madness, and of course the courts deny it. Just so easy would it be for courts to admit that the system is racist and broken as for an abusive householder, with his hand raised for another blow, suddenly to stop and feel how gone wrong he is, and collapse in weeping weakness—and be free at last, free at last, thanking God almighty. Just so easy as that is transformation: not easy.

What is holding American society in bondage to bondage and violence? Why are we in a prison of prisons? Even in the church, why do we struggle to learn the first lesson about *not* using the courts to settle differences, but rather our hearts? “Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?” Jesus asks. What answer to these questions can be worth holding?



When I was a young man, I was separated from my young son by divorce. In the first year of his life, I was permitted to visit my baby boy at his mother’s home for a few hours on a Saturday. Arriving for one visit, the front door was opened, some words were tossed out, and then that door slammed in my face. There surged up inside me like molten lava a rage such as I had never felt. I stood on that porch and . . . I left.

Soon after these events, I thought: If I were used to guns; if I’d had one in my pocket that morning, I would have used it, and every life on both sides of that door would have been ruined. From that day to this, my thoughts, like a dog circling several times before resting, make a practice of saying, “I am a criminal.” Not for things hidden from the state for which I must yet account. No, rather for things I have done that would go hidden from myself, if I did not give account for them and learn remorse from them. For the cravings and fears and pains which drove me to that day are all of one kind with the cravings and fears and pains that drive all humans to their crimes. We are all one. It matters very much to draw no distinctions.

A similar rage I have not felt in all the decades since that day. Have I grown? Of course. But the possibilities in change and growth only strengthen

my desire for solidarity with all who have done crimes. Had a gun been in my hand that morning, I would have become a criminal then—but not just then; no, for years to come. Sometimes I ask a study group: *When is a criminal?* Is a criminal when the crime is done? Or is a criminal never done? For black and brown men, far more than white, America's answer is, *A criminal is forever.* Therefore, I will not wash the words from my mouth, though the taste is bitter. *I am a criminal.* God knows, the words do not make me worse. No, they wake me up to my brotherhood with tens of millions of Americans whose fears and cravings led to choices from which they struggle daily to be released.

Only the forgiven can forgive. The reverse is true too. Where no forgiveness flows, the unforgiving know not their own forgiveness for their own crimes. What is holding American society in bondage to bondage and violence? Spiritual ignorance of the grace of God. What is the sign of this tragic spiritual disease? It is that craving for self-righteousness, that clambering upward over others to make distinctions; me good, them bad. The Roman philosopher Terentius wrote, "Nothing human is alien to me." Only the forgiven can say that. Why, the Lord Jesus himself was counted a criminal. Do you think he would deny it to set himself above? Not on your life. Can you feel the strange goodness of it, the fellowship in it? *I am a criminal.* About five years after the events I spoke of a moment ago, I became a pastor. I will tell you that nothing has so lightened my pastoral calling as that phrase ever near my lips, that I am a criminal, for what deed have others done which I have not done? There is none. We are one.

Now, I believe that laws can be agents of good, as of evil. Therefore, like you, I want to see bad laws changed. I am very moved by the concrete steps proposed by the Riverside Prison Ministry and our coalition allies to bring political pressure to bear to make a difference in the lives of prisoners who deserve to be paroled. Yet, taking not one word from these hopes and commitments, I also affirm that it is spiritual movement that causes political movement, and not the other way around. In other words, it matters for the political transformation of America that you and I undergo personal transformations. Religion in America is only irrelevant insofar as the religious keep changing the subject. The subject is not blaming them, the bad guys, whoever we think them to be. The subject is not even God. God is fine, whether we pay attention or not. The subject is not, frankly, praising Jesus. Jesus would be appalled at the amount of song sung at him by people who have neither desire nor time nor tools to be made like him in his love, like him in his suffering. The subject of Jesus' crucifixion-resurrection is our transformation, in our self, in our city, in our nation, in our world. Start where you are.

Jesus warns his hearers, *Settle your case with your accuser, lest there follow a chain of reactions that cast you in prison, from which you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.* America is already in that chain reaction, already down to spending the last penny trying to abuse them called criminals, so as not to have to see and to say, *I am a criminal.* So take this home with you. First, remember: Only the forgiven can forgive. Then, have confidence that the paths we mark out for spiritual transformation matter for a whole world. Not finally as benefits to you personally does the path matter. Your own life is important, but not important enough for it to be your life's purpose! No, the spiritual path is the path for others, for a whole people. It is the beginning of God's politics and of God's reign.

I leave you with this from Victor Frankl's account, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, of what some prisoners in the Nazi death camps did for other prisoners to bring them through their despair. What he says here can inform all that we are called to. He writes that it was necessary

“ . . . to teach the despairing that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us; to stop asking about the meaning of life and instead think of ourselves as being questioned by life [and finding that] our answer must come in right action and right conduct.” (p. 122)

As you pass from in here to out there today, sense your right action. You are called to reveal the light within you for all without. You are called to learn and to witness to the great reversal, which the apostle calls “power made perfect in weakness.” You are called to break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free—yes, the oppressed within you first. You are called to make the inside out.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*