

## EVERY MOTHER'S SON

Text on Sunday, May 9, 2010

Mark 5: 1-20

For more than ten years, in every week or two, I have spent a couple of hours in conversation and reflection with men in the prisons at Attica or Sing Sing—men who sometimes feel like that song: a motherless child. This Tuesday evening is the final class for the course in Christian Ethics I teach at Sing Sing. In respect for my students and their aspirations and because the mothers I know would rather feel their mother-nature than have it set on a pedestal, I am taking advantage of the spirit of this Mother's Day to turn our well-wishing toward the ends for which our hearts are shaped; toward compassion for every mother's son who is in prison. And particularly for black and brown men in prison.

The men I meet there are black, black, Latino, black, black, white, black, black, Latino. I would like you all to see them and feel their condition, for they are every one a mother's son. Some of you are no doubt their mothers and grandmothers, their sisters, their brothers, their daughters and sons. I say this not because you've told me, but because 1 in 14 black men was in prison in 2006 vs. 1 in 106 white men. Between the ages of 20 and 35, 1 in 9 black men is behind bars. One third of American black men are under the control of courts, prisons, or parole boards. These men are every mother's son, but America is pitiless. For the most part, American churches makes it unsafe to talk about the systematic injustice of our prison practices. It reminds me of that awful storm in New Orleans, when every body in the waters was black, black, black—yet America could not acknowledge that the disaster was a disaster of almost edgeless racial indifference leading up through decades to those awful days.

This is the story of how America continues to drown its poorest black and brown men and women in poverty, violence, and sorrow. So far, it is a tragedy, the kind of story usually only mothers know all the way down. I could wash this whole hour in facts and figures that hurt to hear. Here are some: Between 1985 and 2005, the numbers of black men sent to prison annually in Illinois jumped 2000%. In Chicago, 80% of adult black males of working age have felony records. In 1999, 992 black men graduated from all the colleges of Illinois. In that same year, 7,000 were released from prison into the hell of legal discrimination and social exile where their debt to society is never paid, never payable. He may be "free," but many states will never allow a once-convicted man to vote again. "More African-Americans are under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850 and more are legally disenfranchised today than in 1872, the year the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified." <sup>1</sup>

Now you may think—for politicians and televisions have been working hard to make you think—that these awesome numbers issue from the violence and decay in the ghettos of American cities. If you are white-washed in America's self-deception, you assume prisoners of color have only reaped the rewards of their criminal behavior. But a far more insidious injustice is at work than appears. In her just published book, *The New Jim Crow*, law professor Michelle Alexander unravels the cords that bind our whole nation in evil. Here, I will not attempt to back up each of her points, as a lecture might, and as her book does, for a sermon has a different purpose from a lecture. First, I ask you to listen with your heart. If your mind boggles at the what we say, go and read this book. Then let us talk. Let us all talk.

The mass incarceration of blacks in America is a system of racialized control—a "racial caste system," in Alexander's words—caused not by unusual amounts of crime among blacks, but by policies and practices in all the branches of government, driven by ambition, fear, and greed. When Ronald Reagan declared a war on drugs in 1982, drug use in America was at a low ebb in all communities. Only 2% of Americans then held that drug use was America's number one problem and Reagan's declaration of "war" was met with surprise. But at the end of Reagan's term, not 2% but 64% of Americans thought drugs were America's greatest problem. The incidence of illegal drug use had not changed much. More

important, the frequency of illegal drug use did not differ much among racial and ethnic groups—it was and still is about 6% or 7% across white, black, and Latino populations in any given year. Yet in many states, 90% of those sent to prison for drug offenses are black or Latino. What has been happening?

“From the outset,” Alexander writes, “the war on drugs had little to do with public concern about drugs and much to do with public concern about race.” She demonstrates that in the aftermath of the civil rights advancements of the 1960s, the resentment that poor whites felt when blacks were no longer officially and legally inferior to them found an expression in racialized electoral politics. As early as Nixon’s campaign, this so-called “southern strategy” welded the face of the black man to crime and coupled that feared image with the promise to crack down on crime. This promise won men power. For forty years, America’s presidents, including Clinton, could only gain their seat by supporting and developing the policies that sweep hundreds of thousands of black and brown men into prison.

Did you know that Reagan’s war has meant that the federal government directly pays police departments a bounty for every man sent to prison for a drug offense? Did you know that federal law permits local municipalities to keep the money and property forfeited by every person they arrest for drugs? Did you know that through the last 20 years, the Supreme Court has removed all Fourth Amendment protections against random drug searches, and has disqualified anyone from seeking redress for racist policies unless someone in power actually states that racism was what motivated his abuse? In function and in character, the American policy of mass incarceration of blacks is a direct descendant of Jim Crow. Alexander summarizes it this way: “Hundreds of years ago, our nation put those considered less than human in shackles; less than 100 years ago we relegated them to the other side of town; today we put them in cages.<sup>2</sup> Since 1985, the American prison population has grown from 350,000 to 2.3 million. We are afflicted by a hideous blindness, a racial caste system that has devoured millions of lives, impoverished public coffers, and deranged our national purpose.

Jesus tells it like it is. That unshackled man with demons bruising himself with stones off among the tombs—if ever there was a motherless child, he is it. Compassion finally meets him in Jesus. In Hebrew the word we translate “compassion” is just *womb* (*rehem*). Jesus “felt womb.” ♪ There must be a womb somewhere . . . But notice this. Whether for his safety or their own, the townspeople have restrained that man with shackles and chains, says the story, but he has broken them in pieces: “No one had the strength to subdue him.” Unless this is the incredible Hulk, or Mark has gone silly with amazement, something else is going on. Surely shackles of *some* size could settle him. It fits reality better to say the town is not serious about restraining him. Deep down, they don’t really want to subdue him or help him or heal him. They want him “out there.” They need him there.

We’ve seen this before. It is the basic tragedy of societies, that in order to keep peace “in here,” the people put their sense of evil out there—on the “evil empire” or the “axis of evil.” They hold themselves innocent and ignorant of responsibility for evil in the world, and often actually destroy the demonized “other” in exile and torment. Between the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the fall of the Twin Towers—the end of the Communist and the dawn of the Terrorist—America threw over a million black men in prison. “Criminals are the one social group in America we have permission to hate.”

When Jesus sends demons from that man’s mind into swine and he is restored, you might think the town (if not the pig farmer) would be glad that their citizen is healed. But they are not. They are afraid. They beg Jesus to get out of town. With no evil man on the outskirts, the town is dangerously out of balance. They must now own their own evil—or force their politicians to start shackling men in prisons and making laws to sweep a legion of hated citizens out of sight where they can be safely despised. But Jesus has healed the man and he wants to follow Jesus, now. Jesus refuses. “Go home to your friends,” he says. The womb of compassion knows that healing which is only personal is not big enough to fulfill God’s will. Healing must also be social and communal. The demonized man must come home, free

and welcome. The community must deal with its own “dark side,” in the Jungian sense. They must become aware of their own violence and greed and oppression and fear. Accepting the one they have despised is how this must begin. “Go home.”

For the man from prison, coming home is often an unrelenting terror. I have seen how inhumanly alert a parolee must be to all the threats that will land him in jail again. It is not possible for most. In 2000, as many people were returned to prison for parole violations as had been put prison in 1980 for all reasons combined! We are drowning in the sea of our own wrong-doing, carried mostly by wombless, compassionless racial indifference to the suffering of millions of men and women in this system— of whom by far the majority are men of color who have broken drug laws for which white people are not held accountable—laws whose punitive harshness is seen nowhere else in the developed world. Read the book. You will weep like a mother whose son has been taken hostage by violent, unruly men.

What is the gospel message in this tragic, painful story? When I was twenty or so, the only homosexuals I had ever encountered were men I’d call desperate, cruising in cars beside me as I walked home, offering money for their pleasure at the edge of town. I was disgusted by them all. Within a decade, that scene was changing. Gay men— couples!—were proud. My whole view changed, along with many, many others’. To be simple about it, the change had to do with connections, coming to know the person on the other side of the label. We met “them.” We welcomed them home from exile. But where do you meet men out of prison? Not in church, mostly. Oh yes, Gethsemane Church, where every member is a formerly incarcerated person. It is good that such a church exists. But where are the formerly incarcerated millions? They are not in the churches. In this nation so eager to call on the name of Jesus, why is the womb of compassion so inhumanely closed to the formerly incarcerated? This question can generate a conversation in which the gospel can come alive.

To the man who had demons, Jesus says, “Go home to your friends.” We need to find ways to say to people who have been in prison, *Come home, to us, friend*. It is essential. Christian churches, at least in theory, are better shaped than any other part of American society to find an open heart, an open ear, to find ways that a person who has been in prison can come home.

Michelle Alexander reminds her reader that in the year he was killed, Martin Luther King Jr. was calling forth from Americans a “complete restructuring” of their heart—their conscience. For many years now, the Dalai Lama has used every opportunity to ask his listeners to come alive to the simple fact that we have “all known compassion from our mother’s arms.” Compassion is available! We can see every mother’s son in everyone who lives. Friends, let us pursue that day when “Happy Mother’s Day” is a happier days for every mother’s son. Let us bring this alive at First Church as a conversation about race, about life, about the people we must become, the people we shall become, the people who are Home to friends we have not yet seen.

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1. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New Press, 2010) p. 175

2. *ibid.*, p. 138