

The Gospel and Incarceration
Hebrews 13:1-3, 10:16, Matthew 25:37-40

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Vamos

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A note about this written sermon: this is an almost word-for-word transcription of a sermon that was preached from an outline, and reflects the colloquial and oral nature of the original.

Well, today's sermon is Part One of a five part series on freedom. And the name of the series is actually called "The Gospel Means Freedom." Freedom. We're going to be talking about that over the next five weeks or so, and you might think, wow, that's a pretty abstract thing that we don't think too much about. We kind of take it for granted as a birthright of Americans. We fought a revolution for...it's a free country and so forth. But what does freedom really mean? Is freedom just freedom to do whatever we want, the external form of freedom? Or is it possible that that kind of freedom, freedom to do whatever we want, might lead us to a certain kind of slavery? And that freedom is truly about something internal, internal freedom, which is a spiritual and psychological freedom. We'll be talking about both realms, both ideas about freedom, the external and the internal, over the next five weeks and how they're interrelated, and certainly have a lot to do with the gospel.

Today we're going to focus on the external nature of freedom. And in particular, we're going to talk about why it is that societies over time have chosen to limit the external freedom of certain people through, for example, slavery. And today in particular, we're going to talk about incarceration. What does the gospel have to do with incarceration?

So before we begin this exploration, I want to emphasize and remind us that this story of the Bible is really a story about freedom. We might recall that the main story of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew scriptures, is a story about the people, the Hebrew people, moving from slavery in Egypt, encountering and becoming intimate with a God who liberates them to be free, leads them toward freedom. And this is a story about external freedom, but mirrors an inner freedom that is the concern of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, a spiritual freedom that is indeed about moving from slavery to freedom.

The Bible also has a particular concern for people who are or have been incarcerated. It may be because a lot of the stories of those we encounter in scripture are stories of people who have been imprisoned. So maybe you remember Joseph and Potiphar's wife who accuses him falsely and is thrown into jail. Here is a list of a few others in scripture who have been incarcerated - Samson, Jeremiah, Zedekiah, Daniel, John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Silas, Apaphrus, Aristarchus, Junia, and of course, Jesus, who was incarcerated before his execution. In a certain sense, the story of the Bible is a story of a bunch of jailbirds and none more prominent, of course, than Paul who wrote the better part of the New Testament. Paul, the Apostle who Acts records as being incarcerated three times. But the tradition of the church is that he was in jail at least seven times, and we'll be visiting his story at various times during this sermon series. Keep in mind too, that in the ancient world, prison was nothing like what we think of today.

So in the Old Testament, prison was generally a cistern, a pit in the ground. A cistern, and is what people dig to catch the rainwater when it would very infrequently come in that part of the world. What a great idea to do double duty by imprisoning people in the pit where it was never dry, it was always cold and always dark? And so Psalm 103, when we read that line to *redeem my life from the pit*, it means to be

released out of imprisonment. Usually people were put in jail because they couldn't pay a debt. It was a horrible place. Job, in the book of Job, he prefers *Sheol*, the land of the dead, to life in the pit, because at least in *Sheol* your pain is ended. In the Roman period, during the life of Jesus, a Roman prison was no picnic either. People frequently died of starvation or disease; food that generally didn't come to you from in the prison. It had to be brought from somebody you knew outside. It was a place designed to be dehumanizing.

This past week, I asked a friend, a new friend who joined our CookWell board, who teaches at Princeton University and whose area of specialty is 'incarceration in the ancient world'. And he shared with me a paper about ancient graffiti in the late Roman period. And it's about graffiti found in Corinth around the time of Jesus. Prison graffiti. And so these are prisoners held in a Roman prison, which was lightless and largely soundless, graffiti that they wrote on the marble floor of their prison cell, barely literate people. And it gives you a kind of snapshot as to how cruel life would have been in such a situation. So I just share with you one graffito, which I guess is the singular of graffiti. Some suffering soul wrote on the marble floor of the prison - May Tuche, which is a god - "May Tuche overcome for the one toiling in this lawless place. Lord, show no mercy to the one who threw us in here."

So, that gives us a picture of the kind of randomness of incarceration, not that this person committed a crime, but somebody had it in for him. And it is a lawless place. It might give us a sense of how hopeless it would have been. To be in prison in the ancient world was to be subject to dehumanization. And it's a sad fact, and here's a pretty broad generalization, but I do think it's borne out by historical fact. It's a sad fact that throughout the history of almost every society's practice of incarceration, putting people in jail was not for the purpose of justice, to balance the scales - when somebody commits a crime, violates the norms of society; not about seeking to restore that person back into society. But instead incarceration was largely used for social control, for the subjugation of particular groups of people.

According to scholar Christopher Marshall, this generalization holds for the world that we learn about in the Bible itself. And he writes that incarceration is a way of silencing pesky prophets who voiced criticism of the reigning King or gave him unwelcome advice, of keeping defeated enemies under control, or detaining people accused of disloyalty. In the new Testament prison often serves as an instrument of religious persecution. Prisoners in the Bible are thus, always depicted as the victims of injustice and stories about prisoners are invariably told from the point of view of the prisoner, not from the perspective of those who did the imprisoning.

The Bible is a story of the prisoner, none more prominent than the pioneer of our faith, Jesus Christ, who was a prisoner. It may be that that's one of the reasons, again, that the Bible shows special concern for those who are incarcerated. And we read one of the most famous examples among others of the scriptures and Jesus' concern for the incarcerated. *When was it that we saw you in prison and visited you...? Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.* And the picture that we get in scripture - contrary to the practice of incarceration in society. Whenever we encounter punishment in scripture, and of course there is a good bit - God punishing using judgment, maybe we might even say natural consequences. When the people of Israel violate the terms of the covenant, violate the law, God uses punishment. The Babylonian exile was a means of judgment, but always, always for the purpose of redemption and restoration - restoration of a right relationship and a more intimate relationship with God.

So all this might lead us to consider 'what's the situation for America in our practice of incarceration'? And we might ask the question, is it for the sake of justice, to balance the scales when someone violates the norms of society, to restore that person to society; or is it merely for the sake of punishment? Is it for the sake of social control of certain groups in our society? If we look at the data and the history, we

might find that our practice of incarceration is not so different from the ancient practices that I have just been describing.

I don't know how many of you have seen the documentary "13th". I saw it this past summer and we actually did a watch party, to watch together that documentary by Anna Deavere Smith. It's about the 13th amendment. And, you know, watching this was a revelation to me because I thought, "Oh, the 13th amendment, it's about freeing the slaves, right?" How great, but I never actually read the text of the 13th amendment, which reads thus:

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as punishment for crime*, whereof the parties shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States."

So, huge loophole in the 13th amendment. How do you reinstall slave people? It's really simple. You just convict them of a crime. Some may have read about the fact that over 1300 of those people fighting the fires in the Western part of our country are incarcerated persons. And do you know how much they get paid? \$1 an hour! And if you don't believe me, look it up. And these are people who cannot then become professional firefighters after they're returned to society. Actually, the governor, I think, has proposed legislation to fix that.

If you want to extract someone's labor for free or next to free, you just convict them of a crime. And if you want to disenfranchise a group of people, especially when such things as poll taxes and means tests for voting are made illegal as they were in the 1960s, all you have to do is incarcerate people and then they lose their vote. Michelle Alexander has written extensively¹ about this and how the war on drugs (There has been some controversy about whether her thesis still holds) is a means to disenfranchise an entire group of people in our country. And if you don't believe me, just read the statistics - 2.2 million people in this nation's prisons and jails, a 500% increase over the last 40 years. The United States represents 2.4% of the world's population. And yet we house 22%, almost a quarter of the world's incarcerated persons. People of color make up 37% of the U S population but 67% of the prison population. Black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men. One out of four black teenagers, black young people will be incarcerated

I think that tells a tale. We should look at the fact that it's not always been the case that prison has been solely about punishment. At the end of the 20th century, there was a movement started by Quakers to make prison a place where people are rehabilitated. You might remember, we used to call prisons *penitentiaries*; from the word penitence. The self-conscious idea that we give people a means to do a penance, to restore themselves to society. So I didn't know, but solitary confinement, what we consider the worst kind of punishment, originally was a means to separate people and force them to be by themselves so they can simply think about what they did, as a way to embrace their penance and be restored to society.

So if were to develop a theology of incarceration, if we were to think about what the gospel has to do with incarceration.... First, I think we need as Christian people to come to terms with social policy about incarceration. We have an obligation to think about how it is that we treat those people on the margins of our society. And I think we need to do that because we need to think about the person who is the focal point of our faith, Jesus, who was a prisoner. The gospel exhorts us to find compassion for the incarcerated person.

And here's where I want to conclude, by turning to the letter to the Hebrews, the last chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, which Kyle read from, chapter 13. It contains a lot of ethical exhortations to

¹ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York : [Jackson, Tenn.] :New Press ; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2010.

virtue. We talked about that last Sunday. But he cites one very specific one at the beginning of chapter 13. *Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them; remember those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.* And that gives you a picture of what it meant to be in prison, synonymous with being tortured. And the reason for that becomes clear at the end of the chapter. It says - Hebrews is all about the worship practice of the Hebrew people - and it cites this practice where the high priest would sacrifice an unblemished animal and the blood would be spilled on the altar, the offering for sin. But the animal itself would be burned outside the city gates, the profane place where criminals are executed. And it makes a comparison with Jesus who was crucified outside the city gates just as any criminal. And he died the cruel death. He was executed as a prisoner, as a criminal. And so the final exhortation is *let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.*

To be a Christian is to develop a compassion for those who suffered the fate of Jesus himself. To be a Christian is to go outside the gates of respectable society, of the rule-following socially acceptable camp, and to go where Jesus was taken for the sake of compassion, for those who suffer there.

The movie "Cry Freedom" is about Donald Woods, an editor of a South African newspaper, and his friendship with Steve Biko during the time of apartheid in South Africa. Woods becomes increasingly sympathetic to the cause of blacks in South Africa. And when he meets with Steve Biko, Steve Biko tries to disabuse him of the idea that he really knows what it's like. He said, "You can't know what it's like until you go there, until you visit the townships and see what it's like, until you are with those people who are suffering there". And he did that and it transformed his life. It gave him a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being on this earth and a part of the redemption project of that country, and of all of us as people of faith.

You probably know that we have started a program called CookWell, and its aim is to give job skills for people who are transitioning from prison. And we've tried to be really conscious about *why are we doing this?* I mean, we can do this with the motivation that, you know, we're good Christians, this is a do-good kind of thing. And we're going to feel great about the fact that we're giving people in need job skills. And you know, that is good. I don't mean to, in any way, denigrate that that is a really good reason to do it. But that can't be the fundamental, primary reason we're doing it.

We're doing it because our freedom is tied up with the freedom of people who are so unlike us. Our freedom consists in getting to know the life of people, for example, in Trenton, whose choices are so limited and who are often tracked to prison. We cannot be free until we know what life is like for such people as that, for those who are suffering outside the city gates. For us to be free, we need to know their story. And so to pray for those in prison and those coming out of prison as if you were in prison with them, as if you were struggling to make sense of the world after incarceration.

How are we going to do that? It's such a challenging proposition. But we've got to try. To find our humanity by a willingness to go outside the comfortable camp we live in, and encounter Christ in those suffering there.

I hope you'll join us next week as we talk about liberation theology.

Amen.