

Go to Jail: Thunder Justice, Releasing Captives, and Acts of Radical New Familial Solidarity!

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Scripture: Matthew 25:31- 43

"I will return again as the Son of Adam in glory and accompanied by every heavenly messenger to occupy the throne of glory. Then all the peoples will assemble and folks will be separated into groups similar to how a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Then the Son of Adam will put the sheep on his right and the goats to the left. Then the everlasting King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who have the blessing of my Father, inherit the domain prepared for you from the beginning of time. For when I was hungry you fed me, when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, when I was a stranger you showed me hospitality, when I was naked you gave me clothing, when I was sick you took care of me, and when I was in prison you came to see me.'

Then those virtuous folks will reply, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you as a stranger and extended you a hospitable welcome? Or naked and gave you clothes? When did we find you ill and take care of you, or incarcerated and visited you?'

And the king will answer, "The truth is whatever you did to anyone, especially to the most inconspicuous members of my family, it was like you did for me.'

Then he will turn to his left and say, "You will be condemned to the everlasting fire... because the truth is, whatever you didn't do for the most inconspicuous members of my family, it was as if you were ignoring me.

Sermon:

Now back in that little country church in Kansas where I grew up, we did a lot to try and relieve hunger in the world. We had a lot of farmers in that congregation, which included my family, and we could literally give some of our wheat to those who were starving through Mennonite Central Committee.

For a time, our congregation would also gather yearly to butcher a couple donated steers, stew them up and then can the meat so it too could be shipped to hungry folks around the world. Also, as an active member of the youth group, I would regularly join in the annual county wide Crop Walk which raised not only money to feed the hungry, but also awareness of world hunger. So, when it came to feeding the hungry, we certainly could check that box!

Several families would regularly host young adults from around the world through MCC's Visitor Exchange Program and we would also invite international students spend the Christmas holidays with us in our community. Welcoming the stranger - check again!

The women would also meet weekly for "Sewing Circle" where they would sew quilts and clothing to be sent to those in need. And maybe because good Mennonite farm families manage to repeatedly

patch and then wear out their clothes, we would often purchase brand new clothes to send to those in need. So, clothing the naked, check again.

Now, one of the benefits, and perhaps a curse as well, of living in a small rural community is that everyone knows each other's business. So, when a particular family was going through a health crisis, not only did folks show up to visit, but they would come bearing a casserole and a homemade pie. Folks would also show up to take turns milking cows, gathering the eggs, and making sure that all the livestock got fed and watered. Visiting and caring for the sick — yes, we had that covered too!

But I can't recall anyone actually going directly to jail to visit prisoners. We would invite members of a "prison ministry" team to come and share once or twice a year during one of our Sunday evening services. And I know that our family, as well as many others in the congregation, financially supported those folks' efforts as they lead bible studies and saved the souls of those wayward criminals. Though perhaps not as robust as the other efforts, I guess you could say we sort of checked that one off the list, thus avoiding goat status?

Now of course I am being a bit sarcastic. I don't really think that any of those folks believed their efforts were being done to get them heavenly glory. I'm also not promoting that being faithful to Jesus is merely a matter of crossing things off some long "to do list." "Prayed today, check! Read my bible today, check! Didn't curse my parents, also check! Didn't wear clothes that combined wool, cotton or polyester? "Gave to everyone who ask me for something? Ah... let me get back to you on those last two." Actually, it would appear, that Jesus was doubling down. Not only should we be doing these things, but the truly virtuous fail to keep track of these good deeds and are seemingly oblivious what they are doing!

But before I go much further this morning, I must also admit (though I probably shouldn't, since it may put at risk your share of eternal glory), I am quite proud that our little urban church. From our very beginning, we have opened our doors to feed the hungry, provided clothes and blankets - and yes, literally covered some naked bodies on several occasions. We have opened our doors to folks too ill to be on the street or in the "shelter." And we have most definitely shown hospitality to folks who have become estranged from our larger society due to poverty, mental illness, and drug addiction.

Now we embark on a new part of our journey together - "Thunder Justice." Note that it is not, "Thunder for Justice" but it is a unique type of justice work that loudly pierces the storms in the lives of real folks; storms that have been created by our so-called criminal justice system!

But let us also be clear that this journey is not merely some enlightened "project" developed over years of in-depth scholarly studies to be a liberal attempt at ending unjust incarceration. Much of what it proposes enables us to continue what we have been doing for a couple of years now.

For years, some of us have been posting bail on our own dime and voluntarily visiting folks in prison, or getting folks to court and attending trials to support our homeless friends. So, we definitely haven't done this for the money, or to save souls, or even to make sure that we inherit some heavenly reward. We started doing these things because those folks who were getting arrested, put into jail,

and going to court, were folks who had become a part of our little church community. No studies, no lengthy meetings, just doing what seemed like the right thing to do for a friend.

And these efforts have gotten us all twisted up in one of the worst injustices in our nation. Simply put, incarceration in the US is fueled by poverty, and our nation, in spite of its wealth incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world!

This is an evil cocktail of insufficient access and resources to sufficiently address both physical and mental health care, the lack of quality and quantity of educational opportunities, the lack of jobs that provide a living wage. Not to mention, the lack of quality childcare and those age old curses of racism, sexism, agism, ablism and heterosexism.

But the inverse is also true - incarceration is a major cause of poverty. Even short term and wrongly convicted jail time can jeopardize one's housing, job and government subsidies. As soon as Social Security learns you're in jail, they suspend all benefits. But then, following release, it can take several months to get those benefits reinstated and a check in the mail.

For the formerly incarcerated, it is far more difficult to find work, housing and educational opportunities, and many times folks are released with a financial debt, for legal, housing and restitution—expenses they are required to pay. And don't get me started on the lack of "rehabilitation" inside that is supposed to help folks actually succeed when on the outside.

So, a simple mistake, a stupid choice, or the lack of quality legal assistance, or perhaps a false accusation can literally mess someone up for the rest of their life! A misdemeanor or lower level felony can result in a life sentence of poverty! How does this not constitute cruel and unusual punishment?

And here in Larimer County, one of the wealthiest in the nation, we actually violate that constitutional protection each and every day by incarcerating hundreds of folks who haven't even been tried. It is the law, a state law in fact, that if you cannot afford bail you must remain in jail until you finally get your day in court. Bail can be as low as \$100 in most cases. A few years ago, when several of us were advocating against the extraordinarily expensive expansion of the county jail, we learned that nearly two-thirds (over 400 inmates at that time) fell into that category of simply being too poor to pay their bond. This, my sisters and brothers, is not simply unusual, but it is cruel, excessive, and the very thing once considered abhorrent - a debtor's prison.

But just like our current situation, the major cause of incarceration in Jesus' day was also poverty, or specifically the inability to pay debts. Now the gospels do mention things like thievery, insurrection, and murder, but the legal infraction of debt is mentioned far more often.

In the rest of the New Testament, treason or the public proclamations of Jesus as Divine ruler became the leading cause of incarceration for those earliest of Jesus followers! Not only was Jesus arrested, but so too were most of that early leadership of Christianity, including, but not limited to, Paul and Peter. John, we recall was exiled to Patmos and pretty much the rest of that merry band of disciples ended up arrested and incarcerated. This would have also been the case during the first three centuries of the common era when the followers of Jesus would have either been in prison themselves or

likely visiting a fellow member who was. Our own Anabaptist ancestors of the 16th century were also quite familiar with incarceration, torture and execution!

This might explain why those invited into God's domain may have failed to recognize Jesus because they would have been looking at familiar faces of those folks they saw in church. And because those folks had experienced a great transformation from being forgiven by an unconditionally loving God, they too would have impetuously flung open their doors to the poor, the social misfits, and the empirical outcasts! And those were the folks attracted to this new Jesus community because that fellowship did practice such simple acts of compassion.

You see, being compassionate will make you compassionate. Nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary . . . they followers of Jesus were simply doing what they should and what they could. I really like the homeless version (SV) here as Jesus says, *"whatever you did to anyone, especially to the most inconspicuous members of my family, it was like you did for me."*

Easter has not only transformed us into new beings, but Easter has also made it possible for all of us to now become a radical new family! Prison visitation wasn't about the saving of poor lost incarcerated souls, but about sustaining the faithful souls who, because they had acted out their salvation, were now being incarcerated for it.

Hopefully we can add our thunderous voices with others and bring crashing down some of the worst parts of our nation's criminally unjust system of incarceration. But remember, Thunder Justice is not only about making a lot of noise, but also about releasing the lives of souls who have too long kept captive!