

“The Least of These,”
a sermon preached by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
March 18, 2007

Why would anyone willingly go to prison? Some people go because it's where they work, as guards or nurses or administrators. Some people go to visit family members or friends. But some go as an act of faith, and that is what we are talking about here today.

The first time I went to prison was when I was working as a commercial photographer in Washington, DC. I was hired to work on a project for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. They were producing a brochure on drug treatment programs, so I spent a few days at a medium security prison in Minnesota, taking pictures and listening to stories. I remember a big black man talking about his family driving up from Texas to visit, and how it hurt to have his mother see him in prison. I remember a middle-aged white man, who'd been an interior designer, telling how he prepared drugs in the kitchen of his suburban home. I was struck by how normal these people seemed. I had expected them to be different. Spending those days working in prison changed my perspective--I saw that many people there were like lots of people on the outside; they didn't have some of the opportunities perhaps, certainly they'd made some bad choices, and were paying a high price for these mistakes.

Do you know that the US has the highest incarceration rate in the world? We lock up more people than anywhere else—more than in Russia or Cuba, the next highest countries. Our incarceration rate is 4 to 7 times higher than other western countries like Britain, France, and Germany. We have less than 5% of the world's population but have over 23% of the world's imprisoned people.¹

Why do we lock more people up than any other country? I have an idea, but I wonder if you would take just a minute or two to talk to each other about this. Turn to those nearby and talk about why you think the United States does this.

Okay, let's hear what you had to say (at this point people shared their thoughts.)

¹ National Council on Crime and Delinquency website:
http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/2006nov_factsheet_incarceration.pdf

Here's my answer: fear. I believe we lock people up because we, the land of the free and the home of the brave, are also a fearful people. Let me tell you another story from when I lived in Washington.

I got involved in a program in which photographers like me worked with children living in homeless shelters, teaching them how to use our cameras so they could document their lives. I remember one night, driving to a meeting about this program through a tough part of town. I locked my car doors. But several months later, after working once a week with a ten year-old boy named Dion, and sometimes with his cousin Brandon and their friends, I realized that I no longer locked my car doors when I drove into DC's poorer neighborhoods. The neighborhoods hadn't changed. The city hadn't gotten any safer. But something had changed in me. By walking those sidewalks covered with broken glass, by spending time with the people who lived there, I was no longer a stranger in what had seemed like a foreign land. I was still an outsider there, but I also felt at home.

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency reports that "In the past thirty years, the US has come to rely on imprisonment as its response to all types of crime." Think about politics over this period--is there any candidate who wants to be called "soft on crime"? Remember how George Bush the elder shamelessly used the Willie Horton story to raise people's fears?

Of course there are people in this country who need to be locked up, to keep them from hurting themselves or others. Of course there need to be ways to deter people from committing crime, and to punish them when they do. But our approach to crime and punishment needs to evolve.

In our country, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. At the same time we are becoming become a more fearful nation. Many of our leaders know this, and know how to manipulate us by appealing to our prejudices and fears. This leads to policies like mandatory minimum sentences, which take discretion away from judges. It leads to a justice system that is about retribution, punishing criminals by putting them in prison. Nobody disputes this fact anymore—that prisons don't rehabilitate, they punish, and most of the time people come out of them worse off than when they went in.

There's another approach, called restorative justice; that still holds the offender accountable for their crime, but believes we don't ask enough of offenders. Restorative

justice requires offenders to atone for their crimes, to try to repair the harm that was done, and in this way restorative justice is often more healing for the victims of crime.

One of the Buddha's central teachings is this: Hatred never ceases by hatred. But by love alone is healed. This is an ancient and eternal law.²

Restorative justice is based on this belief that we belong to one another, that love is stronger than fear, that only love can heal the wounds we inflict on each other.

In the same way that it is crazy to think that going to war can bring about peace, to think that locking people up in a place that dehumanizes them, that subjects them to torture and abuse and humiliation from guards and other prisoners, will somehow rehabilitate them, is just nuts. The prison system in our country is broken; is abusive to both prisoners and guards, is often inhumane. As in the piece Susan read, how can we expect this system to do anything but create more problems, and harm more people?

If this makes you angry, then good! I hope you will be inspired to lift your voices for prison reform, to fight against mandatory minimum sentences, and other abuses in the system. If this makes you feel discouraged, if you're wondering, "What can one person do?" then I'm glad you're here today. Listen to these words from Robert Kennedy:

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest wall of oppression and resistance." Our individual actions can and do make a difference.

That belief is core to the mission of Partakers, a faith-based prison ministry organization. Based on the fact that prisoners who pursue education while incarcerated are far less likely to commit more crimes, Partakers connects people in faith communities like ours with people in prison. We help a prisoner to earn a college degree while behind bars. The connections benefit the prisoner certainly—having visitors from the outside who offer care and support, who can be mentors and advocates, this makes a huge difference in the life of someone who may have never had a person show them this kind of care.

² Pema Chodron, *The Places that Scare You* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 9.

But the benefits of prison ministry are not just for the prisoner. The word partaker means “one who joins in community with others to share of oneself and learn.” By joining in community with a prisoner, we ourselves are changed—our preconceptions and prejudices are challenged, we learn how others live, we begin to understand something about life behind bars. Listen to these words from North Parish folks doing prison ministry:

“Prison ministry has changed me by opening another group to which I can belong at church, by reminding me that I am responsible to remove barriers between people. That is better to face the difficult than to run away from it. That hard work does not have to be done alone.”

“How I have changed is by becoming more active with this issue. I write letters to the editors and send letters and e-mails to my senators. I speak up at church more about prison conditions. How I have changed through Partakers is by becoming more humble. Partakers has helped me break down the walls between me and people on the inside. And between me and people who visit their loved ones on the inside. I really love being part of the process of partaking.”

“Through the experience of repeatedly spending time in a prison visiting room with prisoners, their friends, family, and the person we visit, I have learned that there is little that separates those on the outside from those on the inside.”

“Through this experience I've learned that there are more injustices than I realized, that I had prejudices that I wasn't aware of, that the prison visit is not a scary thing.”

There is a passage from the Gospel of Matthew that I want to share with you. In it, Jesus is describing the time of judgment as a king sitting upon a throne, separating people from one another. This can be a hard and tricky reading, and we UU's, who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, are rightly wary of how it can be used to exclude or oppress. But they are important words to hear. I believe we are accountable for our actions. It matters how we live our lives. Call it karma, call it judgment, call it what you will, we ought to live as if we will have to answer for how we spent our days. Hear these words from the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I

was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “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 a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25: 34-40).

Right here, this is what I love and what challenges me and scares me about Jesus. His assertion that we will be judged not by how we care for those we like, but how we care for “the least of these”—those it is so easy to forget, to look away from. And people in prison are certainly some of the least of these.

This is the test for us as people of faith—how we live our lives, what we do with the gifts we have been given, whether our deeds match our words. It’s common to get involved in outreach work because we want to help others. But when we do, we often find that it’s ourselves who are blessed and transformed by the process. Those we serve can also be our teachers and can help us find our way. Here’s what one more person said about her experience of prison ministry:

“I’m fundamentally changed by what I did with Partakers. This experience has enriched by life beyond words can express. I received way more than I gave. Because if it, I see and experience the world on a much deeper level.”

Isn’t that why we’re here? To share what we’ve been given, and in doing so realize how much we have? To reach out to others, and in doing so to have our own lives transformed?

“Truly I tell you, just as you did for the least of these who are members of my family, you did for me. . . For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Amen.