

Christians for the Abolition of Prisons

“Proclaim freedom for the prisoners” – Luke 4:18

Christians for the Abolition of Prisons is an organization dedicated to prison abolitionist education and advocacy within the progressive church.

We believe that Jesus came to free all who are held captive and establish new forms of justice, free of retribution and within community. As followers of Jesus, we see the abolition of incarceration and the development of community-based restorative justice as a moral imperative and as our particular vocation as the Body of Christ.

Abolition is more than “just another progressive cause” of the church. Our support for the liberation of all people – including those who have committed serious crimes – is based directly in the gospel of Jesus Christ: in his life proclaiming freedom to captives and good news to the poor, in his cross that overcomes the human need for retribution for harm done, in his resurrection that burst the bonds of sin and death, and in his ongoing presence in the church community that lives out a new kind of justice. Our theology forms the basis for our moral witness against every form of imprisonment.

Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.

He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:17-21 (NIV)

Why Abolition? Why Christians?

Why Abolition?

Progressive Christians are often involved in calls for criminal justice or prison reform and are active in prison ministries. Why do we call for the church to go further than that, calling entirely for the abolition of prisons and our prison culture?

- “Prison reform” often ends up meaning “more prisons,” despite the best intent of its proponents. After all, prisons were developed as a reform of the criminal justice system that was an improvement over capital punishment. Solitary confinement was developed as a penitential reform by well-meaning Christians in 19th-century Pennsylvania. We have to look further than reform to an entirely new way of thinking about liberation and justice.
- Incarceration right now claims to have two purposes: to punish those who have committed crimes, and to rehabilitate them to return them to society. But the two impulses are at odds: the desire to punish leads to ever-worsening conditions of incarceration and the denial of resources like physical and mental health care and education to prisoners, although those are precisely the things that would help prisoners heal and prepare for their release into society. The contradiction is built in to the way prison works, so the system cannot be reformed and must be abolished.
- The biblical call for justice is incompatible with punitive incarceration as it is currently practiced. The most important thing for rehabilitating those in prison and preparing them to return to society is fostering their ties with their community, and especially with their families. But prisons are designed to separate prisoners from their communities and families, cutting them off from the very relationships that will help them heal and make amends and learn to live differently. God is the one who seeks out every lost member of the flock to return them to the whole (Matthew 18:12-14). God desires a system of justice that occurs within relationship and results in healed and renewed relationships with the beloved community. Prisons are not that system!

Why Christians?

Prison abolition is a movement with a long history, but has mostly grown out of secular movements for racial justice and liberation. Christians (especially rich, white Christians) have rarely been public leaders in abolitionist work.

Mass incarceration is the continuation of systems of racial control going all the way back to slavery. Just as Christian abolitionists were involved in the fight against slavery, so Christian abolitionists should be involved in the fight against prisons now.

We believe that prison abolition is essential work of the church. Beyond every human-rights argument for prison abolition, we believe that Jesus’ call to set the prisoners free compels us to do the same. Jesus reached out to the marginalized and left no one outside the circle of God’s community, so Christians are called to abolish prisons, a force that separates people from community. Christ’s death and resurrection ended the need for retributive justice and made true restorative justice within loving community possible.

Who We Are

We are...

- **Christian:** Our commitment to prison abolition does not arise only from universal understandings of human rights, but from our specific belief in the revelation of the nature of God through the man Jesus Christ, his death, and his resurrection.
- **Mainline:** We are speaking primarily to the mainline, progressive Christian churches in the US. These are churches that are historically rich, white, and liberal. Mainline Christians have commitments to criminal justice reform as one of various progressive causes—but for the most part have not made the paradigm shift to abolitionism. Recognizing our own privilege, we seek to organize the mainline churches to support work being done on prison abolition by those marginalized groups most affected by mass incarceration.
- **Intersectional:** We recognize that prison abolition is only one aspect of many interconnected struggles for justice in our society, and that our efforts must take into account the complex ways our current criminal justice system affects people at the intersection of their various identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

What We Do

Abolition is a long-term goal. But our commitment to the abolition of prisons and better forms of justice informs the way we approach immediate policy and prisoner-advocacy work.

From an abolitionist perspective, it's important that our work to reform the current system not lead to retrenching it. From a Christian perspective, it's essential that our advocacy always show forth the gospel truth that Christ has abolished the need for retribution and that God seeks out all who are lost, to heal in community.

Some of our specific policy and advocacy goals:

- **Abolish the death penalty:** We join in longstanding Christian opposition to the death penalty, an act of violence against the image of God in every human being.
- **Abolish LWOP:** Life without parole (LWOP) is another form of death sentence, sentencing people to die in prison. Our faith teaches us that everyone, no matter what they've done, can change—think of the apostle Paul and his dramatic conversion after persecuting the church. Parole is a way of recognizing that people change, and that even those who have done great harm should have the chance to return to society. Especially as we fight the death penalty, it's important that we not give in to reforms that propose LWOP as an alternative to execution and therefore make it harder to advocate for greater access to parole for everyone sentenced to life. God desires that no one should be lost (2 Peter 3:9) so everyone should have the chance to be reincorporated into their community.
- **Abolish solitary confinement:** Solitary confinement that lasts longer than 15 days is torture and does great psychological harm. People incarcerated in solitary confinement can be kept in their cells alone 23 or 24 hours a day, often only allowed recreation alone in an outdoor cage. Prisoners in solitary liken it to being buried alive. In the name of the One who burst from the grave, we call for the immediate end of long-term solitary confinement.
- **Abolish private prisons:** Although the vast majority of prisoners in the US are held in public facilities, private prisons are a particular immorality because of the profit motive. No one should make

money from the suffering of another; no one should profit from the caging of a human being. “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). In this spirit we demand the end of private prisons.

- **Abolish immigration detention:** Immigration detention is prison by another name. But it lacks even the excuse of punishment, as immigrants are being caged because they are immigrants, not as punishment for a crime. In fact, most immigrants in detention are seeking asylum as they flee violence and persecution in their countries of origin. God commands us to “love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19). In response to this command of hospitality and in the context of brutality against immigrants, we join in the call to end the criminalization of immigration and the caging of immigrants.
- **Abolish money bail:** Over half of all people held in local jails have not been convicted of any crime, but are in jail awaiting trial, often because they cannot afford bail. Not only are those held in jail caged, sometimes for years, without conviction, but being unable to make bail often leads to the loss of jobs and livelihood. And being held pre-trial makes it much harder to prove your innocence. In fact, more than 95% of criminal cases never go to trial but are resolved through plea bargains. If everyone went to trial, the system would be overwhelmed. Pre-trial confinement is a powerful tool prosecutors can use to encourage plea bargains, even from innocent defendants, when a guilty plea can get them out of jail sooner than waiting months or years for a trial. Effectively, money bail means there is one system of law for the rich and one for the poor. But the Bible tells us not to let our justice system be perverted by discriminating between the defendant who is rich or who is poor (Leviticus 19:15). No one should be locked up for poverty, so money bail must be abolished.
- **Abolish sex-offender registries:** Sex offender registries effectively form an additional punishment for offenders who have already served their sentences. Harsh restrictions on residency can leave sex offenders homeless and ban them from large sections of the cities where they live. Such restrictions are ineffective, reducing community support that helps prevent those recently released from committing further crimes. Registries even expose offenders to vigilante violence. Sex offenders are modern-day lepers, banished from our communities. Just as Jesus touched and healed lepers, we must address sexual violence in a way that hold offenders accountable within communities rather than hiding them out of sight through our laws.

We believe in the God who brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt.

The foundational act of God's covenant with Israel – the act by which the identity of God is shown forth and to which Israel returns, over and over, in their naming of God – is the release of captives. The Exodus from Egypt defines the nation of Israel and the nature of God. The Exodus is the story of setting free those who are enslaved, but it applies equally to prisoners. God is the one who brings those in prison out of bondage into the Promised Land of the beloved community.

We believe that Jesus came to proclaim release to the prisoners and the captives.

In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he begins by reading a prophecy from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We believe that Jesus' promise of freedom for prisoners does not apply only to "spiritual" imprisonment to sin but to every structure that holds captive the children of God – including the actual prisons and structures of supervision and confinement built into our criminal justice system. We believe that Jesus' proclamation of freedom for prisoners applies to those who have committed crimes as well as to those who are innocent but held captive.

We believe that everyone has great capacity for good and great capacity for evil.

Prisons are built on the myth of incapacitation – that if we can exile the "bad people" out of our communities we will be safe. But as Christians we believe that each of us is created in the image of God but also that each of us is subject to the power of sin. There are no "good people" and "bad people" – we are each "entirely sinner and entirely saint." That means our justice can't be based on separating out the "bad people" but instead on building stronger networks of safety to prevent violence and restorative justice procedures to make amends when harm has been done. God will always go after the "lost sheep" (Matthew 18:12-14), so we should work for justice within communities, not by allowing people to be banished from them.

We believe that Jesus died for our sins on the cross, and by doing so brought an end to punishment.

"By his blood, he reconciled us. By his wounds, we are healed." We believe that Jesus bore the punishment of every sin in our place on the cross and thus reconciled us to God. As a direct consequence of this, the need for punishment and retribution ended when Jesus died. He bore it away by his death. Because of the cross, we are liberated to imagine justice that is free of retribution. We understand justice to be about accountability, restitution, and restoration without punishment. There is no more punishment, because "Jesus paid it all."

We believe that Christ descended into Hell and rose again to defeat death and Hell.

Jesus' descent into Hell upon his death, to overcome death and Hell and destroy it, is the paradigm for prison abolition. By entering Hell, Jesus abolished it, setting free those who were imprisoned by death or sin. Many Orthodox icons of the Resurrection show Jesus taking Adam and Eve by the hand and setting them free. Jesus broke the gates of Hell to release all those who were held captive.

We believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Our justice must always be aimed at forgiveness and reconciliation. The church has the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). It is our job to build structures of justice aimed at pursuing reconciliation and restoration of right relationship. Prisons are the opposite of this kind of justice. Their retributive aims conflict with the goal of rehabilitation, and imprisoning offenders does not meet the needs of victims. Ultimately, we believe that justice comes through restoration and making amends in community.

We believe that God is reconciling all things and making all things new.

The church is the first witness to God's re-creation of the world. The new creation begun with Jesus' victory over sin and death will not be complete until all things in heaven and on earth are reconciled to God. Prison abolition is the banishment of those who have done harm. But ultimately, we know that even those who have done great harm will be restored to God's love. Abolishing prisons is a concrete witness of our hope, as Christians, that all will eventually be restored through "the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting." It is making real on earth now what we eventually hope for in the New Jerusalem at Christ's return.

FAQ

- **But what about “violent predators”?**

This is the question we get most often. “What about serial killers? What about murderers? How do we keep society safe from predators without locking them up?”

It is a serious question that any abolitionist needs to seriously address. Abolitionism is *not* about impunity, letting abusers and those who do violence continue without accountability. But we believe prisons are the wrong way to produce safety and accountability.

Why?

Let’s be clear: there are separate questions bound up in the question above. We can start with this one:

What about people who have committed “violent crimes”? What about murderers?

First: ***violence is contextual***. Even horrific, inexplicable, and unjustifiable acts of violence are almost always *motivated*. Violence occurs within a particular context in response to particular stresses and situations. People who have committed violence, even murder, in particular situations (in the context of a robbery, in the context of gang conflict etc.) are not dangerous in every situation.

Rather than rely on prisons to lock them up, we can work to transform the underlying situations that led such people to violence. You see this in the work that [Homeboy Industries](#) is doing to prevent gang violence, and in targeted violence-prevention programs like [Operation Ceasefire](#). By removing people from the situations that led them to commit violent crimes, we can help them avoid further violence. By putting resources into violence prevention and [transformative justice](#) to change the situations that lead to violence, we can have a greater effect on “safety” than simply by locking up people for being “dangerous.” Even in the case of sexual assault, programs like [Circles of Support and Accountability](#) have demonstrated that by providing material and social support, as well as social accountability, to those at risk of re-offending, we can help them avoid committing further harm, while other [restorative-justice responses to sexual assault emphasize prevention via education and community support](#) as a key part of a restorative response. By changing the context and addressing the situations that lead to violence, we can prevent violence and promote safety.

Related to this reality that violence comes from particular contexts is that ***prisons further victimize victims of violence***. Saying “murderers are dangerous, so we need prisons to put them in” ignores, for example, that many women imprisoned for murder were [incarcerated for defending themselves](#) from abusive partners or fighting back against them (the organization [Survived and Punished](#) does [important work](#) on this topic). Many women who have been in abusive relationships are incarcerated because of crimes committed by their abusive partners—either [because they helped their partners](#), out of fear, or, in the case of child abuse, because they are accused of [“failing to protect”](#) their children from their abusive partners. (This creates a double-bind for mothers in abusive relationships: if they fight back against the abuse, they risk prison for violence used in their own defense or defense of their children; if they don’t fight back, they risk prison for failing to protect their children.)

And people, especially people of color, who are victims of police brutality are [often charged with crimes and imprisoned](#) for “resisting,” “interfering with,” or even “assaulting” the police. Prisons only exist to protect those who are deemed “worthy” of safety from violence, usually along racial, gender, and class lines. And what constitutes a “violent crime” or makes someone a “violent predator” is defined along those lines too.

What this means is that in most cases, even violence is best addressed by preventative and compassionate means, not prison. So the question about “murderers and rapists” is really:

What about serial killers?

What do we do with the few remaining true serial killers/serial rapists—totally unrepentant people, perhaps sociopaths, who intend to go commit more grievous harm if they’re free?

The first thing to recognize is that the number of such people is very, very small. Of the 2.1 million people in prisons and jails in the US, how many are true serial predators? Let’s get everyone else out rather than hold up our work towards abolition on account of these few.

The second thing is to understand that if a few people need to be detained to prevent them from committing imminent harm (not some far-off future harm, but *planned and immediate* harm), abolitionists would not oppose the use of force to prevent that harm. Prison abolition does not mean one cannot use force to restrain someone from harming another!

It’s important to note, though, that such use of force needs to be focused on imminent harm and to continue to respect the dignity of even the most “predatory” person—if such individuals are considered disposable or beyond redemption, we will reproduce the abuses of “preventive detention” that we already see in the unconstitutional indefinite [civil commitment of sex offenders](#). Preventive restraint is about *engaging* with people to prevent them from committing immediate planned violence, not *disposing of them* by banishing them to some form of detention and ignoring them.

But that kind of targeted, compassionate, preventive restraint is not what “prisons” exist to provide. One reason to abolish, rather than reform, prisons is that the retributive impulse behind their existence—the desire to make them punitive places—will always get in the way of any other purpose they have. Prisons are intended to be cruel, and prisons are intended to banish people, exiling them from society.

The third thing to acknowledge is that even the most predatory acts are motivated in the psyche of the offender, and no “predator” is beyond empathy, compassion, and the possibility of redemption. Psychiatrist James Gilligan has [written](#) about how the most extreme acts of violence are motivated by profound shame—and how, when that is understood, even the most extreme killers [can perhaps find healing](#). As followers of the God who “does not desire that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9), we cannot simply banish those we consider “incurable” to prisons.

Abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba has also addressed this question in this [excellent graphic format](#). She rejects the definitions of “safety” and “justice” that underlie the carceral state.

- **How do you address Romans 13:1-6, and the role of the state as ordained by God to punish criminals?**

Christian defenses of the prison often rely on Romans 13:1-6, a call for Christians to obey secular laws, and especially upon verse 4: “[The authority] is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.” The first thing to do is read this passage in the context of the final verses of the previous chapter, which encourage Christians to avoid taking vengeance, but instead to live peaceably even when wronged and “leave room for the wrath of God” (12:19). In this context, the description of governing authorities as “instituted by God” (13:1) is intended to be a promise that God has not forgotten the cries for justice of victims of violence and oppression. God will do justice for them in some way—either eschatologically when all is made right in the coming reign of God, or through the imperfect institutions and authorities of the state. The injunction to avoid resisting authority (13:1), in the context of vengeance, means: don’t give in to the desire for vigilante justice. Don’t seek vengeance for your pain yourselves. Don’t break the law to return violence for violence. Instead, trust in God to work through what exists, the state, to bring some kind of justice upon evildoers (13:4); turn your own efforts to fulfilling the law of God by loving one another (13:8); and remember that the final, better justice of God is near (13:12).

Abolition does not mean *impunity*. It does not mean letting those who have done harm get away with continuing to do harm. The wrath of God against violence and harm is just! For injustice to be overcome, God’s judgment against the world must be revealed. But we also believe that the fullest expression of God’s judgment was revealed on the cross (compare to John 12:31, where Jesus says “Now is the judgment of this world...and when I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself”). On the cross, God’s wrath was satisfied by Jesus’ death. So to “leave room for the wrath of God,” now in the light of the cross, actually means to give up our enemies and oppressors to God’s mercy shown forth through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Romans 13:1-6 is a promise to victims of violence that they are not forgotten by God, and that God is committed to bringing about justice, even if imperfectly through institutions that exist. But it does not thereby mean that the institutions of this fallen world—including the prison—are in line with God’s true justice. God works through the authorities that exist even though every authority is also captive to the powers of sin and death—but for us who live in the power of God’s coming reign, we can participate in a better, truer justice than that provided by the authorities of the world. God can work through the prisons—but prisons are nonetheless instantiations of the power of death. What we desire is to stand against the prisons as powers of death and to proclaim God’s *true and unalloyed* justice, the restorative justice of the coming kingdom of God.

- **Doesn’t abolishing prisons mean letting serious crimes go unpunished?**

Punishment is not the same as accountability. We believe in a *culture of accountability* rather than a *culture of impunity*. We want everyone who has done harm to be held accountable for that harm, and to work to make it right.

But punishment is the intentional infliction of suffering in retribution for harm done. We believe that on the cross, Jesus bore the punishment for every sin and every crime, so there is [no longer any need for retribution](#). The human need for vengeance and retribution was satisfied by Christ’s vicarious atonement. By his death, there is no more punishment, just as by his resurrection, there is no more death. This is the reality we proclaim and live into when we support prison abolition.

And if there is no more punishment, then justice can instead be entirely *restorative*, aimed at true accountability and reconciliation. The fear of punishment discourages those who have done harm from taking responsibility for the harm they have done—but true accountability encourages (and requires) the taking of responsibility, while responding with empathy to those who have done harm. A great resource about what accountability-without-punishment can look like, in practice, is TransformHarm.org.

- **How do I get involved?**

- **Learn:** Check out our [Resources](#) page for lots of further reading, including lists of books and online articles to read. Learning more about the system is liberating and radicalizing!
- **Share:** Consider sharing our materials, including our [4-week bible study](#) with your congregation or another group. Personal testimony is an effective way to encourage people to be open to abolitionist ideas.
- **Write:** Writing to prisoners is one of the most effective actions you can do, to establish friendships, work against the isolation and dehumanization of incarceration, and deepen your solidarity with those who suffer. You can write to prisoners through [Black and Pink](#) or the [Death Row Support Project](#), among other organizations. Or [contact us](#) and we will help put you in touch with a pen pal.
- **Visit:** If you can, visit someone in prison. Look for a local prison ministry, a chaplaincy, or another volunteer program in your local jail or prison. Visit those you may know who are incarcerated. There is no substitute for visiting the prisoner, because in prisons is where we encounter Jesus himself.

A Christian Case for Prison Abolition

by Hannah Bowman

(Originally published on Covenant: the blog of The Living Church)

Criminal justice reform is increasingly in the news. From the [First Step Act](#) to the [Movement for Black Lives](#) to the [Nationwide Prison Strike](#), many Americans are increasingly aware that our system of mass incarceration is disproportionate to the rest of the world, unjust, and forms a system of racial control that Michelle Alexander calls “[the new Jim Crow](#).” The impetus to reform our prison system is bipartisan and has evangelical Christians’ support from organizations such as the late Charles Colson’s [Prison Fellowship](#).

But there’s a chasm in anti-prison activism between reformists, who want to improve the current criminal justice system, and abolitionists, who want to end any system of punishment by incarceration. By and large Christians (at least white Christians) have found ourselves on the reformist side. We engage in prison ministry and advocate for better conditions of confinement and fairer sentencing, but the leap to envisioning a justice system free of prisons goes too far. Instead, the movement for prison abolition has grown out of the work of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and racial-justice activists, who argue that a just society can [make prisons “obsolete”](#) (to quote Professor Angela Y. Davis), and that human rights and dignity require a world in which no one is put in a cage.

The arguments for prison abolition are rarely made in Christian terms — but there are deep biblical and theological reasons to support the wholesale abolition of prisons. Prison abolition is not just another progressive cause that the Church should support, or just a moral imperative based in the baptismal vow to “strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being” (1979 Book of Common Prayer, p. 305) but is a profound statement of the Church’s faith and eschatological hope in the reality of the kingdom of God.

Fundamentally, the Christian case for prison abolition is the one made by Jesus in his first appearance in the synagogue in Galilee, when he reads the prophecy from Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Isa. 61:1-2).

He adds: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:17-19, NIV). In other words, Jesus’ ministry is the inauguration of the kingdom of God, the peaceable kingdom in which the sick are healed and the captives freed. Abolitionists take Jesus at his word here — we believe that when he proclaims freedom for the prisoners, that really calls us to *set the prisoners free*.

Author Lee Griffith, in *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Eerdmans, 1993), places Jesus’ proclamation of freedom to prisoners within the context of the Old Testament witness about justice. He connects “the year of the Lord’s favor” that Jesus proclaims to the Mosaic Laws for the Jubilee and Sabbath years, when debts are forgiven and slaves set free:

In the social/legal terminology of Israel, the Sabbatical and Jubilee liberations were based on God's standing as the [kinsman-redeemer] for Israel's slaves. ... In effect, God became the next of next of kin to the most hopeless of captives ... The ransom had already been paid for all future captives when God served as [kinsman-redeemer] for all of the covenant people in the liberation from Egypt. (pp. 99-100)

In other words: Jesus' proclamation of freedom to the prisoners is rooted in the liturgical traditions of the Jubilee and Sabbath years, which are rooted in the foundational narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. Freedom for captives is woven deep in the fabric of the Old Testament story of Israel.

While the Exodus is primarily a narrative of freedom from slavery, the line distinguishing types of captivity is never a clear one: Griffith writes that during the Babylonian exile, "'prisons' and 'prisoners' became important symbols for Israel" as the experience of slavery was replaced in recent memory by the experience of imprisonment (p. 102). And even today, activists have noted the ways that incarceration in the United States acts as a loophole through the 13th Amendment's [prohibition of slavery](#). Prisoners form essentially a [new caste of enslaved people](#).

God desires justice, but — throughout the Old Testament and in Jesus' proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom (Luke) — God also shows a desire for freedom for captives. God's justice does not require or allow for continuing imprisonment. In the kingdom of God, prisons are obsolete. So for us Christians who live in the power of the kingdom — proclaimed in Jesus' ministry and then inaugurated with power in his resurrection — why support them now?

Of course, there are objections to prison abolition: in particular, the question of what the role of the state and the community is in dealing with harm done to its members.

Prisons were intended at one time as a more humane alternative to capital and corporal punishment. Christians played a central role in the 18th-century "criminal justice reforms" that started the American love affair with prisons. The first "penitentiary," in Philadelphia, was founded on Christian principles by well-meaning Quakers. In it, prisoners worked and were held in constant solitude for the sake of their souls (Griffith, *The Fall of the Prison*, p. 174). We have now realized how harmful solitary confinement is. It does profound harm to mental health, such that that [the United Nations considers more than 15 days in solitary to be a form of torture form of torture](#). The United States holds [more than 80,000 people](#) in solitary confinement, [sometimes for years or even decades](#).

This example of Christian efforts at prison reform illustrates why we must turn our attention to abolitionist solutions that set people free rather than looking for better ways to cage and punish, or rehabilitate within a context of imprisonment. Prisons, intended to take the place of capital or corporal punishments, ended up recapitulating their cruelty as retribution won out over rehabilitation and torturous conditions of confinement were mainstreamed.

Meanwhile, capital punishment is still practiced today. Sentences of "death by incarceration" (life sentences or sentences so long they amount to life sentences) affect more than [200,000 American prisoners](#), and prisons have expanded so drastically that [now 2.3 million Americans are in prison, and — including those on probation and parole—almost 7 million are under some form of correctional supervision today](#).

Prisons — with their violent conditions, forced labor, frequent sexual assault, and inadequate food and healthcare — are not the humane alternative we wish they were.

The state does have a responsibility to address harm for the sake of public safety. Christians often understand that responsibility in light of Romans 13:1-4:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

This passage is often taken as support for prisons — the sword borne by authorities to execute God's wrath — but it is useful to re-read it in light of the surrounding context. A few verses earlier, Paul writes: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (12:19). In light of this injunction against retribution, the Romans 13 verses are intended to limit the taking of vengeance by restricting it to the state. They should not be read as an excuse for Christians to support or construct retributive laws or social policies. There is a vast difference between submitting to the authority of the state by obeying its laws and granting it retributive power in our name.

If the state bears God's wrath toward wrongdoers, we have to ask: What is the role of God's wrath in the world today, in light of the death and resurrection of Christ? God promises final judgment of evildoers, but Jesus' death on the cross has changed the Christian understanding of judgment.

After all, Jesus says that in him, the judgment of the world has already taken place on the cross (John 12:31-32). Jürgen Moltmann writes in *The Crucified God* (Harper, 1974):

In the context of the apocalyptic expectation of the final triumph of the law, the "resurrection of the dead" is a two-edged expectation. But the resurrection of the crucified Christ reveals the righteousness of God in a different way, namely as grace which makes righteous and as the creator's love of the godless. Therefore the resurrection hope of Christian faith ... shows the cross of Christ as the unique and once-for-all anticipation of the great world judgment in the favour of those who otherwise could not survive at it. (p. 176)

The cross has changed the world's relationship to God, and what God's judgment requires: the cross has taken the place of the dreadful judgment.

After all, the substitutionary view of the atonement teaches that Jesus bore the weight of God's wrath for every sin on the cross. God's wrath has been fully satisfied. The punishment for every crime has already been paid by Jesus! What this means for Christians living in light of the cross and resurrection is that *there is no more punishment* — not eternally and thus not temporally.

Just as Jesus' death and resurrection conquered and destroyed death, Jesus' punishment and vindication conquered and destroyed punishment. By taking into himself the punishment for sin and crime and harm, Jesus destroyed the necessity of punishment in order for justice to be done. Justice can now be fully restorative — based in rehabilitation and accountability — with no need for retributive or vengeful measures. (Pastor Morgan Guyton has offered [an excellent development of this theology](#).)

Christian support of prison abolition and restorative justice is therefore a profound affirmation of faith: when we act as though we believe that justice is about accountability rather than punishment, we are “proclaiming Christ’s death until he comes,” making a theological claim that the atonement accomplished on the cross is a present reality that guides our lives and the way we structure our society.

Abolishing prisons does not mean letting crime run rampant, but the opposite. Abolition is grounded in the idea that justice should occur among those with whom the offender has relationships, rather than through banishment via incarceration. A community-based restorative-justice program requires much more of offenders than simply locking them up does: it requires them to participate actively in their accountability, to develop empathy and understand the harm caused by their actions, and to make amends.

Such programs already exist, frequently for juvenile offenders or minor property crimes and [even rarely for serious violent crimes](#). Usually, the process involves offenders, victims, and community representatives coming together for a circle in which victims and community members share the effect the crime had on them and offenders have a chance to share their side of the story and the context for the crime and to take responsibility for their actions. The participants in the circle then work together to develop a plan for the offender to make amends. Meeting the needs of the victim is always the first priority in restorative justice.

This secular process clearly has theological overtones, with its emphasis on contrition, confession, and ultimately restoration of the offender “in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1) to the community of God. Its closest analogue, perhaps, is to the church discipline found in Matthew 18:15-20 and in the immediately preceding parable of the lost sheep. Scholars Ched Myers and Elaine Enns have developed an extensive analysis of Matthew 18 as a restorative justice text in their book [Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Vol. 1 \(Orbis, 2009\)](#), in which they write of the restorative justice implications of that parable:

Not only are those who are “scandalized” the moral center of the community; the *offender* too, as an errant member, must be “found” and restored. Both victim and offender are wounded and vulnerable. The moral of the story is: “It is not the will of my Father that *one* of these little ones should be lost!” (p. 63)

Prisons are places of banishment, but God’s desire for justice is to restore into the community those who have done harm as well as those who have been harmed — and to do so in a way that leads to sincere repentance and amendment of life. Prisons, which separate people from every relationship in the community that might lead them to repentance, do not meet that goal.

Prison abolition is an act of Christian discipleship. It is an act of discipleship and not only a moral imperative because it is a proclamation of faith. Fundamentally, Christian support for prison abolition is based in our eschatological hope that the kingdom of God is *real* and “within us” (Luke 17:21). Jesus tells us there are no prisons under the reign of God, so we should live now as citizens of the kingdom, as though there are no prisons. “We can spend the rest of our lives inventing new handcuffs and building new prisons, but that won’t change the fact that Jesus proclaims liberty for the captives and *the prisons have fallen*” (*The Fall of the Prison*, p. 228, emphasis mine).

When offenders see the effects of their actions through processes of restorative justice, we glimpse as if in a dim mirror what reconciliation in the kingdom of God looks like: a foretaste of that blessed day when “we shall see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12) and “God shall wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21:4).

Prison abolition has the potential to transform not only society but also the Church. It forces us to grapple with the implications of the faith we profess and revitalizes our proclamation of the gospel as a hope for the world right now, not only in the age to come.

I volunteer as a lay chaplain in the Los Angeles County Jails. Some Sundays, after our church services, we walk the rows of solitary confinement cells, singing whatever hymns we can think of (usually “Amazing Grace”). Those hymns — the only music ever heard in that hallway — are a voice crying out in the wilderness of the jail, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is breaking forth into our reality, proclaiming that Jesus is already present, having gone before us into every prison cell and every cage.

Our work for prison abolition, as Christians, can be a similar voice for the world at large: a new way of proclaiming the gospel by which sinners are forgiven, victims are healed and reconciled, and all who have been held captive are set free.

INTRODUCTION TO ABOLITIONIST THEOLOGIES
A 4-session adult education curriculum

OVERVIEW:

“Mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow.” “Solitary confinement is torture.” “Black Lives Matter.” Congregations are pelted with information about America’s criminal justice system and its harms. For many Christians, it seems clear that criminal justice reform is needed. But what does that mean? And how far should it go?

Our current system of imprisonment is plagued by inhumanity and injustice. From our continuing practice of capital punishment to the thousands of people serving life without parole – a sentence to die in prison – to our widespread reliance on long-term solitary confinement, defined by the United Nations as torture, as a disciplinary tool, our prison system over-punishes at great cost. Prisoners face de-facto additional penalties besides loss of liberty based on dehumanizing prison conditions ranging from inadequate healthcare and separation from family to inedible food, dangerous levels of heat with no air conditioning, violence and brutality from other prisoners and guards, and even sexual assault and rape. Our system is racist and unequal: people of color are incarcerated at disproportionate rates, and poor people languish in jails awaiting trial while the rich are able to pay for their freedom on bail. And sometimes our sentences are grossly unjust, as for thousands of nonviolent drug offenders serving decades or life in prison due to mandatory minimums. Something must be done to fix our criminal justice system!

But prison abolitionists believe that incarceration as a system is impossible to fix. The aims of incarcerating criminals – separating them from society, punishing them in a way commensurate to the crime, rehabilitating them to return them safely to society, meeting the needs of victims of crime – are incompatible. Our prisons are inhumane because they’re designed to punish – which will always limit how much effort towards rehabilitation they can make. Locking people up doesn’t deal with the realities of why people commit crimes. Nor does it provide anything for those who have been harmed by crime.

Prison abolition is a long-standing activist goal and philosophy, but white Christians have generally not been deeply involved in the prison-abolitionist movement. But we believe that prison abolition is not just an important progressive or radical cause, but also an essential witness to the compassionate justice of the kingdom of God and the reality of our reconciliation to God and one another in Jesus Christ.

This study provides a brief introduction to prison-abolitionist theology, focusing on four key ideas and New Testament texts. As prison abolitionists, we choose to read the biblical witness in light of Jesus’ understanding that the reign of God means freeing the prisoners. This study focuses on texts that help develop the theological basis for activism against prisons and every form of injustice, especially in the ways we respond to crime and harm in our society.

This study is appropriate for a congregation that has some awareness of prison or criminal justice issues or a history of criminal-justice advocacy, but which is looking for a deeper abolitionist understanding.

GOALS:

- To develop an understanding of the basic theological ideas underlying Christian prison abolitionist activism and their support in particular New Testament passages
- To learn a new interpretation of familiar biblical passages and see them with new eyes
- To discover the flaws inherent in any system of imprisonment, and the possibilities for alternative non-retributive forms of justice as a way of responding to crime and harm

SUMMARY:

SESSION 1:

- *Theme:* Jesus declares freedom to prisoners
- *Text:* Luke 4:17-21
- *Key idea:* The reign of God that Jesus announces is about literal freedom for prisoners, not just spiritual freedom or healing. Jesus has inaugurated God's reign, so we should seek freedom for prisoners to bring it to fruition.

SESSION 2:

- *Theme:* Jesus' death on the cross as an act of reconciliation
- *Text:* Luke 23:32-43
- *Key idea:* Jesus identifies himself with prisoners with the promise of their freedom and salvation even at the point of death, and models forgiveness rather than retribution as a response to harm done. Jesus' death ends the need for retribution and punishment as a response to harm.

SESSION 3:

- *Theme:* God's justice always takes place in community, but prisons are places of banishment from community
- *Text:* Matthew 18:12-14, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21
- *Key idea:* God's justice is worked out in community, not alone, and leads toward reconciliation, not isolation. But prisons are designed to separate offenders from communities and isolate them.

SESSION 4:

- *Theme:* Jesus' identification with prisoners is part of God's new creation
- *Text:* Matthew 25:31-46
- *Key idea:* "Visiting the prisoners" isn't just a command given to us to be like Jesus, but the beginning of a new imagination of what the reign of God looks like. We go to prisons because God is already there, transforming the world until there are no more prisons.

Biblical passages are quoted in the New Revised Standard Version.

SESSION 1
JESUS' MISSION TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM TO PRISONERS

The reign of God that Jesus announces is about literal freedom for prisoners, not just spiritual freedom or healing. Jesus has inaugurated God's reign, so we should seek freedom for prisoners to bring it to fruition.

Nazareth, Saturday morning. Jesus has been baptized and has faced the devil in the wilderness, and now he's returned home ready to declare that the Promised Land is here. He reads the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Everyone is amazed at the power in his words – until they realize that his promise means something bigger and different than what they expected.

As prison abolitionists, we often have a similar experience with these words of Jesus. Our convictions are based, quite simply, on the belief that when Jesus announces that the reign of God means setting the prisoners free, we should take him at his word. We believe that there is no room for prisons in God's new creation, and therefore that as followers of Jesus it's our job to make prisons obsolete here on earth, living out the promise that Jesus has declared is already accomplished. But when we take Jesus at his word, we're often met with skepticism, disbelief, and fear: "What about serial killers?" "How can we maintain safety in our communities without prisons or police?" "Isn't it a disgrace not to punish people for their crimes?" "Why not just make prisons better for rehabilitation of those incarcerated?"

These are real and difficult questions – questions that demand practical answers as well as answers of faith. Throughout the next four weeks we'll consider the realities of prisons and what alternative forms of justice can look like, as well as examining the biblical and theological case for prison abolition.

In practice, there's a strong case that prisons as they currently exist (and especially the explosion of mass incarceration in the United States) are a modern invention. Part of what we do, as prison abolitionists, is question the status quo, because the fact is that prisons aren't doing the job we expect them to do. Prisons don't make us safer or make our society more just. We incarcerate ten times as many people as we did forty years ago, but the crime rate hasn't declined correspondingly. We incarcerate people for far longer than any other country does for the same crimes, despite evidence that people quickly "age out" of violence and that the elderly are no threat to public safety. Our criminal justice system has roots in slavery and still operates in a racist way: 1 in 3 black men will be incarcerated at some point in their lives. Prisoners labor for far less than minimum wage, a vestige of slavery remaining in our society. Our prisons are violent and inhumane, and prisoners face conditions from inedible food and inadequate healthcare to physical and sexual assault. We still execute people and make use of long-term solitary confinement, which the United Nations defines as torture. There are many reasons to abolish prisons on secular and humanitarian grounds.

But ultimately, the question of prisons is a question of faith. We believe Jesus when he says there are no prisons under God's gracious reign. And then we ask, "What would it take for us to change our society so that prisons were no longer necessary?" That's the path of our discipleship.

There are strong biblical reasons to take Jesus at his word when he proclaims freedom for the prisoners. Author Lee Griffith notes that the entire history of Israel is constructed on the narrative of freedom of the captives: first, the freedom of the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt, and then their freedom and return to the Promised Land when they were imprisoned in Babylon. And he points out that the obligation of freedom is built

into the liturgical and legal traditions of Israel through the Sabbath and Jubilee years when debts were released and slaves were set free. Throughout the history of Israel, God is revealed as the God who sets prisoners free.¹

When Jesus quotes the prophecy of Isaiah in the synagogue, he's drawing on that tradition of the Sabbath and Jubilee years – "the year of the Lord's favor." His promise that he was sent to proclaim freedom to the prisoners can be understood in light of the legal traditions of freeing captives within the Torah as well as the symbolic importance of freeing captives to Israel's history. God's reign is a reign of liberation. Jesus announces that it's already present.²

We believe that prison abolition is an important cause for Christians not because it will lead us to a safer and more just society (although it will) nor because prisons are inhumane and cruel (although they are) but because abolition offers a real picture of the reign of God, available to us here in our world today. Every step we take towards setting the prisoners free is a step following in the footsteps of Jesus the Divine Liberator.

¹ Lee Griffith, *The Fall of The Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*, 97-102.

² See Griffith's discussion of this passage in *The Fall of the Prison*, 108-112.

SESSION 1
JESUS' MISSION TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM TO PRISONERS

PRAY Psalm 146

Go around the circle reading the psalm, with each person reading one verse.

READ Luke 4:17-21

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

DISCUSS

- Jesus’ mission, as he describes it, has multiple elements: “to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set the oppressed free; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” What connections do you see between these elements? How are the oppressions of poverty, prison, and blindness/illness related in today’s society?
- What is “the year of the Lord’s favor” and how does it relate to the freeing of prisoners? Does the concept of ‘jubilee’ seem to have a natural connection to setting prisoners free, or does that seem like an unusual interpretation of its meaning? What do you think the connections drawn between the economic meaning of jubilee as being set free from debt and its association with freedom from imprisonment have to say to us, in a society where “it’s better to be rich and guilty than poor and innocent” when dealing with the criminal justice system?

SESSION 2
JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS AS AN ACT OF RECONCILIATION

Jesus identifies himself with prisoners with the promise of their freedom and salvation even at the point of death, and models forgiveness rather than retribution as a response to harm done. Jesus' death ends the need for retribution and punishment as a response to harm.

We've already examined the way that Jesus' ministry calls for setting the prisoners free, beginning with the claims he makes the first time he preaches in the synagogue of Nazareth in the Gospel of Luke, and the way this call is in line with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Jesus tells us that there is no room for prisons in the reign of God.

But Jesus' ministry doesn't lead him to a triumphant reign as his followers expected of the Messiah, but instead to the cross. What do Jesus' death and resurrection have to show us about the way we live out justice in the kingdom of God?

If we are honest, we will admit that one of the impulses towards incarceration in our society is for retribution – prisons are intended to be punitive for people who've committed crimes. In fact, part of why it's hard to create prisons that effectively rehabilitate prisoners is this retributive impulse: for every effort to make prisons more rehabilitative, by offering better education programs, for example, or easier ways to stay in contact with family, or more humane conditions that encourage prisoners to build community within the prison walls, we hear a complaint that the prisoners are 'getting off too easy' or that 'doing time isn't supposed to be summer camp.' Our desire to see bad people punished is inextricably interwoven into our understanding of justice. But Jesus' death and resurrection offers us a new way of thinking about the relationship between punishment and justice.

Jesus going to his death offers only compassion and forgiveness, not a desire for retribution. He is killed as a prisoner and thus identified with prisoners (as author Lee Griffith reminds us).³ And on his way to the cross he does not demand retribution from God for the harm done to him, but instead promises grace and forgiveness. To the thief crucified beside him he promises new life with him in paradise without delay ("today you will be with me in paradise!"). And even to those clamoring for his death, he prays for God's forgiveness upon them. His example shows us a new way vision of justice – a kind of justice that does not depend upon punishment to make things even, but instead upon healing to make things right.

It's important to comment here on the use of capital punishment in the Old Testament law, which provides a background for any discussion of retribution in the Bible and context for the crucifixion of Jesus. As Griffith points out, capital punishment in the Old Testament is encouraged as *expiation* rather than *retribution*: Israel is commanded to kill offenders in order to purify the people and the land, not as punishment. This law as written to Israel as a whole is a picture of God's desire for Israel to be pure and holy, but it shouldn't be understood as blanket support for retributive killing. It's not clear to what extent the capital punishment provisions of the Torah were ever put into practice in Israel, Griffith argues⁴, and as Christians we have to consider expiation in light of Jesus' death on the cross. We believe that we, the people of God, have been made holy and pure by Jesus' death for us, the expiation of which the earlier law was only a foreshadowing. By becoming the victim of capital punishment, Jesus undoes the need for and logic of it.

³ *The Fall of the Prison*, 125-126.

⁴ *The Fall of the Prison*, 90.

And the same goes for retribution more generally. As Christians, we believe that Jesus' death and resurrection conquered death. And when Jesus bore the punishment for sin, he also conquered the need for punishment and retribution in order to say that 'justice has been done.' Jesus promises us, through his death and his forgiveness of those who killed him, that further violence in the form of punishment is not necessary to have real justice. Justice is about accountability and healing, without punishment.

There are a variety of theories of how the atonement works – how Jesus' death and resurrection save us. In substitutionary theories of the atonement, we say that Jesus bore the punishment for our sin – and by doing so, we believe that he destroyed the need for punishment. As the old hymn says, "Jesus paid it all!" Pastor and author Morgan Guyton makes this point beautifully: "Punishment for the sake of punishment has no place in Christian ethics if Jesus' cross really does absorb all the punishment for the world's sins."⁵

But there are also other ways of understanding how Jesus' death reconciles us to God, and how that reconciliation points us to a new form of justice. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians "Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me" (2:19-20). Whatever the mechanics of atonement, Paul makes a deep discovery here: the law's demands of punishment and retribution died with Jesus on the cross, and in his resurrection he overcame them. The Risen Christ inaugurates a reign of justice that is separate from punishment.

When we stop thinking of punishment as a response to harm done, the entire project of prisons (and the collateral consequences that follow from felony conviction, like loss of employability, disconnection from family and community, and so on) becomes hard to justify. Prisons are designed to inflict suffering as much as to separate offenders from communities. Even though it's been proven that locking more people up doesn't decrease the crime rate and that in fact incarcerating people makes them *more* likely to commit further crimes, prisons are still considered justified because the people there "deserve punishment." But Jesus, crucified and risen, calls us to demand in practice new forms of justice that are based in compassion and healing, not retribution.

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mercynotsacrifice/2014/11/20/if-you-need-for-undocumented-immigrants-to-be-punished-then-you-dont-believe-in-jesus-cross/>

SESSION 2
JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS AS AN ACT OF RECONCILIATION

PRAY Psalm 22

Go around the circle reading the psalm, with each person reading one verse.

READ Luke 23:32-43

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

DISCUSS

- Karl Barth said the criminals crucified along with Jesus were "the first certain, indissoluble, and indestructible Christian community."⁶ What do you think of this statement? What does it mean that a criminal is one of the individuals to whom Jesus explicitly promises entrance into heaven?
- Scholars Ched Myers and Elaine Enns write that in the sacrifice on the cross, "God models in Christ the practice of victim-initiated reconciliation."⁷ What does it mean for us that God, identifying in solidarity with the victims of every crime, forgives us through Christ's death? How should this affect the ways we respond to crime and harm in our society?
- Historically the church has held a variety of atonement theologies: for example, substitutionary atonement, which holds that Christ died in our place on the cross, bearing the punishment for our sins; 'Christus Victor' theology, which holds that Jesus, by submitting to death, established power over death and the devil to set us free from the power of death; moral exemplar theory, which holds that by following the beautiful example of Christ's obedient sacrifice for us we are inspired to repent and return to God and thus be forgiven; and others. What does each of these theories have to tell us about the way we respond to crime and harm in our society? What does each tell us about the role of punishment in God's plan for the world?

⁶ "The Criminals with Him" in *Deliverance to the Captives* (Harper, 1961), 77-78.

⁷ *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume 1*, 13.

God's justice is worked out in community, not alone, and leads toward reconciliation, not isolation. But prisons are designed to separate offenders from communities and isolate them.

One of the most difficult questions for prison abolitionists is “Why not just reform the prisons we have? Prisons as they currently exist may be inhumane and unproductive, but we could make them better. Why the call to abolish rather than reform?”

Abolitionists believe that the things that lead prisons to be inhumane and unproductive are inseparable from the existence of incarceration. By design, prisons are intended to separate out the ‘bad people’ from society and banish them away from their communities. But banishment is incompatible with rehabilitation. Author Maya Schenwar explains that relationships within the community are the things that are most likely to help those who have committed crimes make amends, as well as keep them from committing further crimes. But prisons remove prisoners from the situation where they might be supported to make amends. Of particular importance is the relationship between parents and children – nearly every prisoner with children identifies their family as the main reason they want to leave their old life behind. But prisons, by design, separate families. The security precautions required when people are caged, along with the long distances that prisons often place prisoners from their families and the high cost of phone calls, destroy the bonds between prisoners and their loved ones.⁸

Christians believe that separation is destructive, to the point that Hell is sometimes described as separation from God. What we learn from the Old Testament law, Jesus’ parables, and the New Testament instructions for the church is that God intends justice to be worked out in community. But prisons isolate people and separate them from community.

Prison abolitionists support alternative forms of justice that can lead to sincere accountability and healing within local communities. Some of these efforts are “restorative justice” or “transformative justice” projects. Restorative justice is generally aimed at a mediated encounter between the victim and the offender, along with representatives of the community, leading to a plan for the offender to make amends. Some key elements of a restorative justice process are the following:

- The offender must take responsibility for the crime or harm done.
- Priority is always given to meeting the needs of the victim and avoiding further harm or trauma to them.
- A restorative justice circle includes the victim and the offender as well as other affected members of the community, like family, friends and community/religious leaders.
- The victim has a chance to tell their story of how the offense affected them, so the offender understands the harm of what they did.
- The offender has a chance to tell their story of the offense – including ways they have been harmed themselves in the past, but also taking responsibility for their current actions. The offender has the opportunity to apologize to the victim.
- The victim and offender along with the community members agree on a plan by which the offender will make amends to the victim, where possible. This can be by direct restitution or further efforts on the

⁸ Maya Schenwar, *Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better*, 9-40.

offender's part (to help others who have been hurt in similar ways, for example, or try to teach others so they won't commit the same harm).

- The goal of the process is to meet the victim's needs and make to them the reparations they need to heal from the trauma of being harmed, and to meet the offender's need to heal from the trauma of doing harm.

Transformative justice looks to go deeper to change underlying conditions that led to the harm/crime done. For example, transformative justice programs look to help get people out of gangs by providing them alternative communities and jobs, as Fr. Greg Boyle's Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles does. Or they look to fight sexual harassment and abuse by questioning all-male or patriarchal power structures and bringing more women into positions of power. Or they focus on anti-poverty and education efforts to help prevent crimes from happening in the first place. Offenders can play a key role in transformative justice, helping others in their community avoid the harm that they themselves caused.

Restorative and transformative justice processes have the power to bind communities more deeply and change them. They are based on the understanding that no one is beyond redemption or God's love. As Christian prison abolitionists, we see in Jesus' ministry of hospitality a call to build communities of reconciliation where we do justice in a new way. Restorative and transformative justice processes, rather than incarceration, are a way to live out our belief in reconciliation in practical terms.

PRAY Psalms 133 and 134

Go around the circle reading the psalms, with each person reading one verse.

READ Matthew 18:12-20, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

DISCUSS

- The parable of the lost sheep is a commonly-read one, but it's not usually read in the context of the rest of the chapter, which is about forgiveness and processes of reconciliation and church discipline. How does re-reading this parable in a criminal justice context change your interpretation of it?
- Matthew 18:15-20 is often used as an example of the way to resolve conflicts in the church. How is this a pattern for a restorative justice process? What role might restorative justice play in cases of harm or crime done within the church community, in light of this passage?
- Activist and scholar Ched Myers considers the phrase “ambassadors of reconciliation” (see 2 Cor. 5:20) to be one of the most important descriptors of Christians and our vocation.⁹ What does it mean that those in the church are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, or are given the ministry of reconciliation? How does that affect our relation to systems of injustice in the secular world? What do you see as your part in the ministry of reconciliation given to every Christian?

⁹ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume 1*, 9-14.

“Visiting the prisoners” isn’t just a command given to us to be like Jesus, but the beginning of a new imagination of what the reign of God looks like. We go to prisons because God is already there, transforming the world until there are no more prisons.

Matthew 25:31-46 is a popular text in churches, often quoted in support of outreach ministries: feed the hungry through soup kitchens and sandwich-making ministries, clothe the naked through underwear and sock drives for local homeless people, visit the prisoners through prison ministry and chaplaincy, welcome the stranger through refugee programs, care for the sick through hospital and nursing home visitation. We’re “Matthew 25 Christians” because we care for each other in our society through this work.

But the famous parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is primarily a text about the last days, what the coming reign of God looks like. Jesus promises the inauguration of the reign of God at the beginning of his ministry, as we saw in our study of Luke 4:17-21. But towards the end of his life he returns in more detail to apocalyptic themes: those that reveal the nature of God’s kingdom as it will finally be revealed in eternity. And in the light of eternity, our view of what the parable in Matthew 25 says is far too small. God’s justice – justice understood in the biblical sense of *tzedekah*, which contains the connotation of social justice for all in society¹⁰ – is bigger and more radical than our social programs.

How does justice as it will be when God’s reign is fully realized – at Christ’s *parousia*, or second coming – relate to the way we run our societies today? Many theologians have argued that punishment by the state is allowable now, even if Christians are called to forgiveness, on the basis of Romans 13:1-5: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.” But it’s important to read this passage in light of the previous verses in chapter 12 (verses 19-21): “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” In other words: the claim in Romans 13 that the state (or “the authority”) is the agent of vengeance follows directly from an exhortation to Christians not to seek vengeance or punishment in cases of harm against them. The state here is intended to *limit* the retributive impulse of Christians, not to amplify it. Leaving justice to the state is to take the desire for retributive punishment out of the hands of individual believers and leave it up to God, not to encourage them to work out their desire for vengeance through state-sanctioned processes of punishment.

What Romans 13 says is that the “authority” is put in place by God to work out God’s justice. But what does God’s justice look like? Does it look like wrath and vengeance? No! John 3:19 tells us of the judgment of God: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” God’s judgment was in leaving people in darkness when the light of Christ – the

¹⁰ Lee Griffith, *The Fall of the Prison*, 95.

new restorative way of living – was shown to them. The judgment of God isn't punishment meted out to people but rather that we continue living in violence and sin even though a more just and peaceful way is possible and has been shown to us. And Jesus goes even further to explain the merciful nature of God's judgment in John 12:31-32: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The judgment, Jesus says, is precisely his crucifixion. The death of Jesus – the crucifixion of God – is the judgment God has appointed for the world. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," but the repayment turns out not to be in any punishment against us, worldly or temporal, but instead in the sacrifice of love made on the cross. On the cross, God judges the world and makes real justice, free from vengeance, possible, so that all people are drawn to the love of God.

We are called to live out God's justice – the *tzedekah* or social-justice of God – in this world today. But we are not called to make the state an agent of retribution on God's behalf. God promises that he will avenge wrongdoing so we should not take vengeance ourselves, even through state processes – but God's judgment of wrongdoing turns out to be more merciful than we could have imagined. The Lamb that judges the world is the Lamb who was slain for us (Revelation 5:6).

This ultimate sign of God's justice takes us back to Matthew 25 and the vision of the end times it presents. Because when Jesus appears at the last judgment separating the righteous from the unjust, he tells us that his appearance as our judge isn't the ultimate revelation of who he is. Instead, while sitting as our judge, Jesus identifies himself as the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner: "As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." In the final courtroom, Jesus – who is God almighty – does not appear as the judge but rather as the prisoner in chains.

Lee Griffith ends his discussion of this passage by writing: "So, for Christians all talk of prisoners must begin and end with Christ Jesus. This is the position in which the Word places us. We are so placed that we cannot talk about prisoners without a recognition of Jesus the Prisoner....It is a scandal for all of us good, law-abiding citizens. We can no longer talk of people who are 'paying their debt to society'; we must now talk of people who are robbed of their freedom. We can no longer talk of 'monsters' who deserve to suffer; we must now talk of the call to serve Jesus by serving the least of the prisoners. Whether we hear them with joy or with fear and trembling, the Word so places us that we must hear the words of Jesus: the Good News is freedom for the prisoners."¹¹

As Christians, we live in the present reality always anticipating the fullness of the reign of God which is always-already present for us. There are no prisons separating people from the love of God in that reign, where Jesus identifies himself with every prisoner. Ultimately, our support for prison abolition is a sign of our hope in the reconciliation of all in the eternal kingdom to come: as we profess in the Apostles' Creed, "we believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

¹¹ *The Fall of the Prison*, 126.

JESUS' IDENTIFICATION WITH PRISONERS IS PART OF GOD'S NEW CREATION

PRAY Revelation 21:1-5

Go around the circle reading the passage, with each person reading one verse.

READ Matthew 25:31-46

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

DISCUSS

- This text is a favorite in churches, where it's often interpreted as a laundry list of suggested actions, or a checklist to 'prove' we're on the right path following Jesus. But what other assumptions underlie the text, if we read it at face value? What does it tell us about Jesus? What does it suggest about the last days and about heaven and hell?
- In his book *The Fall of the Prison*, Lee Griffith writes of the call to visit the prisoners "The Greek term [for visiting] connotes more than spending time with people. The same term is used most often to refer to the divine activity of redeeming and freeing and caring for people...the meaning of the reference to prisoners is clarified if we bear in mind that the text depicts Jesus teaching about God's eschatological judgment of *the nations*."¹² What do you think about this interpretation of this text? What does it suggest about the ways we should structure our prison ministry efforts? How might we take part in God's liberation of those in prison?
- Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that "Christ comes not in the form of those who visit the imprisoned but in the imprisoned being cared for."¹³ If we read this text as a statement about Jesus' identification with those in prison, what does it tell us about the character of God and the nature of God's new creation in the last days?

¹² *The Fall of the Prison*, 118.

¹³ *Accidental Saints* (Convergent Books, 2015), 47.

Abolition Bibliography:
a bibliography of texts about prison abolition, restorative justice, and theology

Christian theology and prison abolition:

The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition by Lee Griffith

Griffith's book is the most comprehensive treatment of the biblical and theological arguments for prison abolition, considering the Hebrew Bible narratives of Exodus, Exile, and the Jubilee/Sabbath years as well as Jesus' identification with prisoners and the imprisonment of the apostles to make a profound call for Christians to proclaim that "the prisons have already fallen."

The Executed God by Mark Lewis Taylor

Taylor's searing summary of mass incarceration, police militarization, and related injustices in the US asks why the church has failed to follow the way of the cross in opposing state terror.

Free on the Inside by Greta Ronningen

Ronningen, a jail chaplain, writes about spiritual practices to engage with God and heal from trauma and broken relationships at the crisis point of incarceration, and offers a theology of human dignity and divine presence even within the brokenness of a jail.

Prison abolition:

Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Y. Davis

Davis' book is the classic text of prison abolition, developing a vision for a prison-free future.

Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better by Maya Schenwar

A journalist who studies prisons and whose sister has been incarcerated, Schenwar draws a personal picture of the harms of prison, and especially the ways they destroy family and community relationships essential to rehabilitation and healing, and provides concrete examples of restorative justice alternatives.

Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison by Michel Foucault

Foucault's seminal work of philosophy traces the history of prisons to show how the current system insidiously developed from efforts at "reforming" the way society dealt with criminal offenses to instead construct an ever-more-invasive and cruel state.

Prison policy, conditions, and reform:

Hell is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement, ed. Jean Casella, James Ridgeway, and Sarah Shourd

This anthology of essays about solitary confinement features the writing of those currently locked in solitary – some for decades – providing a harrowing and horrifying look at a practice that is widespread in the US although the UN considers it a form of torture.

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander

Alexander's book develops the history of mass incarceration over the past 60 years of US history, with a special focus on the way criminalization and incarceration have been used as a system of racial control.

Resistance Behind Bars by Victoria Law

Law focuses on resistance movements in women's prisons in this study of the way female prisoners organize – usually nonviolently – for improvements in their conditions of confinement and the injustices of their cases. This book is striking in its demonstration of the ways that any solidarity among prisoners is seen as a threat by those in power in the carceral system, and in its illustration of the ways those who are incarcerated nevertheless support one another.

Locked In by John Pfaff

Pfaff, a professor at Fordham University, writes about why the 'standard story' about the War on Drugs driving mass incarceration is wrong, and how a renewed focus on prosecutors can help in efforts at decarceration.

Caught by Marie Gottschalk

Gottschalk's book is an extensive academic overview of the forces driving the prison-industrial complex and mass incarceration.

Restorative justice:

Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson

Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, draws on his years of experience as a defense lawyer in death-penalty cases to illustrate problems in the system as well as moments of grace he has found accompanying people on death row.

Ambassadors of Reconciliation by Ched Myers and Elaine Enns

Religious scholars Myers and Enns draw on the history of Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as biblical studies to illuminate restorative-justice readings of the New Testament and models of Christian peacemaking.

Violence by James Gilligan

Gilligan, a psychologist in a Massachusetts state prison, explores the psychological roots of the most heinous crimes, concluding that profound shame is the emotion motivating extreme violence and offering ways to combat violence by countering shame.

We believe in the forgiveness of
sins

- ❖ In Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness of every sin: **of every crime and of every harm** we have done to one another. We forgive because we have been forgiven.
- ❖ It is the job of Christians to build structures of justice aimed at pursuing **reconciliation and restoration of right relationship**. Prisons are the opposite of this kind of justice.
- ❖ Prisons aim to rehabilitate but also to punish. Because these aims are in conflict, they are unable to do both. **True justice should be aimed at rehabilitation.**

God is present here

- ❖ The most important lesson about prisons in the Bible is from Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus tells us to "visit the prisoner...as you have done for the least of these, you did it to me."
- ❖ **Jesus is present in every prisoner. Jesus is here with you today.**
- ❖ God accompanies us through all oppression, injustice, and suffering. And God's presence brings **the promise of freedom and liberation.**

*The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
(Psalm 146:8 NIV)*

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What Does the Bible Say About Prisons and Justice?

*Jesus said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me
to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
(Luke 4:18 NIV)*

Our God is a God of Liberation

- ❖ Jesus proclaimed **an end to every form of imprisonment** (Luke 4:18). He promises freedom to every captive in the coming kingdom of God. There is no place for prisons in the kingdom of God, where all are healed from every addiction, trauma, and sin and set free to love one another.

- ❖ Christians worship the God who brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt. From the beginning, God's promise to his people has been a promise of **freedom and belonging**.

- ❖ The Exodus is the story of setting free those who are enslaved, but it applies equally to prisoners. God is the one who **brings those in prison out of bondage** into the Promised Land of the beloved community.

- ❖ The Apostles' Creed tells us that Jesus descended into hell after his crucifixion, and **freed the souls held captive** upon his resurrection. By entering hell, Jesus abolished it, setting free those who were imprisoned by death or sin.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2 NIV)

What is justice?

- ❖ Often, people think justice is synonymous with punishment: "you do the crime, you do the time."

- ❖ But **Jesus bore the punishment of every sin** in our place on the cross and thus reconciled us to God. As a direct consequence of this, the need for punishment and retribution ended when Jesus died.

- ❖ Because of the cross, we are liberated to imagine **justice that is free of retribution**. There is no more punishment, because "Jesus paid it all."

Good People vs. Bad People?

- ❖ Our system of prisons is designed to make society safe by separating out "bad people" from "good people."

- ❖ But as Christians we know that **there are no bad people and good people**. Every one of us is capable of great good and great evil.

- ❖ Justice means learning how to **live together in peace**, take responsibility for our actions, and make amends for the harm we have done, no matter who we are.

God's community of justice

- ❖ God's goal is for no one to be cast aside (Luke 15:7) but for justice to be worked out **in the community**. No one is disposable in the kingdom of God.

- ❖ The church is entrusted the **ministry of reconciliation** (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is Christians' job to seek justice in ways that reconcile offenders to the community.

- ❖ Restorative justice in community can look like **taking responsibility and making amends**, but also like addressing the conditions that led to the offense.

The reconciliation of all things

- ❖ Our ultimate hope is in **God's reconciliation of the entire creation** at the end of time.

- ❖ When we are reconciled to each other, we are **anticipating** the coming kingdom of God.

- ❖ Jesus tells us "**the kingdom of God is within you**" (Luke 17:12). When we work for restorative justice on earth, we are making real the kingdom of God which is already present in us.