

I smiled last Sunday night as I was leaving our little Confirmation classroom under this sanctuary. On the door of the room is a poster that I love, which is from the Heifer Project mission people. It shows pictures of people around the world being helped with livestock and food. But the words are from one of my most cherished spots in our biblical literature. In Micah 6 God asks the world, basically what do I require of people, especially people who claim to be God's people? Literally from the Hebrew it says we must “*...make justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.*” Some years ago I was reading the words in Hebrew, and I was struck that it does not say “Do justice,” but that it says “MAKE justice.” To me there is more than a slight difference in the words. MAKE JUSTICE!

It worked out very nicely that the Kairos Prison team has been over in the prison this week. This is not only beyond honorable, but it has a special place in Methodist history. When John and Charles Wesley were in graduate school at Oxford in 1730, one of their little group, William Morgan, knew someone who had been put in prison. He went to visit the person. The prisoner said to him that he and others would really benefit from visits from others. Morgan invited John and Charles to come to Castle Prison in Oxford. They did. And it started to turn into something else. Soon, John and Charles were visiting there twice each week. They actually developed their own system of visitation. They would seek out the new prisoners and counsel them, asking them about whether they are filled with anger or

hate or malice against those who put them there. They would ask them if they repented of what they did that was wrong. They would pray with them, and have Communion with them. The Wesley group with their friends would raise money to help free those who were locked up for owing money. People regularly went to jail for this, including John Wesley's own father, who served 4 months in debtors prison. They would raise money the best they could to pay the literal debts of others. I have to smile at this, as they were what we would call "college kids." They usually didn't have much money, so the fact that they raised money to set anyone free is pretty impressive.

Back in 1968 a federal judge named Frank Wilson from Chattanooga, TN spoke at an annual conference gathering in Texas. He was a keynote speaker and preacher. He told that group of Methodists that he stayed in contact with all the people he sentenced to prison. And he offered this challenge to the clergy of that conference: "Every pastor should be as familiar with the inside of the local jail or prison as the inside of the local hospital." That is quite a challenge, one that does sting. I have actually visited inside of prisons about 10 times in my life. I have traveled many miles to do so. It is hard. And yet, when we read our sacred words, like those today, we see a special reference that connects some things. It says

"The spirit of the LORD has ...sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." These are precious words aimed at the ancient people of Israel

who had suffered destruction and exile, who are promised that they will see home again, and that they will be restored. If we ever wanted to feel like we had accomplished something wonderful in life, wouldn't it be something if we could be people who would help do these things? To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to prisoners? John Wesley came to believe that visiting the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned was a means of God's grace for both the visitor and the visited. Visiting them was a means of grace, something you could do that would open you to being shaped and touched by God.

Well, if that sounds like noble work, I have really good news! We live in the best place in the world for this to happen! How can that be? Well, here are a few facts that we probably are not familiar with. First, we Americans have 5% of the world's population, and yet we have 25% of the world's people in prison. We have more than 2 million people in prison right now. Actually we have 7 million right now are either behind bars, on probation, or on parole. It was not always this way. But it certainly is now. As Americans we pride ourselves on being people of law and order. We finish our pledge to the flag with the words "...with liberty, and justice for all." We talk the talk about liberty and justice, and we have far more people in prison than any other country on the earth. We pay over \$ 60 billion per year to have all these people in prison, costing nearly \$30,000 per person, which we pay for. For us to have more people in prison than any other country in the world might

make us wonder WHY? HOW? Are our people the worst people in the world? That makes no sense? John Wesley insisted that it was a means of grace for us to be concerned about those who are in prison and jail. Maybe we need to pursue this some more, to figure out how things have gotten to this point. Allow me to share just a few more numbers for us to input into our thinking.

Between 1970 and 2005, in those 35 years, the number of people per capita locked up in the US increased by 700%. How could that be? Well, a number of things happened. First, laws were changed. Politicians told us that we needed law and order and justice, and people ran for office pledging to rid the nation of criminals. A key thing that changed was laws about drugs. Certain drugs being used received one kind of punishment, while other drugs, usually those used by poorer people, those drugs received far greater punishment. The vast majority of drugs taken in the US are taken by white Americans, and people who have some money. They take their drugs at home in a safe place. When they do get caught, they usually have much better lawyers to get them less punishment, like community service and fines. Poor people take their drugs out in the open, where they can be arrested more easily. And poor people don't have lawyers quite like the others. Those things are factors.

A key crazy thing in the last 45 years is that corporations have gotten into the prison business. For a number of years I would receive collect phone calls from a relative in prison in Georgia, which is actually the #1 prison state, where 1 out of 13

adults are in prison, and another 1 out of 13 adults works at a prison! A recording would come on which told me that I was receiving a call from a Georgia State Prison Inmate, and that I would be charged \$9.50 for the first minute, and \$1.75 for each additional minute. We could talk for 10 minutes, and once the extra fees were included it would cost me \$27 to talk for 10 minutes. Do you think anyone made any money on this? Global Telecom somebody in Georgia. I paid for those calls for 17 years. Today we have prisons that are private for-profit prisons. Investors put money into building prisons, and all the things needed to have people in prisons. And they make a profit on this. Do you think there is any incentive there for people to be sent to these prisons? When the prisons are full, people make money. There is a private company called Corrections Corporation of America that is a publicly traded company on Wall Street! Their stock price is \$21.55 per share, and they have been paying at 8% for a number of years now.

Do you think that there is any chance that corrupt human hearts would ever want to put people in prison because they could make a profit from it? If such a thing were done, what would God think? That doesn't sound like good news to the oppressed, and the setting captives free? Do you think God is watching what we are doing as a country when it comes to all this? We are in fact talking about people's lives here.

Let me mention my final and most painful point in all of this. Who are the people in our prisons? Well, mainly they are poor, and mainly their skin is darker than mine. 35% of all

people in American prisons today are young African-American men. They are far more over-represented than any other group. If we want to obey God and “make justice” we should ask WHY? Is there something wrong with them? Are they just worse people than other human beings? Are we not all created equally in the image of God? Then why would one group be far over-represented in such a tragic way? It is not uncommon for people to hold racist outlooks, in which they literally believe that certain other people are not the same as the rest of us. They are not the same, because there is a racial difference. It is biology. They are just bad, so they go to prison. This is common in cultures that have believed in white supremacy, which many cultures have done. Europeans have done this for a very long time. But to believe that a group of human beings are not really the same is in fact a racial or racist belief, and one that I would not recommend to anyone, certainly not to people of the Church.

Certain young men grow up in poverty with terrible schools, violence, drugs, and no jobs anywhere. They grow up with fathers in prison. Boys need fathers, all boys need that. And in places like Ferguson, Missouri not many years ago, it was common for the police to arrest people for a tail light being out on a car, or being heavily fined for a long list of things. People were put in jails for almost nothing. BTW the police did this because the economy died in 2008 and cities couldn't pay their bills. Solution? Fine people for anything! And then when you're in jail, you cannot work to pay the fine. What happens to

your kids? Is this the way things are supposed to be in this land? And sadly for places like Fergusson, there were no John Wesleys waiting to visit the prisons and jails. People were not caring for these people as a real means of grace.

This is one of these painful Sundays in Lent where we get some really bad news, that we Americans today seem to be addicted to Incarceration. We have 25% of the world's people who are in prison. We pay a lot for this. Some people make a lot of money off of this. I would really like to talk to the people who were charging me \$27 for a 10-minute phone call! I would like to ask them how they could sleep at night. It makes me want to go back to the Gathering Prayer today, starting partway through: ***“Holy God, be the champion of those who suffer poverty, dislocation, hunger and disease. You be the chastisement of those who abuse innocent victims. Unerring judge of us all, forgive us our involvement in the sins of your people.”*** Let's take that bulletin home to put that prayer up on the fridge. Lent is serious business, when we must confront the brokenness of our world, including that in our own land. Let's be people who are troubled by the suffering of others, so much that we would try to do something about it. May it be so that we could be the ones who make justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Let the spirit of the LORD God be upon us all, that we could say

“The spirit of the LORD has ...sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to

proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”  
Let us be that kind of people. AMEN.