

AN EPISTLE TO THE AMERICAN CHURCH

"Set the Captives Free"

Michael C. Richardson

My dear fellow clergy and saints,

I greet you in the matchless magnificent name of Jesus. It is my sincere prayer that you are continuously refreshed in mind, body, and spirit as you labor in the ripened fields of our Father's harvest. There are a variety of challenges that confront the twenty-first-century church from within and without. Religious pluralism, immigration, environmental issues, Muslim-Christian relations, and poverty are among the myriad pressing concerns of the church globally and locally. In light of these many challenging issues, I can understand you may be puzzled as to why I am raising concerns here about the liberty of individuals convicted of crimes through seemingly due process of law. I can imagine that the liberation of convicted drug dealers, addicts, thieves, and other felons does not rank high on your list of priorities. The matter does not rest solely on the matter of guilt or innocence, but in the motivation behind the punishment and the degree of scrutiny given to the perpetrator. When the punishment is by one individual against another based on race, social status, or ethnicity, it is called a hate crime. However, when a race is singled out by a country to be punished for their offenses against society, too many rest complacently in naming it "justice." This methodical mutation of justice is part and parcel of the unrighteous mass incarceration system in America.

My beloved brothers and sisters, maybe you have been anesthetized by the dismal statistics and grotesque facts concerning the plight of all incarcerated persons. Such statistics and their historical

background can desensitize you to the reality that we are talking about the lives of human beings, people created in the image of God.¹ Maybe if I can give you a glimpse into the harsh reality of these men, you might find the compassion in your heart to take up the mantle of our Lord and Savior and endeavor to set the captives free.²

So where do we begin? How did we get here? The mass incarceration problem in America has its roots in racism, slavery, and white supremacy. American history has been steeped in oppressive practices targeting minorities and particularly African Americans. There is little difference between this twenty-first-century tyrannical scheme and the segregation that Martin Luther King Jr. condemned. Slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration devalue human life. Dr. King asserted that "segregation substitutes an 'I-it' relationship for the 'I-thou' relationship, and relegates persons to the status of things."³ What are we to do about more than a million African American men and women—and indeed all persons imprisoned—who are being dehumanized in the current system?

As an African American man who continues to struggle to be emancipated from the mass incarceration system, I would like to share my own story, hopefully to provide my perspective on the matter at hand. In 2000, I was a young man with a couple of minor encounters with the criminal justice system. One January morning I found myself on a Philadelphia street corner where I had no business being and subsequently was arrested for possession with the intent to deliver a ten-dollar bag of heroin. I was charged with selling to an undercover police officer, even though the marked money was found on another individual and no drugs were found in my possession. I remained in pretrial detention for almost two years before I was convicted based on police testimony contrary to the physical evidence. As my mother and ten-year-old daughter watched from their courtroom seats, I was sentenced to ten to twenty years in prison for this nonviolent offense. My sentence was ten times the twelve-month sentence prescribed by the sentencing guidelines. My only hope was that the court would appoint me an appeal attorney that would be less inept than the trial attorney appointed to me.

I was quickly transferred to Graterford State Correctional Facility to be processed into the system. I would like to share with

you the details of the intake process. As you will see, the description of the intake process for Pennsylvania state correctional institutions eerily mirrors the inspection and labeling process of the slave trade, with both culminating in the individual being deemed property. I invite you to imagine the psychological impact of such an experience.

An ominous tension permeated the air as a sea of brown skin slowly meandered down the cold, cramped corridor. The deafening murmur of hundreds of men scuffling along the pale grey, steel bar-lined passage was only quieted by the bellowing commands of the escorting correctional officers. Each one of the new arrivals had been stripped of all personal items, identification, clothes, and any ounce of dignity that remained. Our lives had been reduced to the contents of a cardboard box that we carried, wearing nothing but a pair of skivvies and shower shoes. We were herded single file to the intake room where we turned over our possessions to be shipped back home. "Next!" the officer bellowed. "Your number is EV2256," he said as he took my paperwork and directed me to the next intake station. Disoriented, confused, and demoralized, I was instructed to strip naked in a room full of officers and inmates. As I stood in front of an officer, he belted out a series of commands, "Open your mouth, lift your tongue, hands out, turn them over, lift your arms, lift your penis, lift your scrotum, turn around, lift your foot, lift the other one, bend over, and spread your cheeks!" This was only the beginning of the humiliation. I was given a shampoo to rub in my hair and deloused with a powdery substance. After being escorted through a communal shower, I was given three sets of undergarments. I approached the intake desk and reality set in with this question, "Where do you want your body sent?" I struggled to swallow the knot in my throat and reluctantly replied, "I don't have a life sentence." I will never forget the response, "No one is guaranteed to get out of here alive, but until then you're state property." This would be my reality for a decade of my life.

I was one of a million men created in the image of God who are methodically deprived of their dignity, self-worth, and freedom. Dr. King declared that "deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth."⁴ The mass incarceration system in America seeks to defraud African American men of their

birthright. As you can see from my story, the main culprit in this fraudulent divestment of liberty and legacy is the woefully biased criminal injustice system. There is a bevy of injustices that perpetuate mass incarceration. Discriminatory sentencing, racial profiling, prosecutorial misconduct, ineffective legal representation, and racially biased juries are all contributors to mass incarceration in America. Tokunbo Adelekan argues that "the average citizen now believes that there are two Americas: one rich and one poor, a two-tiered system of laws, one of which exists for rich whites and the other for poor people of color, largely male, who serve mandatory sentences for petty crimes."⁵

So what is to become of individuals like me who have been found to be prisoners of this system? Is there deliverance for the people languishing in the cold concrete gyves of America's capitalist machine? Unfortunately for many, this is only the fount of a life of captivity. After ten years in prison, I was paroled and reunited with my then eighteen-year-old daughter. I returned home like many, hoping to put this nightmare behind me. But to my chagrin, as Michelle Alexander reminds us, "this caste system extends far beyond prison walls and governs millions of people who are on probation and parole, primarily for nonviolent offenses. They have been swept into the system, branded criminals or felons, and ushered into a permanent second class status—acquiring records that will follow them for life."⁶ Millions of black men have been permanently branded felons and convicts. Regardless of sincere reformatory efforts, they have been estimated to be only the sum of their failures. Interview after interview, job after job, background check after background check, these men are turned away, virtually unemployable. Today, sixteen years after my last crime, I am still denied positions due to my criminal record.

Joblessness, stringent probationary restrictions, societal and domestic pressures, blighted communities, psychological bondage, and scarce reentry assistance all contribute to high recidivism rates. Many of these nonviolent offenders return home with addiction problems. A 2004 U.S. Department of Justice survey showed that drug use prior to incarceration is common in both state and federal prisoners.⁷ I can personally attest to this reality. The existence of substance abuse among incarcerated individuals is most evident in county prisons when they are first introduced to the system. This

is the period when these individuals must adjust to life without the addictive substance that had become their motivation for life. I remember during the initial county prison intake process how fifteen to twenty men were placed in one cramped holding cell with nothing but two metal benches lining the walls. Individuals would find a place on the cold, dirty floor to get some rest during their two-day long intake process. In this constricted space, about half the men began their withdrawal from drugs and alcohol. As I tried to mask the pungent stench of vomit, feces, urine, and other body odors, I watched as the shivering, convulsed bodies of individuals combated the physical and mental withdrawal from heroin, alcohol, cocaine, and other substances.

The same 2004 survey that documented the substance abuse among state and federal prisoners showed that 40 percent of state and 49 percent of federal inmates took part in some kind of drug program, but most were self-help or peer counseling groups. Only 15 percent of state prisoners and 17 percent of federal prisoners took part in drug treatment programs with a trained professional.⁸ In my experience, there were various mandatory programs for those who had a substance abuse history; however, they were facilitated by individuals like me without any formal training to address the various issues addiction presents. So often under the pressures to assimilate into society, these men seek to numb the pain of their hopeless state through substance abuse. Because of these moments of decrepitude and lapses in judgement, they find their way back through prison's revolving door as parole or probation violators.

Many of these individuals carry the ignominy of being imprisoned and the perception of unemployability home to children who need their financial support. Now we begin to see the ripple effect of the systematic enslavement of the African American male and other incarcerated individuals. Families and communities are torn apart because of this unrighteous system. Mass incarceration is a dehumanizing industry that has a far-reaching impact on individuals, families, and communities. These men and women are more than the number assigned to them or the bottom line on a company's income statement. The collateral integration consequences and issues that plague those individuals who are attempting reentry into society are tremendous. The clear majority of individuals who have been incarcerated are parents. It has been estimated

that roughly three million children have parents who are currently incarcerated or have been recently paroled.⁹ The separation from a parent due to incarceration has become highly likely in the lives of African American children due to the disproportionate incarceration rates among African American men. These splinters in the family unit have adverse effects on all the interpersonal family relationships within the family. The separation due to incarceration often leads to infidelity in romantic relationships and eventually to severed ties. Additionally, it has been determined that parental incarceration has an adverse effect on children's social skills. "The psychological bearing on the children of incarcerated individuals can manifest in a medley of ways such as, poor socialization, faint aspirations, and diminished self-worth due to the stigma of incarceration."¹⁰

Lastly, mass incarceration has a profound effect on the communities of the individuals incarcerated. Mass incarceration harms the communities by returning these former prisoners as disenfranchised individuals without voting privileges and prospects of employment. The lack of voting privileges leaves these communities with a sector of their populace unable to vote for policymakers in that community. The lack of employability limits the communities' spending power. "Concentrated incarceration in impoverished communities has broken families, weakened the social control capacity of parents, eroded economic strength, soured attitudes toward society, and distorted politics."¹¹ There is far more damage this unrighteous caste system has done in the lives of the declared guilty and the victimized innocent; this letter only serves as a glimpse into the abyss. I question whether we are still to believe that mass incarceration is a matter of inmates lawfully adjudicated within a justice system. A better question would be whether we are compelled to act on behalf of these poverty-stricken, disenfranchised, marginalized individuals.

I stand with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his declaration that "it has always been the responsibility of the Church to broaden horizons and challenge the status quo. The Church must move out into the arena of social action....It must take an active stand against the injustices which Negroes confront in housing, education, police protection, and in city and state courts."¹² The mass incarceration system is an incursion against the social, economic,

psychological, and political freedoms of an entire demographic. The deprivations of these freedoms are diametrically opposed to the mission of God in Christ. Christ's liberating mission has been passed on to the church. If the church is to indeed prove to be faithful to the *missio dei* ("mission of God"), it has a responsibility to be a facilitator for liberty. I can only offer the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as a clarion call to action.

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."

(Luke 4:18-19)

I implore you, brothers and sisters, to resolve to liberate the oppressed. I dare to venture that the church has more in common with these marginalized outcasts of society than initially conceived. Christians have experienced the joy of deliverance, the hope evidenced by the gospel of grace, the mercy showered upon us from on high, and the joy of being set free from the power of sin. I aspire to arouse your compassion for those on the fringes. My friends, I hope to incite your passions and invigorate your courage as I bare my soul. I have shared with you the stresses and impediments I have experienced through my incarceration. Six years ago, I was liberated from the bowels of that concrete leviathan unscathed following a ten-year incarceration. Against all odds, over the ensuing six years, I would graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration *magna cum laude*, obtain a Master of Divinity with honors, own and operate a successful business, and become an ordained elder in the Lord's church.

Considering the seemingly pervasive trappings of this deplorable system, you might wonder how I could achieve these victories and others like them. The clear answer would be Christ, the Body of Christ, the church. Because of the presence of God in the form of church prison ministries, where others' leaves withered, mine flourished. Because of the support of a church community

upon reentry, I have been able to avoid the many pitfalls present in urban communities.

I dare not purport that my journey was one of smooth thoroughfares and unobstructed passages. I still deal with the stigma of a convicted felon as I navigate life. These rebuffs emanate from worldly sources and even from the called out ones. At my orientation interview for seminary, I was told that I would be given a chance but that I represented all ex-convicts. I understand I had a responsibility to God to excel in my seminary career; however, my success or failure could never represent such a diverse group of individuals. As I sought to complete my clinical pastoral internship as a chaplain, I was turned down multiple times after a background check was performed. I want to remind you that we are referring to a crime that is sixteen years old. The brand of convict or felon has proven to be a formidable challenge for even a man who has excelled academically, professionally, and, I humbly pray, spiritually. The sad truth is that often my trepidations are about sharing my testimony with believers rather than unbelievers. Beloved, I stand unveiled before you cloaked only in the righteousness of God to urge you to act and set the captives free. As Dr. King so aptly declared, "As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils."¹³

The question remains, what is the church's ethical response to mass incarceration? What can be done to curtail the escalating numbers of African American men being torn away from their families and communities? How do we help to make reentry into society a successful assimilation? What does the church offer as a healing balm to the psychological abuse experienced by these individuals? The answers are available, but none of them is a quick fix. To turn the tide of this mass incarceration epidemic, we will need to have diligence and perseverance. The other chapters in this volume are doubtless an important contribution from many different scholars and church leaders to ask similar questions and to persevere toward God's justice.

The greatest weapon that the church has to assist and heal inmates is the gospel. Churches need to actively engage in prison ministries to build these men and women up through the good news of Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. They need to hear

that they have value to God. They need to know that if they were the only sinner on the face of the planet, he would still take the punishment to be reconciled to them. They need to know that no matter what they have done, God loves them and has forgiven them. The gospel message is an antidote to low self-esteem and a diminished sense of self-worth. For me, it was the outside ministries that reminded me of my worth. This is what the church has been instructed to do in Holy Scripture. "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured" (Heb 13:3). We must remember that whether incarcerated or on parole, each one of these individuals is beloved of God and counted among the number of lives that Christ died to restore relationship with the Father.

Second, the church must begin to champion the cause for justice and equity in the criminal justice and penal systems. There must be an active voice that will challenge the policymakers to balance the scales regarding the disproportionate incarceration of black men. Additionally, there must be public support for the Second Chance Act and rehabilitation initiatives. Returning citizens will be able to utilize the benefits of the Second Chance Act through job readiness programs, job placement, substance abuse treatment, education, and other reintegration assistance. The families of these returning citizens can also receive support in order to improve communities as a whole.¹⁴ The church must also be a support system for those who are attempting to reenter society.

Finally, the church must make efforts to mend the communities to which these men and women will be returning. The light of the church must not be hidden behind sanctuary walls. We must take our light into our communities to offer hope to the fatherless, undereducated, and impoverished youth. We must sponsor after-school programs, volunteer at organizations that provide reentry assistance, and support families and children of incarcerated individuals. Within our church walls, we must develop effective youth ministries that seek to give our youth a biblical perspective of their value and worth. Our men's and women's ministries must teach biblical principles about marriage, parenting, and civic responsibility. Additionally, we must develop programs and collaborations

among local businesses that will help with the employability of those reentering society.

I pray that I have offered you a clear snapshot of the ugly truth that is America's mass incarceration system. There are many evils that we face in the world, but none as cunning and resilient as the one that has found its home on this country's soil. It seeks to disinherit humanity of its divinely vested freedom and its supreme identity. An identity that is not divided into ranks based on race, social status, ethnicity, gender, or any other schismatic factor. An identity that exemplifies the unifying freedom found in the divine community of the Godhead. This evil has made its way from the Garden of Eden, across time and across oceans, and seeks to enslave those who have been set free. It is constant in its nature, but capricious in its modality. It has reared its cunning head as slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and now as mass incarceration. Beloved, it is my belief that this evil's head was crushed at Calvary. The Body of Christ must securely replace its foot on this enemy and deracinate it with the authority vested in the church. It is my hope that you will stand with me and for me in the liberation of the captives. I leave you with these words of encouragement from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: "When we are in the darkness of some oppressive Egypt, God is a light unto our path. He imbues us with the strength needed to endure the ordeals of Egypt, and he gives us the courage and power to undertake the journey ahead."¹⁵ May God bless and keep you my beloved brothers and sisters in the faith.

In His Image,
Rev. Michael C. Richardson

Notes

1. A few statistics may nonetheless be instructive to share. Five hundred twenty-six thousand African American men were serving time in state or federal correctional facilities in 2013. That is 37 percent of the overall 1.5 million imprisoned men. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency identified similarly disturbing statistics for Native Americans' incarceration rates, which is often underreported by mainstream media. Native Americans are incarcerated at two times the rate of whites in the United States. This is higher than any other ethnic group except African Americans. Christopher Hartney and Linh Vuong, *Created Equal:*

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the US Criminal Justice System (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2009), 3.

2. The growth of numbers of women imprisoned in the United States is also disturbing, and I do not intend to minimize that fact by focusing on male incarceration.

3. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 141.

4. Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 118.

5. Tokunbo Adelekan, *A Charge to Keep: Remissioning the Urban Church for the 21st Century* (Chicago: MMGI Books, 2014), 120.

6. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 101.

7. Christopher J. Mumola and Jennifer C. Karberg, *Drug Use and Dependence, State and Federal Prisoners 2004*, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007).

8. *Ibid.*, 9.

9. Holly Foster and John Hagan, "The Mass Incarceration of Parents in America: Issues of Race/Ethnicity, Collateral Damage to Children, and Prisoner Reentry," in *Race, Crime, and Justice: Contexts and Complexities*, ed. Lauren Krivo and Ruth D. Peterson (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 180.

10. Bruce Western and Christopher Wildeman, "The Black Family and Mass Incarceration," in *The Moynihan Report Revisited: Lessons and Reflections after Four Decades*, ed. Douglas S. Massey and Robert J. Sampson (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 24.

11. Amy Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 37-38.

12. King, *Testament of Hope*, 141-42.

13. *Ibid.*, 142.

14. Lior Gideon and HungEn Sung, *Rethinking Corrections: Rehabilitation, Reentry, and Reintegration* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011), 27.

15. King, *Testament of Hope*, 85.