



Revelation at Angola

Discovering the disturbing truth about a broken justice system

DEBBIE BLUE

I was in prison and you visited me. Matthew 25:36

Trayvon Martin's name became familiar to households across the United States as the story of his tragic death gripped the nation. The seventeen-year-old African American male lost his life when a neighborhood watch volunteer shot him on February 26 in Sanford, Florida. His case garnered worldwide attention as we watched and waited for some sense of resolution and justice to be rendered by the authorities.

Yes, his story was a sad and senseless one. Yet beyond our consciousness, "Trayvons" are dying on a daily basis. Violence, specifically gun violence, is running rampant in our major cities, and we all agree that it has to end. But there is yet another form of violence sweep-

ing our nation. And its presence is not as obvious to us. It is, in many ways, hidden from us. I am speaking of the violence of mass incarceration. Where is the clarion call to end this crisis?

Hidden behind the bars within our prisons and jails are the invisible "Trayvons," their fathers, and their grandfathers. They have no names to us. They are only numbers that add to the increasing statistics of the incarcerated, numbers that have escalated exponentially over the years primarily due to the war declared on drugs. There is no national outcry for justice, no media spotlight on their stories, no protest marches, hoodies, or hearings. There is only the constant clank of the closing cell—for months, years, or perhaps for life.

That sound fell on my deaf ears—until a month into my call as the executive minister of compassion, mercy, and jus-



tice when I stepped onto the grounds of Angola Prison, the largest maximum security prison in the United States.

Driving through the entry gates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary—Angola, our team of eight from Hillside Covenant Church in Walnut Creek, California, encountered a stone sculpture with the words of Philippians 3:13: “I’ve learned to forgive and forget about the things that are behind me. I am pressing forth and reaching for the things that are before me.” Seeing the word of God proclaimed so boldly served to ease some of my anxiety, especially as I knew that the place we had just entered was once known as the bloodiest prison in America.

A former slave plantation, Angola houses more than 5,100 inmates, 76 percent of whom are black and

24 percent white, as stated in their 2010 annual report. The majority of inmates in Angola never return back to society; 71 percent are serving life sentences or are waiting on death row. One heartbreaking moment occurred when I met a young man whose father and grandfather were also in Angola—father, son, and grandson all serving life sentences.

It was in that place that I had to reckon with my own assumption that we should “lock ’em up and throw away the key,” and with my blindness to the fact that the incarcerated are also created in the image of God.

As I assessed my own anxieties, I realized that I was operating with a stereotypical mindset about “criminals” and “convicts.” When I came face to face with the invisible members of our society in Angola I was shocked by my own ignorance. It was in that place that I had to reckon with my own assumption that we should “lock ’em up and throw away the key,” and with my blindness to the fact that the incarcerated are also created in the image of God. It was in this place that I saw the compassionate and merciful actions of those doing prison ministry and met the God of the oppressed as “criminals” ministered to me and blessed me. And in that place my own heart began to break for the things that were breaking the heart of God.

Isaiah 61 reverberated loudly and clearly in my mind: “The LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise

instead of a spirit of despair” (vv. 1-3, TNIV).

I was reminded of the Apostle Paul’s experience of regaining his sight as the scales fell from his eyes in Acts 9:18, a movement from darkness to light, from blindness to seeing, from legalism to grace. In Angola, my scales fell off.

After that I began to see prison

ministry differently. Although we were obedient to the words of Jesus, “when I was in prison you visited me,” they now somehow felt unfinished. Why did we not question the injustices of a “free” nation that incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world—5 percent of the world’s population, 25 percent of the world’s prisoners? A level of dissonance began to resonate internally for me, perhaps due to the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit directing me to Micah 6:8: “He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (TNIV).

Was there logic or rationale that created the incongruity of the demographics in the Angola prison? Louisiana’s 2010 census reflects a population that is 63 percent white and 32 percent black in its racial breakdown, yet the prison population reflects just the opposite percentages. And I learned that Louisiana is not an anomaly. Not only is the United States experiencing rapid growth in incarceration rates (one in thirty-one adults), but for African Americans under correctional control, that number is one

Debbie Blue is the executive minister of compassion, mercy, and justice for the Evangelical Covenant Church.

in eleven. Micah 6:8 was beginning to echo within my heart in much deeper ways.

If the situation is dire for adults in the system, perhaps there is hope for our youth—how does the juvenile system compare with the depressing reality of the adult population of the incarcerated, I wondered. Sadly, the prospects of hope were quickly squelched as I gleaned more information. At the national level, research from the organization Campaign for Youth Justice reveals that:

- On any given day, nearly 87,000 juvenile offenders are not living in their homes but are held in residential placement (e.g., juvenile detention facilities, corrections facilities, group homes, or shelters).
- Every day, nearly 25,000 youth are detained in America.
- An estimated 200,000 youth are tried, sentenced, or incarcerated as adults every year across the United States.
- On any given day, nearly 7,500 young people are locked up in adult jails.
- On any given day, more than 3,600 young people are locked up in adult prisons.

On the local level, I discovered that the news is equally sobering. Once again, I was taken aback by the egregiously disproportionate demographic of detention in Cook County (Illinois), where I live. Although the county's makeup is 55 percent white, 25 percent black, and 24 percent Hispanic, the population in a local juvenile detention center tells a different story: 80 percent black, 19 percent Hispanic, less than 0.5 percent non-Hispanic white, and less than 0.5 percent "other."

The more I learned, the worse the picture became. I was running out of hope quickly. Ecclesiastes 1:18 helped me make sense of what was happening to me emotionally and mentally. Eugene Peterson states it simply in

The Message: "Much learning earns you much trouble. The more you know, the more you hurt."

Where are the scales when you need them? How much simpler life could be if those blinders could just stay where they were!

Yet as much as I would have preferred to ignore the problem, hoping that it would go away, I had no doubt that God's heart was breaking for the injustices inherent in this broken criminal justice system. God was inviting me into the messy chaos and I had no choice but to accept. If I chose to ignore God's heart tugs on this issue, was I also choosing to ignore God's word to Micah clearly stating what the Lord required—to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God?

Had the church been oblivious to this issue as well? In my own context, which was being severely impacted by these statistics, I very rarely heard sermons preached on the topic. Nor did I hear about it in other congregations as I traversed the country. I concluded, rightly or wrongly, that the church has not been a place where we hear much about those who are incarcerated or the families that are impacted or affected by the system—including victims and families of victims as well as offenders. Yet the overwhelming number of those incarcerated (more than 2.3 million, according to the Pew Center on the States) added to those who are under correctional supervision (more than 4.3 million) would indicate that the church is not immune to the effects of the system.

In April Fareed Zakaria, editor-at-large for *Time* magazine, wrote an article titled "Incarceration Nation: The war on drugs has succeeded only in putting millions of Americans in jail," in which he highlights some interesting facts: "More than



For an expanded conversation on mass incarceration check out a video interview with the author and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom at CovChurch.tv/companion-july-2012-feature

half of America's federal inmates today are in prison on drug convictions.... A college student costs the state [California] \$8,667 per year; a prisoner costs it

\$45,006 a year." He continues, "We are creating a vast prisoner underclass in this country at huge expense, increasingly unable to function in normal society, all in the name of a war we have already lost."

Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, communicates a similar point, naming this underclass as an "undercaste—a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society."

Church, where are you? Who will be that voice for the voiceless? The silence of the church on the issue of criminal justice has locked up the stories of brokenness and shame, guilt and pain—from the incarcerated and the free. Is this issue too political for the church? Should we not be involved in making things right in our broken world?

In Luke's gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry quoting the words of Isaiah 61. He also tells us that when we visit those in prison, we are doing it for him (Matthew 25:39-40). The writer of Hebrews exhorts Christ's followers to "continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison" (13:3, TNIV). Do we find encouragement in the words of the psalmist? "God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy" (68:6, NLT).

The introduction to the resolution on criminal justice adopted by the 2010 Covenant Annual Meeting states, "those who commit crimes rarely enter into a restorative process; instead they often become enmeshed in a downward cycle of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

Revelation at **Angola**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

non-redemptive despair and a sense of hopelessness resulting in repeated cycles of crime. The burden on society created by crime and the need for a redemptive response is more than can be reasonably borne by those who work within the criminal justice system alone. It cries out for an active, engaged response from God's people—the church.”

We are right to join in the call for justice for Trayvon Martin, yet nothing will restore Trayvon's life. The other Trayvons in our country still have a chance. We the church have a hope in Christ that can bring restoration and wholeness to all those created in the image of God. It is a hope that can prevent more Trayvons, their fathers, and grandfathers from even entering the system.

Matthew Watts, founder and director of Hope Community Development Corporation, says, “We can starve the beast and cut off the supply by starting with our youth.” We can also continue to be a presence and a hope to those who are on the inside of the bars. And for those who are released from prison, we can join efforts with others in our communities to assist in their re-entry into society. Meanwhile, we can all advocate for a fair and just system for all, recognizing the humanity and dignity of each and every person.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” While he was imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes...and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.”

Compassion, mercy, and justice; healing, restoring, and redeeming—these are all things that matter to God and must matter to God's church as well. We the church must end the silence and proclaim freedom for the captives. ■