

There is Good News Even in a Broken System  
The Rev. Deacon Thomas R. English  
First Congregational United Church of Christ  
September 18, 2016 Criminal Justice Sunday  
Luke 10: 25-37

Good morning! It is truly an honor to be with you this morning. I am grateful to Melanie and Jonathan for their kind invitation and especially to the Literacy Committee for their help in bringing you a Criminal Justice Sunday.

For the last few years the Prison Ministry Commission of the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon in cooperation with Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, the Partnership for Safety and Justice and Sponsors, Inc., here in Eugene, has been urging communities of faith to dedicate just one Sunday or one Sabbath per year to learn, lament and pray about the issues of our criminal justice system and why they are so important to us as Christians and people of faith. Today, I am pleased to include First Congregational Church in this effort.

In past years, I have used the Parable of the Prodigal Son as my text not only because of its exposition of God's radical forgiveness but, more importantly because of the anger and resentment of the elder brother in that story that goes to the very wounds on our community soul, as today's text, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, so vividly points out.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan brings the issue of community soul into focus when the lawyer, in seeking to narrow his duty, asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" The word *neighbor* in the Greek means *someone who is near*, and in the Hebrew it means *someone that you have an association with*. This interprets the word in a limited sense, referring to a fellow Jew and would have excluded Samaritans, Romans, and other foreigners. Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to correct the false understanding that the lawyer had of who his neighbor is, and what his duty is to his neighbor.

The Parable tells the story of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, and while on the way he is robbed of everything he had, including his clothing, and is beaten to within an inch of his life. The Jericho Road was treacherously winding and was a favorite hideout of robbers and thieves. Then a priest passes by showing no love or compassion for the man by failing to help him, and passing on the other side of the Road so as not to get involved. The next person to pass by is a Levite, and he does exactly what the priest did: he passes by without showing any compassion. Neither of these community leaders could see the injured man as their neighbor. We do not know if the injured man was a Jew or Gentile, but it made no difference to the Samaritan; he did not consider the man's race or religion. The *Good Samaritan* saw only a person in dire need of assistance, and assist him he did, above and beyond the minimum required. The Samaritan saw his neighbor as anyone who was in need.

On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a speech to a gathering of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church in New York City.<sup>1</sup> Professing his wholehearted support of the aims of the organization, King recounted how over the preceding two years, he had moved steadily to, "Break the betrayal of my own silences on the Vietnam war."

King's advisers had questioned the wisdom of doing so, feeling that it would detract from the focus on civil rights. They didn't see it as their problem.

But King rejected this view. True to his trade as a preacher and social prophet, he asserted that the war in Vietnam was but a symptom of a deeper malady in the American spirit. What America needed was “a radical revolution of values...,” and then he went deeper.

“A true revolution of values,” he said, “will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to be the Good Samaritan of life’s Roadside; but that will be only the initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make life’s journey on life’s highway.”

That day is here. Charity and Mercy are not enough. We are called to make structural and systemic changes.

In Jeremiah we hear the prophet lament that, “The harvest has passed, the summer has ended and we are not saved...I mourn and horror grips me,” the prophet says. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?”

So it is with our criminal justice and public safety systems. They are so broken and we are shocked and lament about gun violence, about unwarranted police shootings, about shooting of police, and profiling of African Americans and Muslims. We are confused by charges of racism and protests that Black Lives Matter. Surprisingly, both Democrats and Republicans, when they can agree on almost nothing else, recognize this brokenness. This is truly good news! And even in this campaign season where politicians wallow in what David Brooks calls the “pornography of pessimism,” we have not only this good news but a growing willingness on the part of Americans, I can feel it, to do the hard work to make wise choices based on our hopes rather than our fears. Yes, we have problems, but none of them are reason for cynicism, hatred and despair. With hope and optimism we are motivated to seek sound solutions to even the thorniest problems—to transform the Jericho Road.

There is healing for the people. We are the balm in Gilead. Not only are politicians talking about the problems of crime and justice, but judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors and criminal justice professionals, here in Oregon and elsewhere, are quietly working together to identify and resolve issues in thoughtful, creative and safe ways. We applaud and celebrate them for this courageous work. But it will come to nothing much more than tinkering around the edges if we, as members of our communities, don’t take up our duties as citizens and people of faith and insist on making the structural and systemic changes needed to raise up the whole community, not just some of us. We can no longer afford to react with anger and resentment because we fear that some other than us might be getting something we want.

Nowhere is this more than obvious than in our crippled education system. Every year 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the United States—that’s a student every 26 seconds.<sup>ii</sup>

Let me put those numbers in perspective. Remembering that just last week, on September 11th, we marked the 15th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center. In that attack, this nation took 2,852 casualties. That was such a trauma for our nation that the American people dropped everything else they thought was important to weep and to mourn, to listen to the tragic stories at the horror that had inflicted so many casualties on us in on us in just one day.

Friday we took another 7,000 casualties. Thursday we took 7,000 casualties. Tomorrow we will take even more casualties. Every day of the school year 7,000 young people drop out of the system and most of those 7,000 young people are truly casualties. Many will lose their lives...and those who don’t will be

permanently debilitated by it. I see them daily in our jail. If you don't believe me, just look on the streets of Chicago or in parts of Eugene or in the rural areas of this state. These youth will be unable to join our society as productive members...or as informed citizens. That's a tragedy for them and a threat to our nation and to the communities we live in—such a threat, that if we don't change what we are doing, our communities will not be peaceful and prosperous and this nation will lose many of its cherished democratic values. Will we be the generation that allows fear for our families, anger at our loss of property and resentment of the other to shatter the vision that 200 years of Americans have built toward?

This question is at the very root at our efforts to make the structural and systemic changes that will transform our Jericho Road. What has been called the *school to prison pipeline* starts with illiteracy. If a student can't read at standard by the fifth grade that student's risk of drop out is 85%. Three out of five people in American prisoners can't read; 85% of juvenile offenders have problems reading. School drop outs cost our nation an estimated \$240 billion a year.<sup>iii</sup> And the consequences don't stop there: 20% of Americans read below the level needed to earn a living wage; 50% of the unemployed between the ages of 16 and 21 cannot read well enough to be considered functionally literate. Fortunately, many of this latter group come to Lane Community College for help—one of our county's most effective crime fighting programs.

Your Literacy Committee here at First Congregational recognizes that addressing illiteracy is the crucial starting point in any transformation of the whole host of social ills that make that Jericho Road so treacherous.

It is in resolving the value and emotional issues surrounding social justice that constitute both the danger and the crucial point in moving ahead with effective and humanitarian reform. It will require the courage of our convictions, both as people of faith and as citizens, to assure that the brokenness is truly transformed. These convictions are rooted in our understanding of God's peace which is not possible without God's justice, and our baptismal covenant to "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being."

I invite you to attend the Criminal Justice Sunday program following this service at 11:00 where Nick Crapser, Deputy Director and Andrew Provencher, Mentorship coordinator from Sponsors Inc., which is our transitional services program for those coming out of prison and your Literacy Committee will update you on their work and suggest concrete things you can do to make transformation happen. We will end promptly at Noon.

Can we as a community, as a state and a nation, as a people of faith, find the courage to act on our aspirations not rejecting our fears, some of which are natural, but at the same time not allowing them to smother reason? Will we rededicate ourselves to that vision 200 years of Americans have built toward? You know that vision. It is the third verse of American the Beautiful.

O beautiful for patriot dream  
That sees beyond the years  
Thine alabaster cities gleam  
Undimmed by human tears!  
America! America!  
God shed His grace on thee  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea!

We will, with God's help!

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<sup>i</sup> King, Beyond Vietnam

<sup>ii</sup> 11 Facts about High School Dropout rates, DoSomething.org

<sup>iii</sup> The Literacy Project Foundation