

## **Empathetic and Invested: The Church and the Prison Problem**

**By Tamarkus Cook**

Benjamin Todd Jealous, President and CEO of the NAACP, has said, “For every century there is a crisis in our democracy, the response to which defines how future generations view those who are alive at the time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was the transatlantic slave trade, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was slavery, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was Jim Crow. Today it is mass incarceration.” This issue is one to which many, even I initially, give little consideration. We convince ourselves that it is an issue that does not affect us simply because we have never been to prison, and have no intentions of going, and our children are not in prison. The reality is that it is difficult to empathize with a situation we have not personally encountered, especially one that is difficult.

This point is further driven home through the ministry of Jesus and two exorcisms that he performed. In the Gospel of Matthew 8:28-34, there were two men possessed by demons in the country of the Gergesenes. The people in their town feared them and despised them so much that they had them chained and forced to a desolate area of their land. Their hostility toward the condition of these men caused them to develop an apathetic attitude towards the men—not the condition of the men, but the men.

In our society today this is one of the contributing factors as to why we are experiencing such an alarming rate of incarceration. Our culture has acquired tunnel vision, and instead of focusing on the root of the problem, we focus on behaviors of people without even considering their worth. Society has deemed it more appropriate to ostracize and imprison men and women than to accept and educate them. We see the conditions caused by the guilty who have been incarcerated, but we do not see the lives and the souls of the incarcerated. This takes much deeper work.

It was this apathetic attitude and lack of concern that caused the people to isolate and chain the Gergesene men, as opposed to embracing and loving them. In fact, the text goes on to inform us that these men were disliked and or feared so fiercely, that everyone in town did everything to avoid even going near them. No doubt they took longer, rougher, and more dangerous roads to arrive at destinations that would have been easier reached had they gone by the way of the possessed men. All of the people’s fear and inhumane treatment of these men arose from their refusal to embrace the reality that these two men could have been any one of them and just wanted the same life everyone else had.

As it relates to mass incarceration, the Church in most cases today takes the same apathetic and distancing approach that the people of this city took toward the two possessed men. The Church does not mind developing a prison ministry that provides inmates with bars of soaps, cards of inspiration, and toiletries. However, there are very few that are willing to embrace sincerely these young men and women to save them from the snares of mass incarceration and re-incarceration. How many are willing to make appeals to court systems for alternative means of correction? How many will sacrifice their limited time and resources to aid in incarceration prevention, restoration via salvation, and the re-acclimation both spiritually and physically in the form of funds, services, and resources (post-prison)?

Even after Jesus cast the demons out of the men, the people in the town had such preconceived notions about them that they still wanted no communication with the men and wanted Jesus to leave their town immediately. The reason for them isolating and chaining the men was that they were possessed. Now that the men are no longer possessed, the people still treat them and their deliverer as if they are all lepers. This is clearly analogous to the way we treat men and women who have served time in prison. We do everything in our power to avoid interaction with them. We label them as felons, restrict which human rights apply to them (even though they are human), and bar them from attaining necessary credentials (that in many cases keep them from earning a decent, honest, living), even after they have served their time and paid restitution for their crime(s).

However, in the Gospel of Mark 9:14-27, we are presented with an empathetic father whose son is possessed with a demon. The demon causes the boy to foam at the mouth, wallow in fire, and jump into bodies of water in an attempt to destroy the boy. Our first account presents us with an apathetic, selfish, fearful group of people. However, here we see a shining example of one loving, invested, and empathetic person.

It is clear to me that the father is empathetic and invested because even though the demon has thrown the boy into fire and water in an attempt to kill him, the boy is still alive. The fact that the boy is still alive suggests to us that the father has risked his own life to get in the fire with the boy to keep him from being consumed by the flames. The father jumped in the water with the boy at the risk of possibly being drowned himself. We know lifeguards die attempting to save people who are flailing in water. And the exegesis of this text suggests that this boy had a form of epilepsy. If an epileptic episode occurred while he was in the water, the father had a life-threatening situation on his hands. And no doubt the father's love for his son caused the father to use his own garments to wipe the foam from the mouth of the son.

If we as Christians can learn to empathize with and invest in our young men and women in the midst of all their issues, shortcomings, and bad decision-making, then we can directly play a pivotal role in reversing the out-of-control mass incarceration movement. Unless we develop an attitude like the father in Mark's Gospel, and stop shunning those in prison and those released, we too are part of the fabric of the cloth of this country which believes it is better to build more prisons than schools, and to spend more money to imprison an individual than educate one.

Further, this father showed his empathy for his son and that he was invested through his patience. An often-overlooked component of this miracle story is the fact that the father brought his son to Jesus. However, when he brought him, Jesus was with Peter, James, and John on a mountain that we sermonically call the Mountain of Transfiguration. These three disciples had enough time to witness Elijah and Moses, see the very garments of Jesus transfigured, hear the voice of God speak to them from a cloud confirming the deity of Jesus, and have a long conversation as they walked down from the mountain. While all of these things were taking place, the father's love and empathy for his son caused him to wait for Jesus, even as scribes argued with the disciples after the disciples who had not gone up on the mountain with Jesus could not cure the boy.

Jesus, taking immediate control of the situation, engages in a conversation with the father and the father asks Jesus to have compassion on “us.” The reason he says “on us” was that the possession not only affects the boy, it affects the father and no doubt the entire family. Every time the boy was thrown into fire, the father no doubt was burned trying to get the boy out of the fire, and every time the boy jumped in water, the father was certainly drenched and possibly risked drowning trying to save the boy. Just as the possession of his son affected this father, we too must embrace and accept the reality that mass incarceration affects each of us. No, we may not have kinfolk in prison, but we are inextricably bound by the love of Christ to all others and we are all impacted, whether we want to be or not, by the mass-incarceration of so many men and women, especially those of us in the African American community. Just ponder what we have lost and continue to lose as millions are devoured by the Prison-Industrial Complex and its after-effects.

Finally, notice that once Jesus delivers the boy from the demon (Mark 9:26), the text says that the boy looked like a corpse so the people thought he was dead. But, Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him, and he arose (Mark 9:27). Most who survive incarceration and gain their freedom are met with socially engineered circumstances that make their new realities appear as dead realities too. They are unable to secure work, so they are unable to provide for themselves. They feel unloved by others and demeaned by society, so many struggle with loving and valuing themselves. As agents of Christ Jesus, it is our job as the Church to represent the very hands of Jesus and speak and bring life to what may seem and feel to others as dead situations through empathic actions and through prayer. After all, the reason the first two men were still possessed was that the people showed apathy towards them; the reason the boy was still possessed was that the disciples failed to pray.

I never shall forget when my wife and I began to wean our son from our bed. Every time we would put him in his crib, he would cry. This being my only son, the sight of his tears and sound of his cries literally drove me to a point of extreme grief. So, whenever he would cry I would get him out of the crib. Finally, one day my wife told me, “If you keep getting him out of the crib, he will never learn to sleep in his crib on his own.” So, I promised her I would never get him out again. However, one day he started crying and as I got off the couch she said, “You better not get him out of that crib!” I promised her I wouldn’t. But when I went in his room and saw my boy, standing there with tears streaming down his face, screaming at the top of his lungs and reaching out for his dad, I couldn’t help myself. I told him, “Son, your mother told me not to get you out of the crib, but she did not say I couldn’t get in the crib with you. Let me see how I can do that!” And that’s our obligation as the body of Christ to the men and women who are incarcerated and those who have been released from incarceration—to get in the midst of their situation with them through prayer and empathic acts of liberating care.