

## Let the Cries of the Captives Come Before You: Discerning Theological Wisdom in the Modern Penitentiary

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According to the contemporary Anglican theologian David Ford, “prophetic scriptural wisdom is inextricably involved with the discernment of cries.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I examine how contemporary theological reflection could benefit from a renewed focus on attending to the cries of imprisoned men and women.

I begin by offering a brief overview and critique of the rationale that led to the creation of the penitentiary system in the United States. In doing so, I draw attention to some assumptions implicit with the Book of Common Prayer rites for the Visitation of Prisoners published around the same time. I then turn to contemporary examples from my experience serving as a chaplain in a maximum security prison: teaching theology classes in which we discussed works like Augustine’s *Confessions*. I conclude with a reflection on certain insights and exchanges from two theology seminars conducted in the prison by David and Deborah Ford.

### *Origins of the Modern Penitentiary: A Brief Sketch*

Despite the growing awareness of the problems of mass incarceration in the United States, it seems the plight of men and women in prison remains rarely discussed in our churches, and the issue of criminal justice reform is seldom taken up by our church leaders. This was not always the case.

Among the first and most influential groups dedicated to penal reform in the United States was the Philadelphia Society for

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<sup>1</sup> David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15.

Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, formed in 1786.<sup>2</sup> Bishop William White, rector of Christ Church Philadelphia and presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, served as the Philadelphia Society's first president. He held this office for forty-nine years, until his death in 1836.

Reformers like White saw the Philadelphia Society's mission to alleviate the miseries of the imprisoned as a natural outworking of Christian responsibility. In 1787, White wrote, "To a people professing Christianity, it will be sufficient only to mention that acts of charity to the miserable tenants of prisons are upon record among the first of Christian duties."<sup>3</sup> For White, showing mercy to condemned criminals was not only our Christian duty, it was also more "civilized." In a letter criticizing the prevailing criminal justice system, which frequently inflicts "death" and "other odious punishments," he opined,

Let us indulge the pleasing hope, that this system of ignorance and barbarism will no longer continue to the disgrace of the nations and governments, who are now arrived at the highest state of civilization, and who profess to be actuated by benign and salutary influences of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

The Philadelphia Society's favored "cure" for the apparent injustices of the older penal system was the penitentiary—an institution designed to facilitate the reconciliation of penitent sinners and fully restore them to society as contributing citizens.<sup>5</sup> Over time, members of the Philadelphia Society successfully lobbied for the legislative

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<sup>2</sup> For records of the Philadelphia Society, see *Sketch of the Principal Transactions of the "Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons": From Its Origin to the Present Time* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Merrihew & Thompson, Printers, 1859).

<sup>3</sup> William White, Letter "To the Friends of Humanity," 1787, quoted in Roberts Vaux, *Notices of the Original, and Successive Efforts, to Improve the Discipline of the Prison at Philadelphia, and to Reform the Criminal Code of Pennsylvania: With a Few Observations on the Penitentiary System* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Kimber and Sharpless, 1826), 21.

<sup>4</sup> William White, Letter to Stephen Lushington, British Parliament, 1818, quoted in Vaux, *Notices*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Meranze, "The Penitential Ideal in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 108, no. 4 (1984): 419–450, for a helpful account of theory and values undergirding the Philadelphia Society's vision for the penitentiary system and how their penitential ideal transformed into law.

changes and funding needed to put their ideas into practice. With a new prison design that was architecturally compatible with their system of prison discipline, they were convinced: “The Penitentiary will be, strictly speaking, an apparatus for the expeditious, certain, and economical eradication of vice, and the production of reformation.”<sup>6</sup>

Looking back, it is remarkable to see the reformers’ level of faith, not only in the possibility of the rehabilitation and redemption of criminal offenders, but in their own ability to create a system that could effectuate this transformation. New advances in science, technology, and medicine bolstered their confidence at the time. One of the Philadelphia Society’s founding members, Dr. Benjamin Rush, conjectured,

Should the same industry and ingenuity which have produced these triumphs of medicine over diseases and death be applied to the moral science, it is highly probable, that most of the baneful vices, which deform the human breast, and convulse the nations of the earth, might be banished from the world.<sup>7</sup>

Such was the excitement and optimism of reformers like Rush that they believed they could use this new “moral science” to not only eradicate the problems of sin in the world, but to even bring about a transformation in sinners that approximates *theosis*.

I am fully persuaded, that from the combined action of causes, which operate at once upon the reason, the moral faculty, the passions, the senses, the brain, the nerves, the blood and the heart, it is possible to produce such a change in his moral character, as shall raise him to a resemblance of angels—nay more to the likeness of God himself.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Description of the penitentiary, by George W. Smith, 1823, quoted in Vaux, *Notices*, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Rush, *An Inquiry Into the Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty: Delivered Before a Meeting of the American Philosophical Society, Held at Philadelphia, on the Twenty-Seventh of February, 1786* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell, 1839), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Rush, *An Inquiry*, 25.

Underlying the reformer's benevolent intentions, there are some disturbing associations and assumptions at play. We find an uncritical adequation of "crime" with "sin" and the will of God with decisions of the state, a hubristic belief that we can easily distinguish between sinful and virtuous people, and an assumption that we have the power to create some kind of system, program, or apparatus that could transform the former into the latter (by force or coercion if necessary). These problematic assumptions and conceptual confusions are apparent in the prison visitation services included in the U.S. Book of Common Prayer, published around the same time.

*Praying Shapes Behaving? Prayer Book Rites  
for the Visitation of Prisoners*

Both the 1789 and the 1892 versions of the Book of Common Prayer included a substantive "Form of Prayer for the Visitation of Prisoners," with an additional rite of "Prayers for Persons under Sentence of Death."<sup>9</sup> The services are penitential rites, designed to bring about (and express) a prisoner's contrition and repentance. In the language of the service, "crime" and "sin" are essentially equated. People might be confined in prison for committing a crime, but the service assumes they are in prison because they have sinned. Just so, whatever may be happening to the prisoner appears justified, as a divinely sanctioned means to a better end. This is apparent in the opening collect:

Grant that the pains and punishments which these they servants endure, through their bodily confinement, may tend to setting free their souls from the chains of sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>10</sup>

The services also include lengthy exhortations in which the prisoner's confinement is portrayed as part of God's providential care and fatherly correction. The prisoner is told,

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<sup>9</sup> These services are based on services added to the 1666 Book of Common Prayer of the Church of Ireland in 1714.

<sup>10</sup> The full text of the "A Form of Prayer for the Visitation of Prisoners" from the 1789 and 1892 editions of the BCP is available online, here: [http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1789/Visitation\\_Prisoners\\_1789.htm](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1789/Visitation_Prisoners_1789.htm).

It is your part and duty, therefore, to humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, to acknowledge the righteousness of his judgments, and to endeavour that, by his grace, this present visitation may lead you to a sincere and hearty repentance.

The problematic identification of God's will with state actions is most egregious in the exhortation intended for those receiving the death penalty.

Dearly beloved, it hath pleased Almighty God, in his justice, to bring you under the sentence and condemnation of the law. You are shortly to suffer death . . . and we pray God, that you may make such use of your punishments in this world, that your soul may be saved in the world to come.

The minister assumes the role of the benevolent and virtuous servant of God who has come to bring the prisoner to repentance, to teach him the error of his ways, and to show him the path of salvation.

Wherefore we come to you in the bowels of compassion; and, being desirous that you should avoid presumption on the one hand, and despair on the other, shall plainly lay before you the wretchedness of your condition, and declare how far you ought to depend on the mercies of God, and the merits of our Saviour.

There is little reason to doubt the intentions of these early penal reformers. They saw themselves as responding with compassion to the very real and observable miseries of men and women in the penal system. With good will toward their fellow humans, they were seeking to "fix" the problem, to find a "cure" for criminality, to create an "apparatus" for the eradication of vice and the production of reformation. Once they were convinced they had discovered a solution, they tirelessly worked to impose it, even in the face of mounting evidence that their system was producing terrible results.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Jennifer Lawrence Janofsky, "Hopelessly Hardened: The Complexities of Penitentiary Discipline at Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary," in Michele Lise

The prison system in the United States has changed much since the days of those early penitentiaries, but in many ways it is the same. It is still premised on the belief that “we” (upstanding virtuous citizens) know what is best to do with “them” (uncivilized immoral criminals), that we can “correct” them, systematically rehabilitate them, transform them into upstanding virtuous citizens (like us). That is the idea, at least.

People are often surprised when I tell them some of the best Christians I know are serving life sentences in a maximum security prison. In our society, we tend to view people in prison from a perspective of presumed superiority. Prisoners must be less moral, or less spiritual, or less intelligent, or at least less well educated. Why else would they be in prison? Well-meaning Christians who engage in prison ministry can easily slip into a patronizing view of the men and women they “minister to.” Genuine Christian ministry is never unilateral. “It is something Christ does in us and through us and that we do in and through Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The relationship is reciprocal, involving both giving and receiving—indeed, “it is in giving that we receive.” I have learned the truth of this during my time working in prison.

### *Prison Confessions: Reading Augustine behind Bars*

When I first started working in the chaplain’s department in a maximum security prison, I thought I might be leaving academic life behind. However, after working there a few months, organizing religious services, coordinating volunteers, and getting to know the people there, some of the men with whom I had been working learned of my academic background and asked if I would teach a class. I agreed. I decided to do something simple and easy—a book discussion about a familiar Christian classic I had taught before: the *Confessions* by St. Augustine. I did not foresee how closely the men would relate to Augustine’s story, nor did I anticipate how great our conversations would be.

When teaching undergrads, I found I expended most of my energy trying to get them to care. That was not the case in the prison. The men in the class wanted to learn. They were hungry to discuss

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Tarter and Richard Bell, eds., *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 106–123.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 17.

theology, to talk about God and their own spiritual lives, and to explore the topics and questions that came up in the text in relation to both.

Many identified with Augustine's perspective as an older man looking back on his life and wondering—Why did I do all those things? Why did I steal the pears? The men wanted to talk about the complexities of sin and evil, about the difficulties of assigning guilt and taking responsibility for our actions. They had questions about God's role in directing our lives, about theodicy, about the way our desires and behaviors can change in different settings. For the men in the class, these were not abstract theoretical questions, thought experiments or paper doubts. Augustine's reflections—on the curious pleasure of a crime committed in the company of others who share in the sin—evoked stories from the men about gang violence, vandalism, and drug abuse. One eloquently connected his own story:

I didn't fall into the "wrong crowd," rather, I and my friends became the wrong crowd, our adolescent sin and wrongdoing turned to greater crimes as we matured.<sup>13</sup>

He then went on to explain,

I can reflect back to see the numerous times when I have made poor choices and realize picking another road would have led to a different life. Needless to say, my poor choices led to that bad one in which I committed murder, an act which was as unnecessary as it was horrid. In a strange way it preserved my life, for if I had remained in the world I would have continued with my friends and our lifestyle which led to their early deaths. I can only, in retrospect, think that perhaps I have been spared, thus far, for a reason. I still search for that reason.

One of the most refreshing things about teaching this class was the lack of a set course schedule; there were no term dates or deadlines when we had to finish, no spring break or summer vacation to work around. We moved through the book at our own pace, meeting twice a week—sometimes only covering a few pages at a time. Early on, I

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<sup>13</sup> Text from a short reflection paper by one of the class participants. Quoted with permission.

apologized that we were not moving as fast as I thought we would and that we might need to take a few more weeks to get through the book. One of the guys jokingly responded, “Look, I’ve got a life sentence. I’m not going anywhere. Take as much time as you need.” That certainly put things in perspective.

When we got to the more abstract discussions at the end the *Confessions* (which many people skip)—the ones after the “autobiographical” chapters, about topics like time and memory—I was still amazed by the level of interest and engagement. To a certain extent, it makes sense. For these men, who are “doing time,” the question, “What, then, is time?” is actually relevant. Several of the “old timers” (men who had been incarcerated for twenty, thirty, sometimes forty years or more) were fascinated by Augustine’s theories about the relation of time to memory and expectation. When one’s daily existence is highly routinized—living in the same place around the same people, doing more or less the same thing, day in and day out—one loses sense of the normal markers and notable events in life by which we usually organize our memories of the past.

We eventually finished the *Confessions* after four or five months and moved on to other works: *The Wound of Knowledge* by Rowan Williams, Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, and then a variety of articles and papers pertaining to topics and questions that came up in our discussions. Often I felt like I was learning more from these classes than I was teaching, gaining more than I was giving.

In 2010, I ran into David and Deborah Ford at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting. We got to talking over coffee about what I was doing and these amazing classes at the prison. A year later, the Fords came to the prison for a week-long visit and led an intensive graduate-level seminar with some of the men from my classes. We read excerpts from the writings of Bonhoeffer, both of the Fords, Peter Ochs and Dan Hardy, several poems by Michael O’Siadhail, and many selected passages of scripture. We studied together, prayed together, and formed lasting relationships.

After the seminar, the Fords later reported that they were deeply affected by the experience. “Profound is the word I’ve been using to describe it,” Deborah told me. Comparing this seminar to ones found at Cambridge, David said that it had “the same sense of being able to have really good discussion of texts with people really sharing their thoughts about them.” What really impressed him, however, was “the maturity of faith with the group.” “They were very different, they had differences among themselves, but each of them, I felt, had a

tested faith, a faith that had been through things. They got to different places, but it was a mature faith.” Deborah was similarly impressed by the faith of the men she met at the prison. “What I feel has happened these last few days,” she said, “is that I’ve been given the real thing. It will go away with me as a standard to measure my own life by. I feel as if I’ve been given a much more intimate way, a personal way, a standard for living a life that’s to be tested, with a sense of ‘if you can do this, I can live my life without so much lamenting.’”

Two years later, the Fords returned to do it again, leading another seminar for men at the prison. Again we studied together, prayed together, and this time celebrated the eucharist together (with Deborah preaching and presiding). We shared stories of joy and also of great suffering, laughed and cried. At the end of this visit, David said that one “takeaway” for him this time was “an amazing experience of family”: we are all members of the same family, the same body of Christ, in Cambridge and in Virginia, in Dubai and in this prison, we are all related to each other in God.

One of my favorite memories from the Fords’ visits occurred during a *lectio divina* session that Deborah led for a small group of us in the evening. The reading was John 20:19–29, the story in which Jesus appears to the disciples and then to Thomas after the resurrection. We marveled at the connection—the disciples were meeting behind locked doors when “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you,’” and here we were, meeting behind locked doors, experiencing a deep sense of peace and communion. One of the men said, “You could almost forget you were in prison right now.” It was true.

### *Conclusion: Discerning Theological Wisdom*

David Ford writes that at the heart of theological wisdom is doing justice to a diversity of cries: cries within and outside scripture that arise from the intensities of life—in joy and suffering, gratitude and acclamation; and cries of people for what they most desire—love, justice, truth, compassion, health, sustenance. “Christian wisdom is discerned within earshot of such cries, and is above all alert to the cries of Jesus.”<sup>14</sup>

In prison, the intensities of life are magnified, the cries of people for what they most desire are more desperate. What one finds in

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<sup>14</sup> Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 5.

prison is not a place or a people unlike anything we know. Rather, as Kenneth Carder writes,

Prisons and jails present in microcosm the challenges confronting the church and the world—racial polarization, economic disparity and poverty, terror and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, personal and family brokenness, isolation and loneliness, anger and meaninglessness and guilt. Behind the walls of every prison and jail are fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors—all persons made in the divine image who, like the rest of us, have distorted that image and who long for love, reconciliation and purpose. Ministry in such contexts of intense needs and opportunities can energize and shape ministry in the broader society where the same realities exist in less concentrated form.<sup>15</sup>

For those seeking to discern theological wisdom in and for the church today, I suggest it may be valuable to consider going to prison. Do not go to “do good” to the prisoners, to “fix” them (make them more like us), or to introduce them to Jesus. Rather, go there to spend time with Jesus, the one who says “I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt. 25:26). Go to find Christ in the relationships you develop there, and allow the Holy Spirit, working in and through those relationships, to make everyone involved, more like him.

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<sup>15</sup> Carder, Kenneth L. “. . . You Visited Me,” *Christian Century* 123, no. 20 (October 3, 2006).