2004-11-14 If There Is A Soul In Prison
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
as the arc of autumn bends toward a time of holiday
to worship, to ask the questions
that are deeper than the surface of our calendars,
and find answers which often pose further questions.
So come, word, music, silence and story,
and flow behind these words, our opening promise:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace.

Sequence

A week of days. A week of seven days.
A death in Paris, and dramatic burial in Ramallah.
Talking heads on TV offering their take on the election.
Pat Robertson gloating about the election.
Usual classes in local colleges: math, literature, poly sci.
Books with lovely pictures, read in grammar schools.
Home cooking on stovetops. Meals in restaurants. Meals taken after standing in line at Faith Mission.
There are deaths in seven days: diseases, accidents, and, as usual, deaths from violence. Many births, too!
A week of days. A week of seven days.
Some hospitalizations. Many sneezes and coughs.
Talking heads about Fallujah in Iraq everywhere, as guns still fell very young people from two nations.

Songs on the radio. Concerts. Drinks at bars.
A young African American man in Columbus pulled over for the 6th time in five weeks for dwb…
driving while black.
Parents worried about their children overseas.
Mothers breathing in fear, should their children be taken away because of the Amendment to the Ohio Constitution favored by a majority of Ohio voters.
A week of days. Just seven days.
People celebrating anniversaries, promotions.
Others humming in grief. Some sipping tea alone.
Dancing in clubs. Traffic jams. Washing dishes.
A week of days. A birthday party at Chris and Jeremy's. Listening to Babar talk of getting ready to go for the Eid supper that ends the Ramadan fast today.
Lovemaking.
Gratitude.
Grief.
Fear. Growing courage.
Laughter. Anger. Joy under a blue sky.
A gathering under this gable.
And as usual, a time of silence.
A week of days.

silence

A week of days. A week of feelings and phone-calls, sitting alone remembering or yearning in the company of family and friends… we take the time to name the people in our lives who ground us, uplift us, challenge us, and bid us claim the personal hub around which all of our worship spins. Aloud, or in the silence of our hearts, their names are named

naming

Seven days, and now a new week begins. A new morning has dawned, the past recedes, the future
greets us. What a week! What a morning! What fine music to empower us to move through another seven days.

Choir: My Lord, What a Morning

Readings

The First Reading comes from the words of Eugene Debs, which obviously gave me the title of this morning's sermon.

Years ago I began to recognize my kinship with all living beings. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

The Second Reading comes from the words of activist Dorothy Day, who in 1952 described her stay in prison.

I lost all consciousness of any cause. I had no sense of being a radical, making a protest against the government, carrying on a nonviolent revolution. I lost all feeling of my own identity. I reflected on the desolation of poverty, of destitution, of sin and sickness. That I would be free after 30 days meant nothing to me. I would never be free again.

Sermon

This summer, after General Assembly, I was visiting my friend Tommy Ace out in the Owens Valley, in Southern California. Magnificent area if you love the desert as much as I do, or if you love high mountains, like the venerable Mt. Whitney, as much as I

do. Just down the road from his log cabin in the Alabama Hills, I found a brand new National Historic Site, complete with a superb museum. It is the site of Manzanar, about which you and our children heard this morning from Chikako.

Only one building from the original camp remains. It houses the museum. A very honest museum, I must say. For though it is sponsored by the United States government, the exhibits there clearly take the government to task for its policies in the 1940's. These policies called for the imprisonment of Japanese-American families during the Second World War era.

These men and women and children had not committed any crimes. They were imprisoned for who they were: people of Japanese ancestry. Many of these families had lived in this country for several generations. 85,000 of the 120,000 imprisoned in the various camps were US citizens.

Manzanar, you may agree, does not represent the high-water mark in United States moral social practice.

Most modern minds consider the whole event a great embarrassment. But not everyone, of course. Conservative commentator Michael Savage says there should be similar camps for US Iraqi Muslims during this present war. And while Pat Robertson won't come out and say it directly, his daily televised screed insisting that Islam is a violent, cruel, false, hateful and foolish faith tells me he is not far from Mr. Savage in this regard.

And of course, the present day Patriot Act and the prisoners down in Guantanamo have already raised the specter of Manzanar for a lot of my older friends. "Isn't this similar to what happened back in the 1940's?" they ask.

None of this really surprises me. After all, the spirit behind the Patriot Act has been part of a North American life almost since its foundation. Criticizing the government, at many times in our history, has been a pretty dangerous thing to do. For example, both Dorothy Day and Eugene Debs were imprisoned for simply criticizing the wars of their own era.

Oh, their individual lives, mind you, were quite different from each other. Dorothy Day, for example was a practicing Catholic. She is even being considered for canonization, that is, officially proclaimed sainthood. Eugene Debs was more of a Humanist, spiritually. He was an active union leader and Socialist candidate for president back in the teens and twenties of the last century. Debs, a small town Indiana man, married the woman he loved and adored her all his life. They had no children. Day, a New York City woman, was in two short marriages, one legal, one not; she terminated her first pregnancy, and then bore a child out of wedlock. But when Debs protested the US involvement in World War I, the Patriot Act of his day threw him in prison for years, disenfranchised him for life, and cancelled his citizenship. And when Dorothy Day simply refused to participate in an air raid drill designed to help New Yorkers find shelter from nuclear bombs, she was thrown into jail for her non-compliance by a similar law.

And both of them, in reflecting on their experiences in prison, came to similar conclusions. *They both said they would never be able to feel free while other human beings were behind bars.*

Now, it doesn't make any sense to think that these two great minds were talking only about other "prisoners of conscience." Eugene Debs, for example, spent his years in a prison with what are usually called "hardened criminals." (And all of these men, by the way, came to respect Debs tremendously because of the humane respect he accorded them. It's not the kind of respect they were

used to, they said, from the rest of the prison staff or often from fellow prisoners.)

Now, this morning, I want to question the vast gulf which I used to imagine separated prisoners of conscience from other prisoners in our United States prison system. If 120,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned, not for what they did, but for who they are, then I wonder if other prisoners in our present system are also incarcerated for that same reason? And if people like Eugene Debs and Dorothy Day were imprisoned, not for crimes against the general ethical standards shared by all nations, but for how they critiqued the status quo, then I have to wonder. "What percent of the rest of the prison population in the United States falls into a similar category?"

If what I have said starts to confuse you, let me try and ground you with a few nice, cool, incontrovertible numbers. Of children in this nation born since 2001, a Euro-American male, (i.e. a white man) has a one in seventeen chance of going to prison. For Hispanic males, it's a one in six chance. For African-American men, it's one in three. Even now, one sixth of all African-American men are current or former prisoners, compared with one in 38 white men.

In 1970, there were 200,000 inmates in the U.S. of A. By June of 2002, there *were ten times that many,* a cool two million. I don't have to tell you, of course, that our national population did not increase by that factor in a mere three decades. There are, right now, more people behind bars in our nation than in any other nation on earth…both proportionately, and simply numerically. This is disturbing news.

And I say that many of these people seem to be in prison, as much for who they are, as for what they have done.

For example, almost 60% of federal inmates in the year 2000 were in for non-violent drug offences, that is, because they *are* addicts. Now, thirteen percent of people who admit to using drugs, at least once a month, are black. But black people make up 35% of those arrested for drug possession, and 74% of those are thrown behind bars because of it.

White drug users tend to use powdered cocaine. Black drug users tend to use crack cocaine. A full 500 grams of the first gives you the same mandatory five year sentence as only 5 grams of the second. Starting to see how this works?

Drunk drivers are primarily white males in this country, and they kill 22,000 people annually. (Absolutely flabbergasting all by itself!) *This is more than all the people who die due to drug usage and drug violence combined.* Yet most US drunk driving cases are dealt with as misdemeanors, that is, they are punished by fines or community service. Typical drug penalties… including drugs like marijuana… are up to five years imprisonment for the first offence.

We've been talking about men. Let's look at women. Among women in prison, 65% have families. Often their children are denied visits because their mother is declared *unfit* by whatever definition the state provides. 40% of these women come from poverty, with incomes less than $600 per month. 75% are addicts of some sort, involving drugs or alcohol. 60% were physically or sexually abused as kids, and deeply transformed by those difficult events.

Although I have never been poor in the sense of these statistics, it is true that, from the day I moved to Oakland, California in 1978, till the day I moved to Columbus in 1998, I was never able to *afford* to live in any middle-class neighborhood. I was only able to afford rents in neighborhoods that were known to the outside world

for their poverty, their drug culture and their frequent violence. I've had bullets whiz past me (they missed, fortunately), and often found buckshot embedded in my metal loft door. In twenty years I was never able to keep a radio, and thus any passenger side window, in my car, until I moved to Columbus. It's still surprising to come out to my garage and find windows still glinting in my car.

Because poverty and prison walk hand-in-hand in this country, and because I have mostly lived in destitute neighborhoods, a good number of my neighbors and friends have been incarcerated. Many people in more well-to-do neighborhoods have told me, over the years, that they are surprised that I would maintain deep friendships with anyone in the prison system. Or that I would visit these people in prison. Or write them. But I am not sure why. Does anyone think it's not possible to care about people who have been imprisoned? If so, then we are really in trouble, and nothing that I am saying this morning can make any sense.

Because, you see, my basic proposition this morning is that everyone in prison is just that, a person, not a category. A human being, not a representative symbol. A human being, whose life is just as important to him or her as my life is to me, or your life is to you, or Eugene Debs' life was important to him, or Dorothy Day's life was important to her, or the lives of all Japanese boys and girls growing up in Manzanar were important to them.

Of the four people in prison I have known and cared for, two were diagnosed with various sorts of mental illness before they went to prison, two were diagnosed while they were in prison. Three out of the four were sexually abused in their family of origin. Two out of the four were violently abused in their family of origin. Three of the four had violence perpetrated against them in their neighborhoods of upbringing. None of the four grew up in less than abject poverty. None of them grew up with any health insurance. Three out of the four used street drugs and alcohol to

self-medicate for their emotional illnesses, at the same time as upper middle class suburban with the same diagnoses were medicated legally through the doctor's office and insurance companies. Two of the prisoners were white, two black, using ordinary parlance.

I don't know about you, but I personally do not believe in the theology that people exist before they were born, and choose their own parents, their own culture. They do not choose in advance to have brain chemistries that churn their emotions in ways mine have never been churned. They do not choose to be assaulted by their own drunken parents or siblings. They do not choose to be born in neighborhoods where their chances of surviving into adulthood are daily compromised.

And a great many of these people, reduced to an astounding powerlessness by both circumstance and systemic systems which deny them access to power education, support or health, end up in prison. And their number is growing. If the current trend continues, one in every fifteen babies born this year will go to jail in his or her lifetime. Make that African American babies, and it will be, as I said earlier, one in three.

And so I ask directly: "Are people in prison for what they have done, or for who they are ? Does incarceration help them to find work, or train them to work, or teach them to read? Does incarceration change their income for the better or the worse? Does it help them come to terms with their un-asked for brain dysfunctions, their powerful addictions and patterns of self-medicating? Does it address their rage, or even their grief at having lost years of their lives? The answer is, our prisons and the society that supports them do almost none of this work.

A prison is not a clinic for brain disorders, and yet it has become a place to simply warehouse people who have them. It is not a

diagnostic and treatment center for people with severe addiction problems, yet that is where we often place people with these problems. And please, an inmate-run Narcotics Anonymous circle is only a token response. A prison is not a sociological think tank offering analyses and potential social solutions for the stratified class, and ethnic and color-based systems in this nation, yet that is where people caught and crushed by these systems end up.

When my friends got out of prison, there were few clear systems to help them come back into society. I'm pretty educated, yet I found it hard to find a path that led to any sort of help and aid for newly released folks that didn't involve them at least pretending to convert to conservative forms of Christianity. I have a number of social worker friends whom I consulted, and I tried to help them as best I could. But I assure you, they went into prison with no family support, and they came out of it with no family support. They went in with the clothes on their back and they came out of prison with the clothes on their back. To expect them to survive, or even thrive, on such limited resources is, frankly, criminal. It transforms the whole world into a place of punishment, not arms of welcome. This is the most perverse possible form of magical thinking.

OK. Am I saying that all prisons in the United States should be dismantled? No. Am I saying that the dangerous sociopaths we find sometimes in our prisons should be sent back into society with a handshake? No. Am I saying that there are restorative treatments for all mental illness and addiction problems, and that once those are dealt with, everything will be just fine? No, I'm not saying that, not at all.

But I *am* saying that our present system of punishment and incarceration supports, creates and reflects the larger and unjust social structure in our nation.

I am saying that the reasons why Debs and Day were imprisoned are actually similar to the reasons other prisoners, not quite as famous or noble, are in prison. After all, both Debs and Day were also accused in their day of recklessly promoting death and destruction here in the States because they refused to bless the First World War and the Cold War with its nuclear threats, respectively. They refused to support the status quo, *the system which led both to these wars* …and to their imprisonment. Similarly today, many young men, denied any access to the status quo, also end up living lives that do not support that status quo, through criminal behavior. Do I think crimes are laudatory? No. Do I think they need to be seen, understood, and worked with in their larger context? Absolutely.

Dorothy Day, when she sat in her jail cell, wrote "I lost all consciousness of any cause. I had no sense of being a radical, making a protest against the government, carrying on a nonviolent revolution. I lost all feeling of my own identity. I reflected on the desolation of poverty, of destitution, of sin and sickness. That I would be free after 30 days meant nothing to me. I would never be free again."

This is a powerful testimony. She is saying, I think, that prison, even a short prison stay of 30 days, totally defeated her. She lost her sense of identity, her passion for her cause. This echoes the experiences of my friends who have served time in prison. They are defeated, undone, and not improved, only dulled. Frankly, I think this is because our prison system is based on the discredited old Calvinist idea of individual sin and the punishment of hell. Prison, in this philosophy, is hell, there to punish willful sins committed by people of bad character. Dorothy Day experienced the effect of that hell, and lost herself for a time. It's bad theology behind a terrible system.

But Dorothy Day *also* says that she spent a great deal of time reflecting on "the desolation of poverty, destitution, sin and sickness." Day, being a socially conscious Catholic, was not talking about sin in some personal, individualistic sense. She wasn't talking about doing something wrong and then telling it to the priest in the confessional in return for a prayer of absolution. No, Day clearly associated her concept of sin with ordinarily secular words, namely, "sickness, destitution and poverty" which are NOT morally chosen, individual acts, but rather, social conditions. For Day, *the whole system in which she found herself was sinful*…and all tied together. For her, the insane and brooding threat of the cold war, the day-to-day innuendo of utter atomic annihilation, were clearly and entirely caught up with the sickness of mental illness, poverty and destitution. She saw sin as social, not personal; systemic, not individualistic.

But, I think she also saw that the same system which stripped her of her soul, identity and passion *in the prison,* was also stealing the soul, identity and passion of North Americans *outside* of prison. The very idea of school children hiding under their little wooden desks to escape threatened nuclear disintegration also disintegrated their authentic human identities. The free and marvelous child all of a sudden is changed into a potential statistic, a political chip in an insane game of bluff and bluster, a hostage to universal terror, a bullseye.

Dorothy Day felt all of this interconnection of ideas in her bones while she sat in her prison cell. She must have been remarkably tough, spiritually, since she went to prison oftener than most, the last time when she was 76.

And she wrote she could never be free, as long as the system that was based on such theft of identity continued.

We Unitarian Universalists talk about the intrinsic worth of every human person. I have already spoken of this idea in my own way earlier, when I said that every single person in one of our prisons is a human being, whose life is just as important to him or her as your life is to you, and my life is to me.

However, Dorothy Day and Eugene Debs both, in their words this morning, were really speaking of that other affirmation we love so: "the interdependent web of all reality of which we are a part." Debs expressed this idea perfectly when he wrote, "Years ago I began to recognize my kinship with all living beings." You got it, Mr. Debs. Exactly.

Yet so often, this image seems to only suggest our place in the natural world…we see whales and aloe plants, the phases of our beautiful moon and silver salmon skipping up stream, and we say, yes, we are part of all that, and everything depends on everything else. Yes. Yes. And it's beautiful.

But I say that the image of the interdependent web also has a *social* meaning. And sometimes this web is not beautiful. For example, there is no moral beauty for me in announcing that the largest prison system in the world is found in the most powerful nation on earth. We here in the States have now surpassed Russia with all of its famous gulags. We have surpassed all the South American countries put together who had their thousands who simply "disappeared."

And both Day and Debs would remind us that this prison system involves us on the outside just as much as it involves inmates. It involves our class and race-based systems of division. It involves our wars and rumors of wars. It involves our politics and our education, our religious lives and our moral affirmations. No one has to live in a destitute neighborhood like I did for years in order to know a interdependence with every man and woman in our

prison system. That interdependence exists even if people live in Arlington or Worthington or Clintonville or Lewis Center or Bexley, or in a sweet loft downtown like I do now. And with Dorothy Day, my sense of this vast interdependent web is that it is not very healthy right now. It's tattered and sad and twisted, caught up in violence and class and race inside, *as the true mirror of the outside reality.* The social web has lost a great deal of its potential beauty. Justice itself is drying up like a dead and desiccated fly in its tangles.

Do I have some grand solution to this problem of imprisonment in the United States of America? Hardly anything I can outline in a mere sermon. Do I think there are solutions? Yes, but not simple ones, and not ones that will fall in place tomorrow just like that. Do I think that there are things people in this congregation can do? Well, some people, yes, not everyone. It's often *frustrating* work, addressing the prison system in this country. Not everyone has the stomach for it. Not everyone can be on their toes enough. The violence and dangers are often real, the deceptions seductive. Training, preparation and study will be necessary. People like Karen Thimmes of this congregation, or Rev. Anne Hines in California, or Melissa Mummert in Charlotte, have a studied knowledge of the realities of prison issues, and a passion for facing the many difficulties present there. But all three of these women can tell you how deeply such work impacts the heart.

But there isn't anyone in this congregation that I can think of who wouldn't benefit from being conscious of the injustices in our prison and justice systems. Such consciousness, after all, can call us to deeper understandings of our religious values. And I say that can only improve our common life over time.

But that common life is a fraud if we think it means that just because no one in this room is in prison now, that this "makes us free." No, as Martin Luther King Jr. affirmed, at most we can only pray for the *day to come* when we can say, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I am free at last." But that day is not today. For Debs was right, you know. With him, I must say, "As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Offertory

Let the opportunity to bring our pledges in support of this church bring us no little joy. We may send them by mail, or drop them in the basket, but may our promises and our generosity, in this most difficult world, bring us joy.

Song of Life

Rock of Ages, I cling to you.
I hold fast to your solid word
which insists that human worth
comes with the territory, and
is never earned or sold.

Rock of Ages, I cling to you.
The tumult of my heart in difficult times
cannot wash me away, cannot turn me from your
promise of serving as a foundation
for a new creation, fresh and honest.

Rock of Ages, I cling to you.
The difficulties are real.
But your reality endures stubbornly
despite my powerlessness to name you
or even understand you.

Hymn: My Life Flows On