

# Redemption

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak

preached on April 12, 2015

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

---

When Martha Copthorne asked if I would preach on something related to *Decarcerate PA's* work against Life Without Parole, I looked at the calendar and considered the available dates for the spring and the themes I was working with... and there was April, with the theme of *Transformation*. I was likely imagining I'd do sermons reflecting the transformation of the congregation in this transition, following the celebration of Easter. But wow - here was something that grew directly out of Easter... not the springtime and flowers part but the other, more ancient story.

**Redemption...** the story that leads into the resurrection is the rather horrifying tale of redemption for all souls being secured by the sacrifice of one man's life - through his suffering and death, by his blood, is redemption from original sin granted. Or so the dogma goes. It feels as if the prison industrial complex is another blood atonement, in some ways... but not one man being sacrificed for many. By many being sacrificed in the name of some security. It's all about making sure the offenders get the punishment they "deserve". But who gets to determine what their just desserts are... we're still mired in retribution - an eye for an eye and all that. This morning's Reading said that

When things are out of balance, fear and insecurity results. The community needs the restoration of peace and security and preventative measures for the future.

The criminal justice system claims to restore security and peace, but at what cost. Yes, society needs to hold offenders accountable. But if the sole focus is making sure the offenders get the punishment they deserve, what kind of society do we create?

We can easily find a lot of data - facts and figures that detail the numbers held, their ages, race, backgrounds. We can see the damage done in our criminal justice system if we look - the many rights and support systems denied to people who while convicted of a crime have done their time and are out of prison... how it is difficult if not impossible to put their lives back together in a way that benefits themselves and our society.

And there's the crippling effects of Life Without Parole. Where people caught in this system mature and age in isolation, in programs that are not designed to rehabilitate or reform. Where physical and mental illness ravage their bodies but the kind of care we would expect is not offered.

I've been watching a series on television called *Orange is the New Black*. It is what is called a "dark comedy" and the characters are broadly drawn. But in all that, I think there is truth... if we look and let the underlying story touch us. The story includes the inmates, the corrupt managers of the facility, the venal guards... the banal and sterile

setting, even less welcoming than a brightly lit food court in a highway rest-stop furnished in uncomfortable plastic tables and chairs. The opening song talks about “animals” being caught in such cages and what the system breeds in them... even if every now and then the inmates manage to find compassion and understanding from each other. And this is the mildest depiction of what prison is and does to people - our fellow human beings.

Now I could just watch it and be amused or annoyed... but you know, it made me think, made me see as fiction often does, and let me reflect on what might really be going on in these very human lives. And that is what the Reading invites us to see... that we are all connected in this - interrelated.

Interrelationships imply mutual obligations and responsibilities. If we are all connected, than dealing with wrongdoing requires that we emphasize the importance of *making amends* or “putting it right.” The initial emphasis may be on the obligations owed by offenders, *the focus on interconnectedness opens the possibility that others - especially the larger community - may have obligations as well.*

How can that be, that there are *obligations on all of us*, when most of the time we are far removed from the system? It is especially important for us, in this relatively privileged class, to focus on our interconnection and interdependence... not just amongst ourselves, with like-minded individuals, but with all people, everywhere. This is central to us and our liberal religious theology.

When we talk about prison reform and the reasons why Philadelphia should do away with Life Without Parole, or that mandatory sentencing needs to be revised, or that we need to “ban the box” everywhere in this country... [*so that those who have been released from prison after serving their time can rebuild their lives - and not have to check the box when they apply for a job that tells their potential employer that have a record...*] when we talk about these things, we need to remember that there is a theological imperative here - a moral obligation that we can approach with our heads - our intellect, to be sure.

But we also have to let it into our hearts, let it touch our deepest consciousness. You can certainly learn about these issues, listen to experts talk about it, attend the panel discussion later today. You can sign on to do something about it - write letters, protest. But this morning I invite us to focus on the soul of this issue - the moral, ethical and spiritual part of Redemption.

Our country's earliest religious origins in colonial days are steeped in the image of "sinners in the hands of an angry god". This comes from a famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards, delivered in 1741- well, famous in some historical and certain literary circles. It is a typical sermon of the Great Awakening, emphasizing the belief that Hell is a real place, and *we will all get the punishment we deserve* in very real ways. Edwards hoped that the imagery of people literally held in god's hand over the miseries of a fiery abyss would awaken his audience to the horrific reality that awaited them should they continue

without Christ. The underlying point is that God has given humanity a chance to rectify their sins. God holds sinners over the flames, but restrains himself from giving this ultimate punishment - letting them fall into the flames - if humanity will repent and return to Christ.

Well, that is still not an appealing idea of redemption! And our Universalist forbears rejected these ideas hundreds of years ago. But you can see the the spirit of vengeance - and not redemption - alive in this understanding of justice and redemption. We need more than a divinity's supposed act of restraint to rectify what is wrong with our "justice" system. This is not just about claiming the moral high ground - not simply a matter of principles and issues, or statistics or conservative "law and order" ideology that we are talking about. All of this is about actual people, real human beings who commit crimes, who are convicted of their crimes and incarcerated. And we are talking about actual people who are victims of the crimes for which these have been incarcerated.

And we get all hung up in the language of perpetrator and victim... and really we are talking about our fellow human beings... all of them - just like us... complex human beings who have the capacity or both good and evil swirling around in our hearts.

Redemption invites us to contemplate human nature, and our theology of human nature and how we understand the nature of good and evil. As Reverend Douglas Taylor put it:

"Are we basically good people who do bad things under certain circumstances, or are we basically bad people who can be compelled to do good things under certain circumstances? Can we divide the population into good people and bad people? What is our responsibility to our brothers and sisters? And, can people change?"

Our religious roots offer us some encouragement. Both religious traditions, historically and contemporaneously, offer us life-affirming answers to these questions. Both religions in the past and today our own Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations have felt called to respond to this question and how it is dealt with in society.

In 1857, the Universalist Convention adopted a sweeping "statement for reform". They were wrestling with issues concerning Slavery, Women's rights, Temperance, and Prison reform - just to name a few. The Universalists of that time created the General Reform Association. Their religion called them to do this, guided by a theology that claimed *all* people were members of one human family. Thus "all people were worthy of being included in the plan for salvation, and not just in the next world, but (as they said,) "insofar as possible, in this world as well."

In the late eighteenth century, Philadelphia's own Benjamin Rush argued forcefully on theological grounds for the better treatment of prisoners, including the elimination of the death penalty. Rush wrote this:

A belief in God's universal love to all his creatures, and that he will finally restore all those of them that are miserable to happiness, is a *polar truth*. *It leads to truths upon all subjects, more especially upon the subject of government.*

It establishes the *equality* of mankind – it abolishes the punishment of death for any crime – and converts jails into houses of repentance and reformation.

(from *The Larger Faith* by Charles Howe, p58-9)

You can't get much clearer than that... our theology, our "god" call us to convert 18th century jailhouses into houses of repentance and reformation. It might inspire us to convert 21st century prisons in houses of redemption and "regeneration and renewal" .

And our Unitarian roots bring us inspiration from 19th century social reformer Dorothea Dix. She spent well over a year visiting Massachusetts jails, prisons, and poorhouses looking in particular for people with mental illnesses. Her work revealed atrocious conditions in the jails and correctional facilities and her extensive notes and documentation led Dix to convince the state legislature to amend that situation and ensure more humane accommodations. You can bet her poking around and investigating the situation was not welcome - that meddling woman! Yet her efforts led to sweeping reforms not only in Massachusetts but then in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Jersey.

We look to our distant past we claim and honor these heroes who worked for prison reform and the abolition of the death penalty. Yet these justice issues still need of our voices . Life without parole and mass incarceration - two great sins - both undermine a just and peaceful society. They create a permanent class of people caught up in webs of poverty, violence, cycles of unemployment, homelessness... in 2005 the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists adopted a statement of Conscience called "Criminal Justice and Prison Reform"

"The American penchant for retribution squanders opportunities for redemption, rehabilitation, and restoration of the individual offender.

Failures in the criminal justice system have created a disenfranchised, stigmatized class, predominantly lower-income, poorly educated, or from racial and ethnic minorities.

The punishment is separation from society by serving in prison...punishment often continues even after those convicted have completed their sentence.

The Statement, which is non-binding but serves as a guide to the Association and its congregations in its social justice endeavors, suggests that

"alternatives should be developed in the context of redemptive, rehabilitative and restorative justice.

*Redemptive justice* recognizes justice as relational. Its purpose is to restore wholeness and rightness in the social order and in the disposition of the offender, not to exact revenge.

*Rehabilitative justice* is a process of education, socialization, and empowerment of the person to the status whereby she or he may be able to contribute constructively and appreciably to society.

*Restorative justice* is a process whereby the offender can reconcile with the victim through appropriate restitution, community service, and healing measures....”\*

The systems that are in place now are so far removed from these ideals. Prisons have become big business. And there seems to be no end to it as more and more men and women get swallowed up in the current tide of mass incarceration, born of a “war on drugs” and a general “get tough on crime” attitude perpetrated at the final decades of the last century. And we all suffer the consequences of this all these years later.

Because this is not just about “those” prisoners over there. It is not just about some unfortunate souls who ran afoul of the law and got sucked into the system. It is not about “them”... **it is about us**. Who we are as a society... who we are as a people of faith.

*Redemption is relational* - it is not just about fixing them - those criminals and prisoners over there - but ALL of us. Redemptive justice recognizes justice as relational. Its purpose is to restore wholeness and rightness in the social order and in the disposition of the offender, not to exact revenge.

But maybe we’ve just gotten used to things as they are... and can’t see our way to reforming anything these days. In her lecture at the 2012 General Assembly, author of “*The New Jim Crow*” Michelle Alexander talked about the United States of the early and mid-twentieth century and where we find ourselves today. :

Just as many people were resigned to Jim Crow in the south (back then) and shake their head and say, yeah, it’s a shame, but that’s just the way that is...

I find that today, many people are resigned to millions cycling in and out of our (prison) system... but I know that Dr. King, and Ella Baker, and Sojourner Truth, and so many other freedom fighters, who risked their lives to end the old caste systems, would not be so easily deterred.

So I believe we have got to be willing to pick up where they left off, and do the hard work of movement building on behalf of poor people of all colors....

We need to begin to tell the truth. The whole truth – that we as a nation have managed to rebirth a caste-like system in America...we need to tell the truth to break this cycle...”

Redemption is possible. *Focusing on interconnectedness opens the possibility that others - especially the larger community, including all of us - may have obligations as well.*

During the Offering we’ll hear Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song*.

It is a song about justice, about personal integrity... about redemption that grew out of the struggle for freedom and independence for the Jamaican people...

it is a Redemption Song for all of us...

**Reading** - from *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* by Howard Zehr

Restorative justice is based upon an old, commonsense understanding of wrongdoing. Although it would be expressed differently in different cultures, this approach is probably common to most traditional societies. For those of us from European background, it is the way many of our ancestors (and perhaps even our parents) understood wrongdoing.

- Crime is a violation of people and of interpersonal relationships.
- Violations create obligations.
- The central obligation is to put right the wrongs.

Underlying this understanding of wrongdoing is an assumption about society: we *are all interconnected*.

In the Hebrew scriptures, this is embedded in the concept of shalom, the vision of living in a sense of “all-rightness” with each other, the creator and the environment.

Many cultures, however, have a word that represents this notion of the centrality of relationships: for the Maori, it is communicated by *whakappa*; for the Navajo, *hozho*; for many Africans, the Bantu word *ubuntu*. Although the specific meanings of these words vary, they communicate a similar message: all things are connected to each other in a web of relationships.

The problem of crime, in this world view, is that it represents a wound in the community, a tear in the web of relationships. Crime represents damaged relationships: damaged relationships are both a *cause* and an *effect* of crime. Many traditions have a saying that the harm of one is the harm of all - a harm such as crime ripples out to disrupt the whole web.

*When things are out of balance, fear and insecurity results. The community needs the restoration of peace and security and preventative measures for the future.*

Interrelationships imply mutual obligations and responsibilities.

It comes as no surprise, then that this view of wrongdoing emphasizes the importance of *making amends* or “putting right;” indeed, making amends for wrongdoing is an obligation. While the initial emphasis may be on the obligations owed by offenders, however, *the focus on interconnectedness opens the possibility that others especially the larger community may have obligations as well.*

Even more fundamentally, this view of wrongdoing implies a *concern for healing* of those involved: victims, but also offenders and communities.