



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon September 25, 2022 Chaplain Mary D'Alessandro

I'm Mary D'Alessandro and I'm the Episcopal Chaplain at the Women's Jail in Chicopee. Its real name is the Western Mass Regional Women's Correctional Center. I am grateful for this opportunity to be with you.

I'd like to take a look at our Gospel reading before I tell you a bit about the jail. We have this familiar parable of the rich man and Lazarus with the gory detail of dogs licking at his sores. We have the "the bosom of Abraham" for heaven, and the netherworld for hell, then Abraham shouting answers across "the huge abyss that no one can cross."

The main sin of the rich man seems to be that he does not even notice the other man. He is blind and unaware of the pain of the world, while he eats "magnificently every day." And the response of Abraham to him is this: "If you did not get it on that side of the abyss of life and death, why would you get it on this side?"

You see, the Sin of the world has created relational divides all over the place. There is a great divide:

- between us and God,
- between us and them,
- between us and our self,
- between us and creation.

This is Hell. This is the darkness from which we ALL need to be saved.

My own personal definition of Hell is to surround yourself with yourself. That is what the rich man did to the extent that he couldn't see what was literally on his doorstep. And this is why Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem to give up all his own "wealth and power" and lay down his own life for the sake of the world. So that he CAN rise from the dead and destroy the great divide, once and for all. This is the Good News.

You represent that message of Good News to the women at WCC. You choose to see, unlike the rich may. You choose to act, you choose to get involved. You choose to bridge that great divide.

Your backpack ministry is so meaningful because you represent to the women, the outside world. You, this little church in this little town, has chosen to reach across the great divide. And with your simple act of generosity you say to them, welcome back. You are valued. We all need help now and again and this is your way of saying, let us help you as you begin your life on the "outside." I have personally been the one who has given these backpacks to the women. The longer I distribute them I have come to realize that they mean much more than just all the good stuff inside. When they leave with something that is theirs, they leave with a little bit of dignity. If not for the backpack, they jail sends them with a clear plastic bag with their jail papers, maybe some meds. It's such a symbol of how vulnerable they are

when they leave. A clear plastic back that contains all their earthly belongings. On more than one occasion, women have been brought to tears. They say things like “Why do these people care about us? Or “I never imagined that people actually thought about us.” I think the best was when a woman said, “This is like Christmas morning. Then she paused for a second and said, actually, this is better than any Christmas morning I’ve ever had.” What is especially meaningful is the note that you include. You’re sending them a message. The point is that the backpacks are being sent with the heartfelt intentions of the entire community. You are not simply sending your own individual messages but with the message of our faith. Or as Episcopal Bishop Curry reminds us of Jesus’ message which is, follow me and love will show you how to become more than you ever dreamed you could be. Follow me and I will help you change the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends.

I’d like to share with you a little bit about the jail and about how you are helping to change nightmares into dreams for so many women. WCC a regional facility, housing an average of 2200 women from Hampden, Worcester, Berkshire and Hampshire counties. The majority are between the ages of 20 -30. 90% have a substance use disorder. 60% have a mental health disorder.

Most women are incarcerated for drug related crimes, like possession, distribution or prostitution to support a habit. Most of the women have experienced major trauma in their life, often childhood abuse and neglect. Over 50% are victims of some type of sexual exploitation. They are hurt women. They are hurt women who sometimes hurt others. They are human beings who, in some cases, didn’t have a lot of options in life. I’m reminded of the saying, “Don’t judge people for the choices they make when you don’t know the options they had to choose from.”

The jail has seen an increase in violent crimes committed by women like armed robbery and human trafficking. Human trafficking has increased 50% in recent years. These women are often coerced into relationships. Some of the women feel as though they don’t have any other options – and some really don’t. So they engage in dangerous behavior either to support a habit or they are coerced into behaviors.

The issues incarcerated women face are different than those for incarcerated men. Society likes to lump “addict” into one category. But for women, there are layers upon layers to their addiction. 80% of the women at WCC are mothers. There is a ton of shame and guilt about losing children. The trauma they have often suffered in childhood and youth often leads to self-medication which leads to dependency which leads to desperate actions and choices. And women tend to internalize that what society says about them. They are the first to say things like “I really messed up this time.” “I deserve to be here.” “Jail is not where I am it’s who I am.” Incarcerated men get many more services and resources than women. There are way more sober houses for men than women. There is ONE sober house for women in all of Berkshire County. ONE. Often women are the ones who catch an extra, more serious charge of child endangerment. Here’s a common scenario. A woman is living with her boyfriend or husband and there’s drugs in the apartment, or possibly a firearm. The police raid the apartment and the boyfriend runs. The woman is not going to run because her kids are there so she’s the one that picks up the extra charge of child endangerment. He doesn’t.

I’d like to share just a couple of stories that, I think, speak volumes.

I teach a class called Self Discovery. We discuss things like our values, strength and weaknesses, relationships...basically I’m asking these women questions that they have never considered before. Those kinds of questions that anyone who has gone through the process of discernment or skills assessment are very familiar with. But not these women. More often than not, when asked to list 3 strengths, they can’t. They can whip up a list of weaknesses like crazy. Why, because they have been

told over and over again what they are. You're stupid, You're ugly, You're just an addict. Just this week a woman described herself as a "toothless addict."

I have literally changed the schedule of classes so the Strengths/weaknesses class come late in the rotation of classes. That gives me a little bit of time to get to know them so I, at least, can come up with a few strengths.

And then there is a session on Relationships. We discuss healthy versus unhealthy relationships and we got side-tracked about abusive relationships. I was talking about how no one should ever feel threatened or be physically hurt in a relationship, ever. Jessica spoke from the bottom of her heart when she said, Well, how do I know he loves me if he doesn't beat me? And then other women chimed in and said, Yeah, he says that if he didn't love me so much he wouldn't have to hit me. It's a sign of how much he really cares...I'm often left speechless.

A few years ago I was facilitating a writing workshop through the organization Voices From Inside. The prompt I brought in was describe a sacred space.

Some of the women didn't know what sacred meant so I tried to broaden it by saying, a special place, a calming place. Still many didn't resonate with any of those words. I finally said, a safe space a place where you can go and be safe, and still, the majority of the women could not think of one. Their dumbfounded faces are seared in my memory. I ended up saying, is there something or someone that is always there for you? A number of them lowered their heads, picked up their pencils and began to write. And do you know what they wrote about? Drugs. For many, the only relationship that they had in their lives that was reliable and trustworthy and always gave them what they wanted, was with drugs.

But please don't despair: Let me tell you something hopeful. This week in Self Discovery I asked, "What do you hope to get out of this class?" Brittany said, "I hope to become the person I was meant to be – before I lost myself. And to stay on the path of redefining myself." That is hopeful!

So this is my observation about them. There is no other group of human beings, in my experience, who dig deeper, try harder, feel more shame, bear more burden than these women. They really want to change, most of them. Often, it's for their children that they want to change which, as a mother, I can relate to. If I don't want to do something that's good just for me, I'll do it because it's good for my kids. They are no different

It's fitting that our first reading today comes from the prophet Amos who chastises his audience for being complacent. Woe to those complacent in Zion.

I don't know a whole lot about this congregation but I know one thing. You are not complacent. It would be so easy to be complacent up here in this quiet hamlet, so removed from some (not all) of society's ills.

You do not simply come together for that mutual warm fuzzy moment of a Sunday service. No, you understand that discipleship means pushing yourselves beyond what is comfortable, seeking out the needs of the world and finding ways to share the Good News. Love in a backpack is just one example of your concern and outreach: you also host the Hilltown Food Pantry: And during the pandemic you supported those in both within your congregation and clients of the Food Pantry. You contribute to the "sharing gifts" program providing Christmas and Holiday for families in the Food Pantry. You partnership with local farmers in developing a community garden while teaching young people about food security and sustainable gardening.

But you take it one step further. Lots of churches are good at the giving stuff part of it. But you're asking the deeper question of why you need a food pantry in the first place. My church in Holyoke is a distribution site for the Western Mass Food Bank. Twice a month we distribute food to about 150 families. And I too stand there and watch young working moms come up to receive food. These are working families. Why is there such a thing as food insecurity in this country of ours? You're doing the hard work of looking at race and racial justice and how race impacts housing. Your efforts go beyond the borders of our country with the Palestinian House of Friendship. I could go on but I trust you know better than I the ways you seek to bridge the great divide. These are just some of the ways where you get outside yourselves and choose to see Lazarus at your door.

Thank you for being faithful to your call of discipleship and mission. And speaking for the women at WCC, thank you for bridging the great divide.

And in your own way and in your own place you are beginning to change the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends.

Amen