

## PRISON MINISTRY HOMILY

Jane Baker

May the words of my lips and the understanding of our hearts be always acceptable to your sight, oh God.

Good morning: Jesus raised the issue of visiting the prisoners when, following the word of Isaiah, he told his Apostles that they did not visit him in prison, as Matthew reports in Chapter 25. This is the vision that Jeanette Hamlin held when she and some friends started Partakers.

You may remember Hamlin. About five years ago, Kevin Bean invited her to visit us; she spoke and introduced St. Andrew's to Partakers. At the same time, Pat Lee Fougere and the late Jeff Coolidge each became interested in the plight of the prisoner and restorative justice. This interest was encouraged by the parish; the Outreach Committee made our participation possible thanks to a generous \$3,000 grant which went to the cost of sponsoring Martine.

The Committee includes Sarah Lincoln-Harrison, Laurie Brengle, Julie Taylor, Rosemary White, Ann Scott, Pat Lee-Fougere, Rick Taylor, and from the Swampscott Unitarian-Universalist Church, Kathy Lique.

Partakers' literature speaks to what became our concerns: "[Our] mission is to reduce prisoner recidivism [or relapse into crime] through education and civic engagement." "As a faith-based, non-profit organization, [we are] committed to advancing restorative justice, rehabilitation, and the healing transformation of both prisoners and society."

Their literature goes on to explain that "in order to realize [their] mission, [they] will focus on two critical areas: "[first] providing an education to an underprivileged and underserved group of men and women through the *College Behind Bars Program*. In concert with Metropolitan College of Boston University's Prison Education Program, College Behind bars offers financial and academic support." This is made possible by volunteer academic mentoring of inmates as they matriculate in the baccalaureate degree-granting program. [Secondly,] helping to educate [these] volunteers about the inequality and injustices in the criminal justice system in an effort to build and foster community cohesion and hopefully challenge and change laws that perpetuate prejudice and discrimination."

There are two tracks that our volunteers follow: One is the mentoring of a released former prisoner; the other the academic support of a prisoner during incarceration. This mentoring piece is about helping the newly released ex-felon readjust to the community and learn to make a life. After training through Span, Inc., an organization whose motto is “Reintegration through rehabilitation,” Rick Howard has successfully mentored an ex-offender who is now fully employed and has been integrated into society. In the other track, volunteers visit the prisoner and when he or she has research needs, try to meet them. The prison library is shy on academic books, and inmates have no internet access, but most volunteers have computers and can check out specific requests for help. We are not a paper-writing organization; we are there to encourage, to discuss, and to help with research, which is so easy on a computer!

I am happy to report to you that Martine, our first student, has finished her BA at Boston University. Remarkably, since she is Haitian, she has received her degree with mostly A grades and a few Bs. Remember, English is not her native language—she speaks French and Creole. However, we have met our commitment to her and this is an opportune time to learn what we are called upon to do next.

Before I go further, I want to explain a term that I used without defining it: Restorative Justice. “Restorative Justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior. It is best accomplished through cooperative processes that include all the stakeholders.” Criminal acts are seen more comprehensively, that offenders harm victims, communities and even themselves; more parties need to respond, not only the government authorities but also victims and communities; further, success measures how much harm is repaired or prevented.

This is a very different model from the one we are accustomed to hearing about. In the punitive model, the one we currently use, the courts determine guilt; this is followed by punishment, frequently incarceration for a stated period. You may remember hearing Arrington’s friend Christina Rathbone when she spoke here a few years ago. She points out in her excellent book, *A World Apart*, that the prisoners are marginalized. They are denied individuality by wearing prison-issue clothes. One has no control over life, eating when and what one is told, moving from place to place when told, with no privacy—even the incoming and outgoing mail may be

opened and read. It is punishment by humiliation, denying the prisoner's individuality and humanity.

Compare this punitive model with the idea of Restorative Justice. If the prisoner admits responsibility for the offense, and if the injured party agrees to mediation, together they can address the effects of the crime. Then a plan can be developed to allow the offender to make some restitution to the victim. There are other systems of negotiating the mediation and these may lead to restitution where there is a monetary loss and community service to rehabilitate the offender or right the wrong that was done. These models are derived from Native American traditional ways.

Although there are different avenues to support this effort, as we have seen, our experience here at St. Andrew's has fallen into two parts: mentoring a male ex-offender and supporting the academic program of a female inmate. [A third part, working on legislative action we have left for another time.] Each of the two has very different needs. Martine, our female inmate, has needed our support and friendship. She lost her father recently, and was grateful for the cards from parishioners, especially since she could not go to Port au Prince for the service. Her academic needs have been quite straightforward. Since several of us have taught, we have had some experience in helping students to narrow their topics down so the resulting paper is focused and clear.

Now she is moving on to another phase of her education: Cookery. This will take a year of on the job training, as she learns to prepare meals for the staff and officers at the Prison. At the end of the program, she will take a test and upon passing it, will receive a state license that will enable her to work.

For the first years of her incarceration, Martine worked at the prison library and developed many of the skills of a paralegal. She learned to do legal research and helped others find cases that speak to their conditions. It is her drive to be doing something that seems to be the key to her success.

The day will come I hope that Martine will be released. Unlike many prisoners, she is blessed with a large and loving family, most of whom are in the Boston area. Her husband and son are here too. However, she has an enormous challenge ahead of her: to get used to making decisions for herself, making good choices, being an active partner and parent.

For those without Martine's blessings, the way is harder. Joe is an ex-offender whom we have been mentoring. He has housing and employment and has even earned a promotion in his job. His mentor functioned as a "Dutch uncle" listening and advising as Joe worked his way into the world again. However, he no longer needs his mentor and is proceeding on his own.

There's another thing I would like to tell you: it's never easy to make the trip to Framingham. After all, the people we will see are being punished by being removed from all they hold dear. It is dehumanizing for us, too, as we step into an edge of that world. We apply to visit Martine. We must see the Officer on duty and produce identification and the car's registration and he or she checks out our dress and if it doesn't meet the institutions rules, we may not enter. Then we lock up our belongings since we may take nothing into the restricted area. Finally we go through the sort of examination one has in the airports today [including in my case showing the scars of the surgery where they had implanted hardware when I broke my leg] and we are finally let into the large visitors' room to wait. Martine appears, her face aglow with pleasure at having visitors. That makes it all worthwhile.

Now, the Prison Ministry is looking to see how we are called to use our time and talents, possibly to redirect the scope of what we do. We know that there are people incarcerated or newly released who need the gifts we can bring. Partakers tells us there are many prisoners who want education. Will you help? How about mentoring a returning prisoner? Many would be grateful for your help and support. Or, perhaps your gifts are in the line of research and advocacy--there is plenty to do in the realm of the State laws affecting prisoners and their families.

Will you visit the prisoners?

Please think and pray about it—and come talk to any present and former members of the Prison Ministry at coffee hour and we will tell you how you can become involved.

Finally, please be an extension of this ministry and keep me and other visitors and inmates in your prayers. Amen.