

# Criminal Justice Sabbath

LENT 2016

THERE IS GOOD NEWS EVEN IN A BROKEN SYSTEM

## Ecumenical Worship Resource Guide

### Why a Sabbath focusing on our criminal justice system?

By Rev. Tom English

If you have been reading your local paper or watching the news, you know our criminal justice and public safety systems are horribly broken. Offenders are not being held accountable, victims are not being helped, law enforcement is frustrated.

The Church recognizes the basic goodness of the Oregon and U.S. criminal justice system, insofar as all civil government is a gift of God and an effective system of criminal justice is an essential part of any functioning civil society. In our society the criminal justice system is based on fundamental principles of civil justice, such as due process of law and the presumption of legal innocence.

We are called to confess that the Church itself and its members fall short in responding to crime, its harms and

the failures of our justice and public safety systems. Often we have been complacent or allowed fear or hatred of the stranger to dictate responses to crime.

We have allowed the cries of the harmed to go unheard. We have allowed the burdens of crime and the criminal justice system to be unfairly borne. In confessing its complicity with a system gone awry, this church invokes the judgment and guidance of God.

We turn to God for counsel on how we might minister better and more mercifully to those harmed by injustice. We ask God's aid in opening our hearts to the cries of our neighbors, that their faces and voices might show us whom we are to love, if we would love God. We pray for guidance to speak more prophetically and work more lovingly toward earthly justice.

### This Guide is for You

Please read and use this guide in your community, whatever your role in learning and taking action for justice:

**Ministers and Worship Leaders**, guiding liturgy to help honor the experiences of all whose are touched by the criminal justice system (offenders, victims, legal professionals, and their families), as an

exploration of the process of forgiveness and healing

**Church and Society or Mission committees** or adult education groups seeking timely, relevant topics

**Individuals** with a heart for peace and mercy in our own communities

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**This resource guide is available through a partnership for peace and justice:**

- *Episcopal Diocese of Oregon—Prison Ministry Commission*
- *Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon—Criminal Justice Ministries*

## Introduction to this Guide

*By The Rev. Deacon Thomas R. English  
Co-Chair of the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon  
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We are in Lent. A time for repentance and amendment of life, a time of life, a time for preparing those new to the Church for Baptism, a time for restoring those who have been away from the church and are returning. It calls all who follow Jesus to renewal of faith and a deepening of spiritual life and practice.

The estrangements of humans from God, each other and the Creation that are a focus of Lent have more than one pattern. Not only do our personal sins bring about alienation and call for healing and reconciliation. God's people are also separated from God and each other by events and experiences of injustice, tragedy and oppression. "... *We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf...*" In Advent, when my parish uses this alternate confession, I reflected on what it means to "repent of the evil done on our behalf." wrongs done in our name all contribute to alienation.

The Prayer Book collect for Ash Wednesday, invites us toward the reconciliation with God through "...lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness..." It clearly addresses our need for reconciliation caused by our personal sins. However, we need also to grasp other aspects of reconciliation.

THIS YEAR, CRIMINAL JUSTICE SABBATH CAN HAPPEN ON ANY DAY DURING LENT—PICK A DATE THAT WORKS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY AND USE THESE RESOURCES TO HELP SHAPE WORSHIP. CONTACT THE CREATORS OF THIS PACKET (LISTED ON THE BACK PAGE) FOR IDEAS OR PRESENTATIONS IN PERSON.

Our "wretchedness," which means estrangement, is caused not just by our own sins but by the evil done in our name. We find it both in personal experience and in witnessing oppression, tragic suffering, and injustice suffered by others. We feel helpless and guilty---like by-standers. These wounds of guilt and estrangement call for reconciliation and God's help to restore the brokenhearted to hope and to bring the oppressed to liberation and new life.

Given this view of Lent and the sorrowful conditions of our prisons and public safety systems, it is especially fitting that we devote one Sunday this Lent to lamenting and understanding the brokenness of our corrections and public safety systems both here in Oregon and in the nation.



**Freedom is both literal and metaphorical, in the language of faith.**

## Prayer of Confession

God of all mercy,  
we confess that we have sinned  
against you,  
opposing your will in our lives.  
We have denied your goodness  
in each other,  
in ourselves,  
and in the world you have  
created.

We repent of the evil  
that enslaves us,  
the evil we have done,  
**and the evil done on our behalf.**  
Forgive, restore, and strengthen us  
through our Savior Jesus Christ,  
that we may abide in your love  
and serve only your will.  
Amen.

FROM *ENRICHING OUR WORSHIP*, OFFICIAL  
SUPPLEMENTAL LITURGICAL TEXTS  
COMMENDED FOR USE BY THE STANDING  
LITURGICAL COMMISSION OF THE  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH. THIS CONFESSION  
CAN BE USED TO REPLACE THOSE INCLUDED  
IN THE EPISCOPAL RITE ONE AND RITE  
TWO SERVICES OR INCORPORATED INTO A  
SERMON TO HIGHLIGHT THE CONCEPT OF  
LAMENTING EVIL DONE ON OUR BEHALF.

## Prayer of/for the People

God of Justice and Mercy;  
On this Criminal Justice Sab-  
bath, we pray for our *whole*  
*community*, and particularly for  
those impacted by crime and  
the legal system.

We lift up our sisters and  
brothers who are victims of  
crime, whose lives have been  
forever changed through no  
fault or choice of their own.

We lift up our sisters and  
brothers who work in law en-  
forcement, corrections, parole,  
probation, and the courts.

We lift up our sisters and  
brothers in prison on this day.

We lift up our sisters and  
brothers returning home from  
incarceration and adjusting to  
the culture shock of re-entry.

We lift up our community part-  
ners who serve people through-  
out the legal system, providing  
hope through treatment, recov-  
ery, mentorship, and education.

We lift up all those with incar-  
cerated loved ones, families  
linked by love that transcends all  
barriers.

Our justice system is made by  
humans—made in our image, not  
Yours—and thus it is broken.

May we strive to make our jus-  
tice systems more than principali-  
ties that divide us, but vehicles for  
your healing and restoration.

You are our Shelter, wherever  
we go.

In You is true Freedom, wherever  
we live.

You call us to reflect Your Justice,  
in whatever we do.

In gratitude for this calling and  
this community, we pray. Amen.

## Hymns for this Sabbath

**Amazing Grace** is especially ap-  
propriate for a worship theme  
of forgiveness, in part because  
of its history. John Newton, who  
wrote the words in 1779, was  
captain of a slave ship. But one  
day he saw his sin and repented.  
The hymn overflows with joy  
and gratitude for God's accep-  
tance and forgiveness.

**There's a wideness in God's  
mercy** is especially appropri-  
ate because of its pointed  
reference to God's justice and  
welcome for sinners: "...  
there's a kindness in his jus-  
tice, which is more than lib-  
erty, there's a welcome for  
the sinner, and more graces  
for the good..."

**Just as I am, without one plea**  
provides text familiar to the  
incarcerated and those who  
love them.



Grace and  
gratitude  
are themes  
resonant  
both inside  
and outside  
prisons .

## Scripture Themes for Criminal Justice Sabbath

If you use the Revised Common Lectionary, the following provide possible themes for special study in texts related to experiences of criminal justice issues.

### **First Sunday in Lent: Feb. 14**

- [Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#)

This hopeful psalm celebrates God's abiding power to provide protection and refuge to all God's people. This affirms that God is our eternal and ever-present shelter, wherever we may live and whatever we may experience—a comforting message for those incarcerated or with loved ones in prison.

### **Second Sunday in Lent: Feb. 21**

- [Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18](#)

Even in solitary confinement, if an inmate gets a few minutes a day in a space with a window to see outside, they can remember God. God's covenant with Abram (Abraham) affirms both God's eternal promise and constant presence—which we are reminded of every time we look into the sky.

- [Luke 13:31-35](#)

As Jesus laments the pain he is about to endure in the Passion,

his desire to gather his flock like a hen reminds us that we are loved, even in the face of suffering and alienation.

### **Third Sunday In Lent: Feb. 28**

- [Exodus 3:1-15](#)

Moses' meeting with the Lord in the burning bush recalls the time when God's people suffered under physical slavery, but were brought to freedom. It took generations, but an exodus was possible then—and is possible today.

- [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#)

Paul tells us that God's support can help us stay strong when we are tested—but also that God wants us to find a way out. God does not wish for us to suffer, but will strengthen us when we must.

### **Fourth Sunday in Lent: Mar. 6**

- [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

Parable of the Prodigal—*see sermon samples on pages 8 and 10.*

- [Psalm 32](#)

This psalmist understands transgressions. He confesses his sins to the Lord, and his guilt is forgiven. Love can surround us when we trust and open even the deepest guilt on our hearts to the Lord. Genuine forgiveness, with accountability, offers true freedom and happiness.

### **Fifth Sunday in Lent: Mar. 13**

- [Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

God is about to do a new thing. Are we ready for it? Out of a history of oppression, through a seeming wilderness ahead of us, God is making a way for new life. Will we embrace it, or stay stuck in our ideas of who we are? It was a literal desert the ancient Hebrews faced, but we seem to face the same difficulty imagining the breadth of possibilities God can open for us.

- [John 12:1-8](#)

Jesus' words in this story have perplexed and challenged Christians for millennia. But when we consider this text on a Criminal Justice Sabbath, perhaps we can understand one of its diverse meanings: that the seeming intractability of injustice and inequality need not divert us from embracing the gift of presence to the individuals around us. In the here and now, there are real people ready to sit with us, share a meal with us, and find fellowship. Even as we seek to ameliorate systemic oppressions, we are called as well to celebrate the gift of relationship with (other) broken people. Healing one helps heal the whole. (The value of self care and care for one another in the movement is also an ever-timely theme for justice advocates.)

## Restoring Justice Takes a Village

By Rev. Audrey DeCoursey, EMO

It may seem that the criminal justice system impacts only a portion of our society. But the legal systems of our society touch every one of us. And the community has an integral role to play in making these systems support our values and goals for our society. People of faith have a special responsibility in affirming the humanity and dignity of every person in every role within the system.

The community as a whole is impacted by our justice system:

**Communities are traumatized** by crime, by gang violence, by police brutality, and by drug addictions. Generations can be lost to incarceration, leaving grandparents raising grandchildren, with contributing adult members of a community simply absent.

**Children bear the impact** of their families' trauma especially. Parental incarceration is now recognized as one of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that can have long-term consequences on a person's health and development. Generational cycles of crime, violence, and trauma can also be handed down to children in ways that individuals cannot interrupt single-handedly.

The **racial disparity** of incarceration in the US both reveals and reinforces systems of racial oppression across the country. Michelle Alexander details well in [The New Jim Crow](#) how these issues are interconnected.

**Prisons are sub-communities unto themselves**, creating their own cultural norms and patterns, which are not contained within prison walls. Both staff and inmates in prisons shape that culture, and bring those patterns into the wider society when they return home. The culture within some prisons can be violent and hierarchical, places where trust is scarce and vulnerability viewed as a weakness to be exploited. If these are not the values we want permeating our wider society, we cannot ignore the sub-cultures created inside prisons.

**Victims** of crime and violence face the burdens of potentially life-long consequences, from the actions of others they had no fault or choice in making. The loss that victims face has quantifiable impacts on the rest of society that are staggering: as but one example from one kind of crime, domestic violence in the US costs \$8.3 billion every year due to medical costs and lost work time (Robert Pearl, MD, in Forbes magazine, Dec. 5, 2013). These shocking facts stand along-

side the individual stories we must hear. The community has a role in supporting victims, believing their stories, and helping them find their own paths towards restoration and healing in their own time.

On a very practical level, **every tax payer and every voter** in a community pays the financial costs of our criminal justice system, and has a responsibility to ensure these resources are used efficiently, effectively, and humanely. Where do we want to invest in people – in education and treatment or incarceration?

**People of faith** have a role in leading these community conversations about our priorities and values. We have a role in making these values shape the justice systems that are operating on our behalf and impacting our loved ones. If we believe in healing and restorative justice for our community, we have a 'mission field' in which to share these hopes, as close as our own neighborhoods.

We also have a responsibility to hear the stories of every individual whose life is touched by the legal system – and not just to hear these stories but incorporate them into our own, larger, narrative of faith. **Their stories are our story, and they are God's story in our world.** Our communities will be healed only when we hear the whole community—starting today.

## A Reflection on Forgiveness and the Criminal Justice System

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By The Rev. Deacon Thomas R. English  
Co-Chair of the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon Prison Ministry Commission

*This reflection was originally written for and published on Episcopal Café ([www.episcopalcafe.com](http://www.episcopalcafe.com))*

One of the most difficult concepts in Christianity is forgiveness. Perhaps that is because we almost always talk and think about forgiveness in the noun form, keeping us grammatically at arm's length from the requirement "to forgive," the verb form. We are required to forgive as we have been forgiven just as we are required to love just as we have been loved. And like love, to forgive and to be forgiven are not feelings, but actions. In fact, love and forgiveness cannot be separated. To love is the will to extend one's self for the nurture of one's own and another's soul. And so it is to forgive. To forgive is an act of love.

*The relatives of people slain inside the historic African American church in Charleston, S.C., earlier this week were able to speak directly to the accused gunman Friday at his first court appearance.*

*"I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of DePayne Middleton Doctor.*

*"But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is she taught me that we are a family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."*

To forgive is a decision, a hard one, not a feeling. But the legal system grinds on in its pursuit of retribution. The South Carolina Solicitor General announced that she will seek the death penalty for Dylann Roof.

*"... We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf..." In Advent, when my parish uses this alternate confession, I reflected on what it means to "repent of the evil done on our behalf." I better understand the evil that enslaves us and the evil we (I) have done, but what about the "evil done on our behalf?" Immediately unjust wars and, for me, the death penalty jump to mind, followed by an immediate feeling of powerlessness. What can I do?*

My ministry as a deacon at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Eugene has taken me and this congregation out of the pews and into Oregon jails and prisons for almost seventeen years. I could not help but think about what repenting "the evil done on our behalf" means for Christians in the context of a criminal justice system so broken and so brutal as to be a public scandal. When an offender is executed and someone pronounces that "justice was done," they cannot be speaking of God's justice, because God's justice must always include forgiveness and mercy. Just as love and forgiveness cannot be separated, neither can love and justice. John Dominic Crossan, in his book, *The Greatest Prayer* (HarperOne 2010), describes this relationship best:

**TO FORGIVE IS  
A DECISION, A  
HARD ONE,  
NOT A FEELING.**

*"We speak of human beings as composed of flesh and spirit or of body and soul. Combined, they form a human person; separated, we do not get two persons; we get one corpse. Think, then, of justice as the body of love and love the soul of justice. Think, then, of justice as the flesh of love and love as the spirit of justice. Combined, you have both; separated, you have neither. Justice without love or love without justice is a moral corpse. That is why justice without love becomes brutal and love without justice becomes banal."*

My reflection was not on the morality of the death penalty, however as important that issue is, but on the lesser known, relentless brutality of a criminal justice system that sucks the souls out of judges and staff, inmates, victims, families and communities on a daily basis. This also is evil done on my behalf, perhaps more insidious because it gets no headlines, no "News at Eleven." It is routine, normal. God's justice does require that offenders be held accountable, that victims be restored and communities be safe places for God's people. And it would be naive not to recognize that some offenders are too dangerous to return to the community. But God's justice must also be executed in such a way that is restorative and healing for victims, offenders and communities.

How did our criminal justice become so broken? Who is to blame? The answer for me is I am, we all are responsible. Christianity, itself, also bears significant responsibility for the use of incarceration. Seen as reform from torture and capital punishment, prisons were built throughout the United States in the mid-1800s with the intention not only of incarcerating but also improving prisoners through a mixture of work, discipline and personal reflection. But when the reform movement died, prisons became out of sight and out of mind for most Americans. We were glad they were there because they made us feel safe. But we paid scant attention on what went on inside the walls. Underfunded, understaffed and increasingly over-crowded, our prisons became warehouses or worse where inmates are punished. As members of the Church and of a polity where citizens are sovereign, we are called not only to be compassionate to those who violate our laws but to seek a justice which truly protects our communities, restores victims and holds offenders accountable while not blunting their chance at reconciliation with brutality.

REPENTANCE OFFERS  
US THE OPPORTUNITY  
TO RIGHT THE WRONG  
AND TO FORGIVE  
OURSELVES FOR  
WAITING TOO LONG  
TO ACT.

The church has the tools to first to acknowledge responsibility and call for reforms necessary to create a truly restorative criminal justice system. As a Church we meet, we teach and we preach. We have sent our people into prisons and jails to work with both inmates and staff. We have helped offenders return safely and successfully to our communities. We have provided care and comfort to victims. But is not enough. Repentance offers us the opportunity to right the wrong and to forgive ourselves for waiting too long to act. We are created free in the image of a freedom-loving God. "To take that freedom away from people is to exercise an awesome responsibility because it strikes at the heart of human dignity and identity. So the first thing the biblical record invites us to recognize is the exquisite pain imposed by imprisonment; why it hurts so much, and thus invites us to use great caution in resorting to it."

There are things we can and, as a Christian must do, to repent the evil done on our behalf. Not to act is to be complicit.

- As people of God we can add our voices, and that of the Episcopal Church, to the growing recognition of a broken and brutal criminal justice system. We can educate ourselves and, as citizens, demand humane and effective reform.
- We can visit the prisoners. If your state is like Oregon, roughly 40% of prisoners receive scant or no visitation at all. Recent research demonstrates that even casual visitation make a positive difference in prisoner mental health and success in returning to community. In Hebrews 13:3 we are told, "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured." In Matthew 25 Jesus identifies himself with those in prison, so that those who care for prisoners actually encounter the anonymous presence of Christ. "I was in prison and you visited me."
- Finally, we must take action to meet those returning to the community with generous hospitality and the resources they need to make a successful re-entry into our communities.

If we focus prayerfully and lovingly on these three elements, we are actively repenting.

## A Commentary on the Prodigal Son Parable

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By Arland J. Hultgren, Reprinted from [www.WorkingPreacher.org](http://www.WorkingPreacher.org) with permission.

There was a time when the lectionary known to most churches of the West did not include the Parable of the Prodigal Son at all, even though it is surely one of the best known of Jesus' parables.

To remedy the situation, it was assigned as an alternate reading for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity (the Tenth after Pentecost, for which the Parable of the Unjust Steward, Luke 16:1-9, was the normal reading) in the American *Book of Common Prayer* (1928 edition) of the Episcopal Church and in the *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958) of major Lutheran Churches in North America.

But the three-year *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992) of today places it in the Season of Lent. It has been transposed therefore from being set in the "green" season of growth in faith and life to the more solemn "purple" season that has a more penitential accent, anticipating the Passion and the Resurrection of Our Lord.

The difference in locales within the church year has hermeneutical implications. If the parable is set on a Sunday in the Season of Pentecost, it takes on a more didactic and evangelic character concerning the mercy of God. But if it is set on a Sunday in Lent, and if one is insistent upon maintaining the mood of Lent, it can take on a more paraenetic (or hortatory) character concerning the hearers' need for repentance.

While both of these themes can be drawn from the parable, it is the former that is actually more in line with the main thrust of the parable itself. And since Sundays during Lent are "Sundays in Lent," rather than "Sundays of Lent," it is fitting to allow the brighter, less somber, theme to dominate, providing a bit of relief within the Season only two weeks prior to the Sunday of the Passion.

In hearing and studying this parable, one should not give attention only to Luke 15:11-24 -- the initial part concerning the wayward son and his homecoming (omitting 15:25-32) -- to deal fairly with this parable. The reason for saying that is that at the outset Luke says: "Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons'" (15:11). In order to hear about both of the sons, one has to go all the way to 15:32.

The parable is framed well with the introduction at 15:1-2. Those verses set up the occasion for all three parables to follow (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son). Jesus is accused by the Pharisees and scribes of drastically inappropriate conduct: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The challenge is put forth, and Jesus responds with parables that, in effect, speak of God as one who welcomes sinners. Jesus, in his own ministry, impersonates the divine welcome by receiving and eating with sinners.

The parable -- the longest of all parables in the gospels -- consists of three scenes: (1) the negotiations of the younger son with his father and his subsequent departure to a foreign country where he is wasteful and becomes impoverished (15:11-19); (2) the homecoming of that son and the welcome by his father (15:20-24); and (3) the interchange between the father and his older son (15:25-32).

There are features of the parable that are particularly striking. Among them are the following: The younger son asks his father for his share of what would eventually be his inheritance. That is remarkable, even shocking. Even if ancient law (Jewish or Roman) had provision for doing what the son wants his father to do (which is most unlikely from what we know, based on the sources we have) it is an affront to the father. In the ancient world, as today, an inheritance is received only at the death of the parent. Therefore the son's request amounts to saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead!"

When the son leaves home for a distant country, he distances himself from his father and older brother not only geographically, but also psychologically. He is, in short, done with being with his father and others in the household.

When the son comes into difficulty, he becomes a servant of a farmer in the far country. The latter is a Gentile, because he has a pig farm. The son is an indentured servant, working for a set number of months or years. Feeding pigs would be in itself bad enough for a Jew, but to consider joining the pigs at the trough is to add degradation upon shame.

The son "came to himself" and decided to go home again. That does not necessarily mean that he had remorse (as in repentance), for the motive given in the text is that he realized that he was better off at home. True, he produces a speech, but does it indicate true remorse, or is it preparation for manipulating his father?

While one can argue whether or not the son truly repents, the focus is on the father's warm embrace. The father has no idea why the son is coming down the road; he does not even speculate about his son's motive. He simply sees the son coming, and he "runs" to meet him (15:20). In ancient times, a dignified man does not run! This is a feature of the parable that is easily missed, but it is highly important. The father does not act like a normal father. The father that Jesus portrays acts out the love and compassion of God.

The son has practiced a speech, saying that he has sinned; that he is not worthy to be the father's son; and that he should be treated as a servant (15:19). But the father will have none of that. He embraces his son, and when the son begins his speech, the father cuts it off abruptly in order that he can give directions to his servants (15:22-24).

While the party is going on in the house, the father leaves it and goes to find his other son, the elder one. He pleads with him to join the celebration, but is unsuccessful. Once again the focus is on the father. He tries his best to bring about harmony in the household.

The dialogue between three persons in 15:27-32 speaks volumes about how alienated the elder son now is from his father and brother. He too has, in a sense, gone into "a distant country," psychologically speaking. The servant tells him that his "brother" has come home (15:27). The elder brother, in addressing his father, uses the term "this son of yours" (15:30). But the father addresses him as his "son" (15:31), and then he says "this brother of yours" was lost but now is found.

There really is no point in going beyond the story as given to wonder whether the father finally prevailed upon the elder brother to join the party. The parable is open ended, and it is best not to try to rescue it to fulfill our own wishes for resolution.

The parable leaves two themes in tension. On the one hand, Jesus illustrates the love of God that is beyond human love as commonly understood and practiced, for no typical father would act as this father does in the parable. On the other hand, Jesus addresses the parable against his critics, vindicating his message and ministry, by which he consorted with the outcast. His critics are illustrated by the behavior of the elder brother, who cannot join in the rejoicing over the lost being found.

The two themes stand on their own, independent of one other. But they have in common something at a deeper level. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. His message was about a God whose love surpasses all typical expressions known to humanity. That love is celebrated by those who apprehend it in the gospel of Jesus, as illustrated in the scene of celebration after the homecoming of the younger son. But the expression of divine love also evokes resentment in those who assume that they know all about it and claim to know who is worthy of it, and who is not, as illustrated in the scene of the elder son's refusal to join the celebration.

**The congregation at worship is the place for celebrating the homecoming each week of the prodigals,** including all of us, and driving away all thoughts of righteous resentments about who all is coming to dinner. Resentment leads to alienation, going off into a far country of our own making. As the father welcomed the son, so God in Christ welcomes us. That has implications for the life of a congregation. As Paul put it so well, "Welcome one another... just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

## Sample Sermon on the Prodigal

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By The Rev. Deacon Thomas R. English, St. Mary Episcopal Church, Eugene, Oregon

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C: Joshua 5: 9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

It was at the 2011 Interfaith Community Breakfast that it happened. The speaker was John Dominic Crossan, an Irish-American biblical scholar. He is often considered the foremost historical Jesus scholar today.

As he approached the lectern he critically inspected the poster we had propped up against it: "Support the Charter for Compassion."

"Now I don't want you to think I am against compassion," he began. "It's truly a necessary and lovely thing. But t'isint enough! You must also do justice or you'll be doing the same compassionate things until Jesus himself comes."

That's when I came to myself. Of course! I have been working here at St. Mary's taking Christ's reconciling message to our jail and prisons for 13 years. But in spite of all my efforts at compassion, the justice system has become still more broken. It is not working for victims, it is not holding offenders accountable and it is making our communities less safe, and in a truly perverse way is starving the very things, like effective schools, women's shelter services and community colleges, that prevent crime in the first place.

This morning's rich and varied lessons challenge us to discern how the universal themes of freedom and responsibility, leaving and returning, exile and homecoming, offending and forgiving, estrangement and reconciliation, honor and shame, generosity and gracelessness, crime and justice, and jealousy and joy call us to repentance.

In Joshua, God "rolls away" the disgrace of Egypt---the shame of imprisonment, of slavery and the mocking of a people whose god had abandoned them. In Psalm 32 we explore the psychology of forgiveness. And in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians we all called to be Ambassadors of Christ:

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*

We are now in mid-lent and it's a relief to hear these messages of God's radical forgiveness and reconciliation. But, because we are in Lent, I view them in the light of a repentance which requires more than just regret and contrition, but a thorough assessment of what God is calling me to do now. For some months, the alternate confession from *Enriching our Worship* used at our (this) 9:30 service has been weighing on my heart---especially in this phrase:

*We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.*

It's from the perspective of "evil done on our behalf" that I want to explore the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The story, the longest of all parables in the gospels, is very film-like to me consisting of four scenes: (1) the negotiations of the younger son with his father and his subsequent departure to a foreign country *where he squandered his property in dissolute living*. In scene (2) he becomes impoverished... and in an epiphany, he comes to himself (15:11-19). Scene (3) is the homecoming and the joyous welcome by his father (15:20-24); and in the final scene (4) containing the only dialogue in the parable, the interchange between the father and his older son (15:25-32).

The parable is sparse and purposely so. In the negotiation what isn't said is, perhaps, more important than what is. Jesus invites us to speculate. Why on earth did the father agree to such a thing? The kid is telling him he'd prefer him dead. But maybe this father knows this son very well; maybe he knows he is so estranged by his self-centeredness that the son needs to get it out of his system...not exactly a gap year or a sabbatical, but more of a catharsis. And in his extravagance, the father grants the son's wish. What did the community think?—his neighbors? It must have been the scandal and the gossip for months.

**HE WAS  
AFRAID TO  
HOPE.**

It is in the second scene that the story begins to become still more like a movie for me. Imagine the dissolute living scenes, the parties, the drinking, and the carousing.

And then crash! *When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly*

*have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.*

Can't you just see it? There he is, this Jewish kid, cold, hungry, dirty and smelling of pig dung, realizing what a colossal mistake he made.

*But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."*

Again, we are invited to speculate. Did this son truly repent? Or did he just do the calculation? We aren't told. Perhaps, on the long journey home he had time to realize that just being sorry would not be enough. Maybe he realized that to come home and live with Dad and brother, to look forward to a life of farming in a farming village, would take much more. It would take a complete 180 degree change. Maybe he had learned something. Maybe the time with the pigs and his introspection transformed him or started to---to bring him back to the person God called him to be.

In scene 3, we see the father on the front porch in the late afternoon, out of the heat of the day, watching the road. This had become his habit ever since his son left. He knew in his heart his son would return or at least he prayed he would. More than once he had seen the puff of dust in the distance turn into another farmer or an itinerant craftsman and disappointment. Today seemed no different, he was on the porch watching the road, it was getting late, probably no one would be traveling this late. Then he saw it—the puff of dust in the distance. He was afraid to hope. As the puff came closer he could see it wasn't a cart, it was someone on foot. The dust cleared some and he could make out a figure, a man. He couldn't see his features, but then he noticed his gait, the way he walked. He recognized that, it was him—his son! He was sure it was!

## Sample Sermon on the Prodigal (cont.)

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*...he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

This loving father *ran* to greet the son. Running was not a usual practice for a dignified Palestinian father, the head of the household a prominent member of the community. Yet he ran and as the son was making his proposal, he cuts him off and tells the servants to get the robe, the sandals and the ring—the symbols of being restored to the family.

In scene 4, the parable itself is quite visual and contains its only dialogue.

*Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'*

Jesus leaves us there on the front step of the house, smoke coming out of the chimney and the fragrance of spit-roasted meat filling the air. It is in this final scene that God's Justice and God Love come together to be God's mercy. The father comes out and begs the elder brother to come in. But he refuses and is indignant at the unfairness of the father's justice:

*But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him*

Then the father turns it around:

*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"*

It is in this exchange that I view the parable through the criminal justice lens. We have all the principal actors of every crime---the offender, the victim and wider law-abiding community. The father represents both the victim and someone who represents the demands of law and justice, the younger son is clearly the willful and harmful offender with the elder brother just as clearly depicting an industrious, law-abiding member of the household community who is outraged by the father's leniency---read injustice.

We don't know if the elder brother joins the party or not. Jesus doesn't resolve it for us: he invites us to ask questions. Is the father's radical joy at restoration of the younger son unjust? Is the elder brother's outrage over the lack of punishment reasonable? Are love and justice, restoration and punishment mutually exclusive? If they are not, then what is the balance? Jesus doesn't give answers, but does demand that we consider the questions.

"THINK THEN OF JUSTICE AS THE BODY OF LOVE, AND LOVE AS THE SOUL OF JUSTICE."

I'm reminded again of what John Dominic Crossan said about the apparent conflict between love and justice in his book, *The Greatest Prayer*, "We speak of the human being," Crossan said, "as composed of flesh and spirit or of body and soul. Combined they form the human person; separated, what's left is a corpse. Think then of justice as the body of love, and love as the soul of justice. Think then of the justice as the flesh of love, and love as the spirit of justice. Combined you have both, separated you have neither. Justice without love and love without justice is a moral corpse. That is why justice without love becomes brutal and why love without justice becomes banal."

As members of the Church and of a polity where citizens are sovereign, we are called not only to be compassionate to those who violate our laws but to seek a justice which truly protects our communities, restores victims and holds offenders accountable while not blunting their chance at reconciliation with brutality.

Our county our state and our nation are in crisis of public policy about how to fix a criminal justice system that is broken and is not financially sustainable. Many Christian denominations, including ours, have passed resolutions pointing to what some have called the scandal of mass incarceration, overrepresentation of minorities, the torture of solitary confinement and the death penalty, to name just a few.

It is tempting when faced with complex issues especially when they interlaced with strong emotions, to throw our hands up, and say, "That's just the way it is; there's nothing I can do" But if we do so we run the risk the sin of complicity in "the evil done on our behalf."

See Chapter 7: "Offending, Restoration, and the Law-abiding Community" in *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime and Restorative Justice (2012)*. By Christopher D. Marshall, Cascade Books: An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishes, Eugene, Oregon. Marshall provides a cogent argument from viewing the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the criminal justice perspective. Special thanks to Charlie Collier of Wipf and Stock publishers for making me aware of this resource.

**THE GREATEST PRAYER: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer.** By John Dominic Crossan. San Francisco: Harper One, 2010. 193 pages.

## Oregon's Public Safety System is Seriously Out of Balance

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By David Rogers, Former Executive Director, Partnership for Safety & Justice

"Let's start with a premise that I don't think a lot of Americans are aware of. We have five percent of the world's population; we have 25 percent of the world's known prison population. There are only two possibilities here: either we have the most evil people on earth living in the United States, or we are doing something dramatically wrong in terms of how we approach the issue of criminal justice."

- Senator Jim Webb (D-Va)

**Oregon has led the nation in effective corrections policies, but we are drifting off course. Without action by the legislature, our state's prison population is projected to grow by 2,300 inmates in the next 10 years. This growth, fueled mostly by nonviolent offenders, will cost taxpayers an additional \$600 million.**

- Oregon's Prison Population has grown by 50% since 2000
- OR's incarceration rate has grown 3x faster than the national incarceration rate since 2000
- The Oregon Department of Corrections now consumes more than \$700 per household per biennium

**As prisons consume a growing share of the state's public safety budget, critical public safety resources are squeezed.**

- In 2011, there were over 20,000 unmet requests for emergency shelter for victims of domestic and sexual violence
- There are fewer state troopers now than in the 1960s, despite population growth, and with parts of the state without 24-hour patrol. Rural communities, in particular, depend on the presence of state troopers.

**There are more effective, less costly ways to improve public safety, hold offenders accountable, and control corrections costs. Building more prisons is not the best nor the most cost-effective way to make Oregon safer.**

- For every dollar we invest in community-based addiction treatment, we get \$7 or more in savings from reduced crime and recidivism. For every dollar we invest in prison-based adult education, we get \$5 of savings from reduced recidivism. But these are the kinds of programs that have seen funding cuts as we have been spending more and more money building and filling prisons over the past 15 years.
- All 17 states that cut their imprisonment rates since 2000 also experienced a decline in crime rate. Focusing on front-end interventions like community corrections, addiction treatment, mental health services, and drug courts is a much more cost effective approach to creating safe and healthy communities than focusing on prison expansion.

## Resources for Learning, Planning, and Action

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### Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption

By Bryan Stevenson

With stories that reveal the personal experience of the criminal justice system, Stevenson's book is a great read for congregational book groups looking to be inspired and provoked into action. Stevenson's work with the Equal Justice Initiative grounds his reflections.

### The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

By Michelle Alexander

A ground-breaking work that exposes the ways the prison-industrial complex emerged from the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, perpetuating racial inequality in our own era. As a civil rights lawyer, Alexander has rich experience serving through the legal system.

### "Restoring Justice"

A 51-minute DVD produced by the Presbyterian Church (USA) for the National Council of Churches provides a vision for how congregations might be involved in developing and working with programs and services that use the Restorative Justice Model. A good opportunity to view an alternative that works.

### "Oregon Out of Balance"

A short DVD produced by the Partnership for Safety and Justice that provides a good overview of the current crisis the Oregon Criminal Justice System is facing today. Use this as a forum starter with a panel of local criminal justice professionals and volunteers.

### "Breaking Down the Box"

A 40-minute movie released by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture to educate communities of faith about solitary confinement, which they call a form of torture, happening within US prisons. Available for free order online at [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org).

### "Start By Believing"

[www.StartByBelieving.org](http://www.StartByBelieving.org)

A web resource encouraging community members and friends to respond effectively and compassionately to victims of sexual violence. Produced by the national organization, End Violence Against Women International.

### "Heal. Hope. Help."

[www.HelpHopeGuide.info](http://www.HelpHopeGuide.info)

An online resource for loved ones of crime and violence. A project of the Partnership for Safety and Justice. With guides for "Helpful Things to Know, Do, and Say" to support survivors.

**An Ecumenical Partnership for Justice and Peace -  
Get in contact and join us!**

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**Diocese of Oregon**

*Proclaiming God's reign while living Gospel lives*

The Episcopal Church in Western Oregon

**Contact Rev. Tom English**

Episcopal Diocese of Oregon

Commission on Jail & Prison Ministries

English@RioUSA.com 541-302-9477

**Contact Rev. Audrey DeCoursey**

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO)

Communities of Support & Accountability project

[www.CoSAOregon.org](http://www.CoSAOregon.org)

CoSA@EMOOregon.org 503-988-8580

**ECUMENICAL  
MINISTRIES  
of OREGON**

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## **Speakers Bureau**

Faith leaders active in criminal justice ministries are available to come to your faith community and share a message of hope and good news even within a broken justice system. This message is open to communities of all faith traditions. From adult education classes to sermons, witness commissions to men's and women's groups, our speakers want to help your community learn about the role you have to play in working for justice and mercy toward those in need.

**Eugene Area:**

Rev. Tom English  
Episcopal Diocese of  
Oregon

**Portland Area:**

Rev. Audrey De-  
Coursey  
Ecumenical Ministries  
of Oregon

In every county in Oregon, a **Local Public Safety Coordinating Council** meets regularly to plan how to meet the community's need for public safety. Council members include elected officials, government staff, and community representatives. Members of your local council may be available to speak to your congregation. Contact the speakers above for assistance in reaching out to these local public safety officials. Find out what your county is doing at [www.safetyandjustice.org](http://www.safetyandjustice.org). Go to *Our Work*, click on Justice Reinvention, and then click your county on the map.