

The Theology of Transformation in Prison Ministry

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i find myself nervous to write for this publication—like every time i step up to preach, i don't take this invitation lightly. Over the past several years, we've witnessed narratives being weaponized and we focus so much on the “unlearning” of something (as if learning isn't a continuum) that we leave little room for transformation. And so, my hope is that we continue to allow growth to happen in both community and in our personal lives in order to redefine punishment and to allow for a lifelong journey towards transformation.

i currently volunteer with an Episcopal Church inside Arizona's only prison for womxn. i'm honored to worship and study alongside womxn who are incarcerated in a variety of settings—a medium-security unit, a maximum-security unit, a closed-custody yard, and a suicide-watch unit. Each of these opportunities reinforce my belief in the ABOLITION of the ways in which we “punish” folx, in particular womxn. Everytime i go inside, the excitement and energy to learn about a G-d, a Christianity that doesn't continue to punish and other G-d's creatures but instead demonstrates the inherent love and dignity that each of us are born with, is breathtaking. The Spirit is alive in a way that i haven't experienced in a church beyond prison's walls—ever.

And yet, there are so few opportunities for non-evangelical ministries inside carceral systems. It's as if nothing exists outside the constant reminder of what we aren't to a Capitalistic society that needs to punish the bodies of Indigenous, Black, Brown, Queer, and womxn-identified bodies in order to thrive. i briefly met a pastor last December who used to go inside a womxn's prison and on the eve of Christ's birth, she mentioned the manipulation by the “inmates” was too much for her to continue the work



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of ministry. While this wasn't the time to delve into her experiences, i found what she shared alarming. For my time inside has been filled with all the ranges of experiences—we've smiled, cried, sang, prayed, learned, questioned, argued, and grown together—manipulation never enters into the space.

While i don't have enough space to go into more details about my prison ministry, i invite you and your congregation to examine what your theology of punishment feels like and then ask if there are other ways of existing? What is the impact of that type of theology and how does our relationship to capitalism continue to feed the carceral system (i.e.: punishment for property damage or peaceful protests like those related to the movement for Palestine, BLM, or environmental protections)?

i wonder when the last time we've asked ourselves: how many of us are impacted by incarceration and why aren't our churches addressing the carceral system's impact on our communities, our families? i know that statistically, in Arizona, 1 in 4 people in our faith communities are impacted by incarceration and yet, how many of them have prison ministries that seek transformation and not continual punishment?

Where does a theology of transformation filled with love and forgiveness land in your body and then how do you help others feel that same sense of freedom?

There are other ways. Global pandemics have taught us that. Our very lives depend on new ways of living—one where transformation is possible. This is hard work, but this is the work of a still speaking G-d.

Now what are you waiting for?

If you're curious about the ways Arizona punishes their womxn, please check out: <https://drapetomaniacollective.org/>.

Blessings Beloveds – rev. ellie hutchison

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