

Set at Liberty – Faith, Race and the Sin of Mass Incarceration
The Kaleo Center

WHY MY FAITH CALLS ME TO STAND AGAINST MASS INCARCERATION

I begin with words adapted from Roque Dalton, poet of El Salvador.

*I believe the world is beautiful
And that my veins don't end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who struggle for life,
love,
little things
landscape and bread
the poetry of everyone.*

That confidence in the beautiful world, that covenant with everyone in it, the unanimous blood, expresses exactly the universalism that defines my faith and calls me out, like it or not, ready or not, to stand for justice and to stand against a prison system, a so-called justice system, that is anything but just.

I believe the world is beautiful, and that every person is born into it, out of mystery, with equivalent stature, and born with the same name, every one of us, and that name is *child of God*, a name that we can never shake, that never can be taken from us, nor obliterated or forgotten, despite whatever name our parents give us – joyful, hopeful names – or the names we claim ourselves as we grow, or whatever names –
 terrible, cruel, deadly labels, typecasts, statistical categories, demonizing slogans,
 slanders, slurs, profiles –
 whatever names come down.

I believe the blood in our veins is unanimous, like the waters of rivers and oceans and rain from which it derives, and we all bear a common name and that name is *child of God*. Beloved.

The inward light which burns within each soul is a living ember of Divinity, the larger Light and Love transcending all our understanding - and thus, when millions and millions of beautiful,

shining souls are thrown away, discarded, disregarded, trampled, scorned, wasted in prison and forgotten, every other spirit is diminished, the sacred fabric is diminished; its integrity is frayed.

Long ago, someone said, famously, “While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” Reading those lines of Eugene Debs many years later, the writer Kurt Vonnegut said he had never known a more cogent exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount (Vonnegut- who was by no means a theologian, but who *was* a Unitarian). This is the spirituality of solidarity. There are many, many souls in prison this morning, and therefore none of us is free. They are overwhelmingly people of color, mostly men but women too; mostly young, but not for long. Each one has a beautiful name - ***and something is terribly wrong.***

Cornel West, who *is* a theologian, writes of the iron cage that holds these many souls, and of the golden cage of privilege. However desperately, even involuntarily, I may squint my eyes to pretend the bars of that golden cage do not exist, that they do not surround me and protect me, I know that they are there, and the integrity of any work for justice I believe I’m called to – the integrity of all my work and really, all my life - depends on my willingness in every moment to name and own the implications of my lifelong privilege. We’re all born with the same name and with equal stature in the eyes of God, but we do not arrive nor do we dwell on level ground. Until, unless, I do my first work first, and do it constantly, that golden cage is going to constrict all my best intentions and make false all my righteous words, and it will (conveniently) limit the risk that true justice work requires. My faith calls me, like it or not, to look with open eyes on every kind of prison bar – because the golden cage of white privilege and class privilege depends upon, requires, that other prison that we’re here to talk about today. My faith calls me toward all kinds of freedom.

We are called to *beloved community*, which is not a destination, some kind of utopian ideal, but instead a way of being – spiritually, politically, economically, in relation. Dorothy Day spoke years ago of “this filthy, rotten system,” which is another way of being; she was talking about poverty, racism, war and even way back then she was talking about the prison system, how everything is intertwined, and were she alive today she’d be talking about profiling, policing, sentencing, the militarization of the street and the border and the heart. The beloved community is the goal toward which we walk and it is the way we walk; it is a daily practice, a spiritual politics that requires radical solidarity, radical nonviolence and radical love, born of Love Divine, all loves exceling.

This is the faith that calls me to stand against mass incarceration, and I am so grateful to be standing in your strong company this morning.

Victoria Safford 14 January 2015