

Reflections on The New Jim Crow

a sermon by

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(Thanks to Michelle Alexander, Wikipedia and other web sources for background information for this sermon)

Today is The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Sunday.

In religious congregations across our country people are reflecting on Dr. King's life and legacy.

Many of them are uncomfortable because they know Dr. King's struggle for racial equality and justice is far from over. They know we've made some progress, but they know we're far from done. And they're wrestling with how to understand what has happened and what we need to do next.

This is where Michelle Alexander from the Ohio State University Law School, is very helpful for us.

In her book entitled *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander points out that many Black and Latino men are now disenfranchised and marginalized not merely because of their color but because at an early age many young men of color are labeled as "criminal."

This label of "criminal" then allows for a whole range of discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, voting rights and more.

So...Michelle Alexander says...mass incarceration policies, which were developed in the 1980s, are the way many people of color are held in bondage. Mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow.

Here – in part – is the story of how we got into this situation.

In the 1930s President Franklin Roosevelt and others implemented the New Deal. The New Deal – based on relief from poverty, recovery of a healthy economy and reform of corrupt banking practices – began to successfully redistribute wealth and opportunity in this country.

In the 1950s and 60s, the Civil Rights movement began to make sure that African American people were included in the American dream as well.

Also in the mid 1960s, President Johnson began the War on Poverty. Some of its provisions included Medicare, Food Stamps, Head Start, Community Action Programs, Legal Services, and the Job Corps.

This movement toward a more just and equal society was not perfect or without flaws. But it did to a significant degree give poor people and people of color some avenues for hope, healing and health. The War on Poverty was costly and was in need of ongoing evolution and development – but its proponents argued it was certainly moving us in the right direction.

Those who opposed the War on Poverty philosophically pointed to its shortcomings and to the troubles still rampant in inner cities. They developed another approach. They called it The War on Drugs – and they focused on incarcerating anyone involved with drug manufacture, distribution or use.

In 1982 the Reagan administration escalated the "War on Drugs." It created a huge media campaign and expanded law enforcement activities in inner cities. This approach fueled fear. White folks were encouraged to be afraid of the restless natives. And many people of color were terrified of both drugs and of law enforcement.

The Regan administration (no kidding) aided and abetted this fear by facilitating an increased supply of cocaine. This is a fact: During the 1980s the Nicaraguan Contras (with US support) created a great fund raiser for themselves by smuggling and distributing cocaine.

Their activity created an explosion of the crack cocaine consumption in US inner city neighborhoods. Crack (by the way) is a powerful but less expensive product made of cocaine, baking soda and other ingredients. The United States Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was incensed by the Contra's drug business and tried to expose it and stop it. But Reagan officials blocked the DEA's efforts.

Instead of cutting the supply lines, the Reagan Administration created more aggressive enforcement of drug laws on the streets. This resulted in a dramatic increase in the arrests of poor brown and black dealers and users.

Along with this.....disparate sentencing for crack cocaine v. powdered cocaine meant that inner city residents of color were charged with felonies and sentenced to long terms in prison, while wealthier folks (many of them white) got misdemeanors for possession of the more expensive powder cocaine.

This street level "War on Drugs," fueled by fear on one hand and by the greed of the prison industry on the other, has had a devastating impact on poor people of color.

During the past three decades, the US prison population has exploded from 300,000 to more than two million. We're number one in the world in prisons and our country is number one in the world in focusing enforcement of drug laws on racial and ethnic minorities.

While studies show that Americans of different races consume illegal drugs at similar rates, men of color have been sent to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times those of white men. These men then become marginalized in a permanent *under-caste* that is largely hidden from view.

You know history is long...and if we don't pay attention we forget our country does not have to be run this way.

Forty years ago - in 1973 the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals advised against the creation of a prison society. In 1973 the Commission recommended the elimination of existing juvenile detention centers and no further construction of adult facilities.

During the next few decades, though, actual developments went in the opposite direction; the US embarked on an unprecedented expansion of its juvenile detention facilities and its prison systems.

Because the "Get Tough On Crime" approach holds so much sway with voters - the civil rights community has (until recently) been reluctant to get involved in anti-prison work.

It has focused instead on protecting affirmative action. Criminal Justice reform (until recently) has not been a top priority for the Congressional Black Caucus. The NAACP and the ACLU have been involved somewhat but even they are timid.

Michelle Alexander, is working to help all of us overcome our timidity. She says we have to remember our history and understand how racism works now. Jim Crow is not gone. It has just become more subtle. Instead of attacking people outright because of their color, it plays on fears we have about the anger, violence and lawlessness we project upon poor people. And since a disproportionate number of poor people happen to be people of color - Mr. Jimmy Crow is doing just fine.

Many of us Americans sitting in religious congregations today are ashamed of our racial history. We know it's against the tenets of all of our faiths. But we don't know quite what to do and it's Martin King Day.

Well my suggestion is that we remember the example he set in his own complicated and dangerous time.

My suggestion is that we remember his relentless, powerful, non-violent work against the prison, military, industrial, fundamentalist right wing complex of his day.

We Americans – by and large – don't like to look at that. We by and large want to believe that everybody is capable of upward mobility. We'll hear a lot about that tomorrow. We'll hear a lot about how King spoke not of the color of our skin but of the content of our character. And that is righteous and positive.

But let me tell you - if my good character is housed in a brown body that at age 19 got high on crack and stole a car – and if that body is now 29 years old – and has been out of prison for five years and clean and sober for 10 years – and if that body has the soul of a philosopher – and has trained itself as a sheet rock installer – and if that brown body has applied for over 200 jobs and showed up for interviews showered, shaved and ready to go....

Let me tell you that brown is still unemployed and ineligible for the aid of any government program. Let me tell you that young brown body is still riding a bicycle around town looking for work and sleeping on the streets or in friends' garages – and that young brown body still can't vote and is nearly without hope – because he may think his name is Steve – and he may think his name is member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno – and he may think his name is human being - But the system knows his name is Dangerous Felon Jailbird Loser Forever.

The New Jim Crow does not require overt racial hostility or bigotry. Blindness serves it just fine. So we need to understand that and develop eyes to see.

After we begin to see it, Michelle Alexander says we need to get to the root of things. We need to confront the underlying pathology of the white, male, European/American Dominator system that forms the foundation of so much how we live.

We need, of course, to confront our atrocious criminal justice system – and as we do, we also need at the deepest levels to cultivate an ethic of genuine care for our planet and for every human being on it, regardless of race, ethnic background, gender, class, or past errors.

Systemic change is absolutely needed. But it won't ever be enough without a profound change in our world view and our hearts. If we only work on the surface, a new system of racialized social control will certainly appear and assume forms we can't even now predict.

The ongoing transformation of our world view and our hearts is the first order of business of this fellowship.

We come here to do that and to build with one another supportive community and to work together to shape our world toward justice, sustainability and peace.

Our Program and Worship and Religious Education people help us with our spiritual work. - Our Caring Circle and Pot Luck folks and others help us with community

And our Social Action Committee helps us as we try to engage the world. Social Action has flier you can pick up today and on it you will find information about a criminal justice and prison reform workshop that they are sponsoring , along with the Friends Meeting.

You will also find information about how you can support the Fair Wage Act Eureka.

Set in the context of learning to genuinely care for our planet and one another – set in the global context of fighting the white male dominator system, our Social Action Committee’s information today is right on target with ways might begin to dismantle the New Jim Crow. Michelle Alexander would be proud. I am too.

And I am very grateful to our Social Action Committee – our Program and Worship Committee, Religious Education and all of you for your company on this journey of heart and head together.

On this Martin King Sunday – as we look again at racism, our journey not an easy one – but with all of our help together – “We’ve got our hand on the justice plow – Can’t turn back on our journey now. We’re gonna keep our eyes on the prize and hold on.”

Hymn – Let’s stand and sing that song together now – Keep Your Eyes on the Prize – Hold On. – (It’s on your Insert)

Extinguishing the Chalice Closing Words and Closing Song

The Closing Song - today will be “Gonna Keep on Walkin’ Forward” We’ll do it a cappella.

These Closing Words are adapted from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

God give us strength of body now to keep walking forward. Give us strength of spirit to remain nonviolent. Give us strength of patience to wage the struggle with dignity and discipline. May we and all who suffer oppression resist the temptation to retaliatory violence and vengeful thoughts. May we choose a way of action that is centered in peace and redemption for all of us.

Now, as we make our way forward God, remove all bitterness from our hearts and give us the wisdom and courage to trust your healing and love – never turning back. – Amen

Song – Gonna keep on walkin forward. Gonna keep on walkin forward.
Keep on walkin forward – Never turnin back – Never turnin back