



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***We Are All Doing Time***

***By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse***

***Sunday, April 26, 2020***

In the small East Texas Town of Slone, Travis Boyete, abducted, raped and murdered a popular cheerleader. He buried her body so deep no one would find it. He watched in amazement as police prosecuted and convicted Donte Drumm, a local black football star who was sent to death row. Years passed and the guilt that Travis felt grew its own kind of bars until he simply couldn't live with himself. He tried in vain to convince people that he was the guilty man, but since he couldn't remember where he hid the body no one believed him. Donte Drumm was executed soon thereafter, and Travis committed suicide.

This story from John Grisham's book The Confession, while technically fiction, is based on a number of true stories. Our prison system is full of falsely accused men and women who are imprisoned for crimes they did not commit -- leaving any number of true culprits who live within the prison of their guilt.

Like so many of us, all of us find prisons of our own making. Words unsaid before a loved one died. Acts we are not proud of. I have my share, you have yours.. We often say that we UUs don't do guilt but that's not true, guilt does us all the time. Even now, imprisoned as we may feel in our homes, there are far greater prisons in our hearts. Complete with bars of remorse and lamentation. I for one actually feel liberated in my home, a sort of casual monastery, while imprisoned by the guilt that my safety comes at the cost of the health of those workers who bring me my food, provide my shelter and serve my health. Oh, no, there is more than enough guilt to go around. And we all have our prisons, we are all doing time. As Bo Lozoff, my mentor and founder of the Prison Ashram project put it in his book We Are All Doing Time:

"Everybody wants to feel good... We could live our lives as a process of adventure, but that can be a lot of work. We instead bury ourselves in work or play in order not to have to discover that goodness. Sometimes we lash out in self-destructive behavior...Robbing a bank or killing someone may sound like a crazy way to go about feeling good, yet it sometimes can. Getting caught and thrown into jail is the downside of what many do, not because they are evil but because they are unable to live the adventure life has given us.

And that depends on your station in life...Like Bob Dylan put it, 'Steal a little and they throw you in jail, steal a lot and they make you king.' The world of insecurity and desire shares similar motivations." (adapted from We Are All Doing Time)

Some of us go to jail but others of us keep the jail around us in the lives we live. And what a time such as now to consider how we might free ourselves from the prisons, reminded as we are of the confinement we live with every day.

I have been wondering about this paradox: we are imprisoned in our homes and yet we are being freed from the prisons of our culture.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in his book An Other Kingdom, speaks about the prison of our consumer culture. We have been trained to spend money, to make offerings at the altar of capitalism, for the betterment of all. Isn't it surprising how much less we need now that we are prisoners of this pandemic? Are we being liberated from the prison of an ideology which has driven us and our planet to the edge of extinction? Think about that. Brueggemann compares this to the story of Exodus, marked by Passover just celebrated again. Moses under God's command helps to liberate his people. Crossing the Red Sea, they rejoice and then wander for a generation in the wilderness. While food and water are provided, many long for enslavement under the pharaoh, for its comfort and certainty.

Brueggemann says our consumer culture is the pharaoh. And we are slaves to it, we are imprisoned in its walls of desire, and comfort and debt and ultimately death. We are all doing time whether it's in our homes, on ZOOM, at work or dealing with all the stress and pain that comes from this time. The question is how do we free ourselves from the prisons of our lives? And which prison do we really want to be freed from? Is the pandemic our wilderness? Are we destined to wander the wilderness or set our sights on the promised land such as I talked about several weeks ago? Might this be the time for us to break through to America 2.0, a time to rethink our economic system of ever-growing consumer demand, of a planet heated to extinction, to social inequities and racism? Is this plague not liberating us already? We all know the new normal will not be the old normal but what do we intend that to be?

I have spent my entire ministry talking and teaching freedom. Freedom of the body from poverty and dis-ease, freedom for people to live their lives as they are destined, freedom to express their truth and freedom from the emotional jails we put ourselves in. I have come to believe that part of that freedom is to recover that sense of adventure that gives life meaning. In my own life it means that I have to get out of town every other month or

so just to go somewhere I haven't been. But in my ministry it means helping you all, and perhaps myself, realize that its "not the external props of our lives that set us free, it's the timeless qualities like kindness, courage, self-honor, and humor.... that we are where we are, and what we are, not because we are 'bad,' but because we're spiritually clumsy." (Ibid., Lozoff). I believe that the first step to setting ourselves free from what holds us is to recognize the bars we have built for ourselves. Have you ever wondered why you get into the same fights, the same struggles with the ones we love? Have you ever wondered why you make the same mistakes over and over again? I have. I invite you to give thanks that you can be freer than you have been. Not totally free, but freer.

How? By cultivating the power of spiritual maturity. And we start, not with some unnamed God, or guru or practice but with the one being we know best, ourselves. As Bo said, the first step is to see you have the key inside yourself.

"The prison of the soul is far more darker than any dungeon" wrote John Donne. This is one reason why I feel so strongly that our first principle is so foundational to who we are as free church. If we can't separate harmful actions from human worth, then who will.

Here I find the Hindu understanding of karma to be immensely useful-- that "what comes around goes around," that every thought, word, and deed is not only a seed we sow in the world, but is also the fruit we harvest from previous thoughts, deeds, and works. Some of our "seeds" ripen quickly, others take longer to mature -- lifetimes perhaps. In that case, by the time they "come around" again we will have forgotten that we ourselves planted and cultivated those seedlings; we blame someone else for taking advantage of us, or accuse the Almighty, when in fact what happens is caused by energy we had set in motion long, long ago. (Adapted from Bo Lozoff Sunrise Magazine, August/September 1986; copyright © 1986 Theosophical University Press)

Leaving aside any cosmic score keeper, what this means for us is that when we say something that hurts the ones we love, they are likely to give it right back to us in different ways. Thus, we create cycles of behavior that keeps us locked up: She says something critical to him, he shuts down and denies her his love, which causes her to criticize him for being emotionally cold. Get the picture? Can you see how this keeps us imprisoned? Or even more parochially, we used to eat out at every meal, now we eat at home. What is more freeing? A bit of both I imagine.

So, once we recognize that our actions lead to further imprisonment, we are free to change how we go about living. We recognize that we are who we are, and life has given us what it has, the "house rules of the universe" and we set about treating others as we have them treat us. So now, when she is critical of him, instead of shutting down, he says

“when you say that it hurts me,” not being defensive, not denying what she is saying, just the feeling. Then he keeps loving her. And after a while she sees her part and the bars begin to bend open.

My mentor Bo Lozoff taught this kind of liberation in prisons. It is hardest to convince prisoners to stop blaming other people for their being there, unless they really are innocent. “You are responsible for everything you say, do, eat and dream” he says. Once that has been achieved, the cycle of blame, avoidance, action, and blame is broken. Even in this pandemic. This is what I mean by being spiritually mature. The greatest compliment a prisoner can receive is “He knows how to do his own time.” Do we know how to do our own time?

Part of what keeps us in prison is the attachment we have to the outcomes of our lives. We worked hard; we expect to be rewarded. We have loved; we expect to be loved in return. I lived a just life, why is my world falling apart around this pandemic? But when we aren't rewarded we grow resentful and we hold on to our hurt in order to see it repaid. We are caught by our attachments, especially by our prejudices, fears, loves, feelings of guilt, pride, lusts. These attachments weigh us down and blind us from seeing the big view of life.

As we would say in California: that is bad karma, man. If you are receiving no love for the love you are giving and you are honest with the other about how you feel, then to stay because you are attached to a certain outcome is not going to work. For years I served a church with a core of leadership that seemed oblivious to all our gifts of time and treasure in helping them grow. I told them how I felt, and the response was, “oh well.” So that was the end of that - I was called on. Freedom is often our choice. We have the key even when we don't see it.

Many of us are religious, but far too few are spiritual. Spirituality is the core of all reality; it's a mysterious but certain essence at the center of everything we see or do. . . Religion is the container for our spirituality but not the content. This religion helps us remember what we are truly thankful for, but the essence of freedom lies in our acceptance of what we have been dealt, the power to change what we can, and to let go of what we can't change.

Our religion, this congregation, is dedicated to the mission of learning and liberation. Now more than ever we witness before us our own TUCW 2.0. Online learning, outreach, connection, I can tell you we will be larger, more expansive than ever before. We are easily serving over a thousand families in one way or other.

But we also need your help. Liberation is not free. Where will we pick up as a people where Covid leaves us off? Many of us have not completed paying on their pledges, some haven't even started paying on them. Let me be plain: We need your help. We need you to pay your pledge which is not the same as the offering plate and we need it now. We need you to make a pledge for next year and we need that pledge now. If we are to be a place of liberation we will need to pull together; towards a world where we are liberating in new ways and the innocent go free.

Hosea Ballou, one of the great founders of Universalism in our country, believed that sin was limited to human existence and that all would eventually be reconciled to a loving God. My own experience has born this out. I have known people, like the character in my opening story, who did something terrible but were never found out. Yet they lived their lives as if they were already behind bars. Not in the case of a psychopath who is incapable of human empathy but for most of us, even common criminals, the guilt of what we did is sometimes a far greater punishment than what the state has to offer. Far more innocent people are behind bars than those who got away with it. And God, such as that concept may be, is not keeping score. We are. We keep the score of our world as we would like it to be and wish it weren't. We keep the bars of our prisons locked tight with guilt and attachments to a reality which is not as we are living it.

What can you let go of? What can you make amends for? What cycles of hurt can you interrupt? What is the chance that you are exactly as you were destined to be and that is just fine, just good enough? I say the chance is pretty good that you are worthy of freedom, just as you are.

So here then is my parting question: What does liberation look like in this time of pandemic and how can we get there?

As always friends, be well and stay connected. You are loved.

Amen.

