Restorative Justice: Belonging to Each Other

Good morning, New Covenant.

I want to share a piece of writing that comes from a young person who is currently incarcerated. As part of my job, I teach a few times a week in the juvenile detention facility in Urbana, and Jubal and I have been doing Bible study with the kids there for a few months, too. Right now, there are about 20 boys there, some for things like stealing cars and burglary, and more than half of them are there for serious violent crimes like murder and attempted murder. Here's what one of them wrote for me about school – this was not an assignment, just something he wanted to say. And actually, his giving it to me tells me that beyond wanting to say it, he wants to be heard. We all do:

READ

I came from family being dead. I was going through something mentally during school. No one noticed.

The scripture that Renee suggested for today is actually something that Jubal and I read recently with the boys. It comes from Matthew 5, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he says:

> **21-22 "You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill. (The Message)**

I thought about this passage again when I read this kid's piece. The violence and the pain that he's being accused of perpetrating, it's horrible, and it didn't start with him. He was suffering, and he was counting on the adults to notice, and no one did. Jesus is saying, murders don't just happen. Being careless, thoughtless with one another – these hurts can take root and grow.

Jesus goes on:

> **23-24 "This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.**

It was hard to sit in a group of teenagers who may or may not have killed other mothers' children, and who are about to be thrown away by society for longer than they can even imagine. To sit with them, and read this passage about anger and murder and conflict that tells

us, “Make it right,” It was hard to read this with them and not feel deeply convicted myself. Jesus is saying, “Do better,” and what lands with me is that actually, we adults needed to do better by these boys way before it got to this. Where would these young people learn the first thing about how to navigate conflict in healthy, productive ways? The adults, the state agents in charge of their lives at this point, are handling conflict with them by throwing them away for the rest of their lives like they are disposable to us.

As some of you know, I was up here a couple weeks ago asking for prayers for momentum for some restorative justice efforts that I got to be a part of that came out of the county’s office for court services. I know a lot about restorative justice from the time I spent in the Bay Area, where it’s been well-established for decades. I was told at the training that folks have tried to make it happen here a few times over the last 30 years, but it just hasn’t taken off.

Restorative justice, in the postcolonial Western sense, comes out of the world of the criminal legal system, as an alternative to our current model, which offers retributive justice.

A retributive system asks:
What rule was broken?
Who is to blame?
How should we punish them?

Seeking restorative justice, we ask:
Who has been hurt, and what are their needs?
Who is obligated to address these needs?
Who has a “stake” in this situation, and what is the process to involve them in making things right and preventing future occurrences?

Whereas the smartest thing a defendant can say in our criminal legal system is nothing at all, under a restorative justice system, they would have the opportunity to participate in what’s called a repair of ham circle, or series of circles.

In a repair of harm circle, the person who has caused harm is asked:
What happened?
What were you feeling/thinking at the time?
What have you felt/thought about since?
Who was impacted? Who else? Who else?
What do you need to do to make it right?

And the victim of harm, whose healing needs are not at all addressed by the current system, gets asked:
What did you think when you realized what had happened?
What impact has this incident had on you and others?
What has been the hardest thing for you?
What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

Importantly, a repair of harm circle also includes parents, friends, pastors, supporters who have a stake in the ongoing relationships involved. The questions asked of the rest of the circle are things like:
What did you see or hear, and how did it make you feel/think?
What parts of our community values or agreements were compromised?
What do we collectively need as a group to feel safe and move forward?
What is our actionable plan—who will do what, when, and where?

Restorative justice practices can help us deal with the fundamental reality that we are connected. Hurt people hurt people. And when we trace back from the violence to the harsh words and the hurt at the root of it and deal with that, it really is possible for healed people to heal people.

But we have to try. We have to stop throwing kids away for the rest of their lives. Turning back to the scripture, Jesus continues:

> **25-26 "Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine.**

Here Jesus seems to be saying that the state's system for doling out justice completely misses the point. The prison industrial complex in this country makes a lot of profit by convincing us that it's keeping us safe and therefore worth the financial and spiritual cost. The reality is that prisons do not make us safer. We live in a country that has locked away 2 million people, and we are all diminished by their absence. Jesus says, turn to each other and make it right. He says, you are not, fundamentally, subjects of the state, so don't give over your responsibility to each other to the state. What you are, fundamentally, is siblings. And you will continue to be siblings in the family of God no matter how mad you get at each other. Figure it out.

I don't mean to sound pollyanna about this. Jesus' simple command is actually a dizzyingly complex, seemingly impossible one: make it right. Where do we even begin? I have a brother that won't speak to me and I don't know what to do about that, let alone how we're going to build the momentum needed to bring real restorative justice alternatives to the criminal legal system here in Champaign county.

And yet, we are created in the image of a creator God. We have been given all that we need. Restorative justice practitioners have developed rituals, or liturgies, to evoke Sharon Chubbuck's recent very moving reflections, that are at least a beginning place for figuring out how we can both keep holding onto each other *and* find real accountability and healing after serious, truly irreparable harm. It starts with coming together, noticing one another's pain, and knowing that we need each other.

And something that makes me hopeful is that we're not actually talking about something new. Yes, it's fairly new in the Western, postcolonial context, but restorative justice is very old. For thousands of years, humans lived in communities across the world with more or less the expectation that they and their descendants' descendants would continue to live on the land where their ancestors' ancestors had lived. Nobody was going anywhere. No one is disposable. So even though restorative justice as I've described it in its western context is fairly new, it's actually a way of life that's deeply indigenous – here in what's now called North America, in Africa, in Europe, in Asia, the Pacific Islands. This is old, old. And is very much tied to place, to land, to the ground, to Creation. As a species, we need each other to survive and thrive on this planet in the long term.

I also have hope because I've seen it work in the most hopeless places. Most of my mentors in restorative justice have been incarcerated people that I've worked with over the years. One of them once explained it to me this way: In prison, it's possible to go on lockdown for months, even years at a time. No one is going anywhere, and no one is coming to save you from your problems. You figure out how to live together in peace because it's really clear to us that we're all we've got.

We're all we've got. We need each other and though our modern conveniences make it possible to live out of touch with this reality, we belong to each other.

I'll give Paul the last word on belonging today, and close with the scripture that the Leadership Team read together this past Tuesday night, from Paul's letter to the Romans:

> **For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, [5] so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.**

We are all invited now to break bread together at Jesus' table. Come, be fed, and remember who you are, beloved family members of God.