

Restorative Justice and Prison Visitation

The following was written for the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, and published August 2001. This was also typical of similar articles and presentations while I worked with M2/W2 Association (eventually known fully under my leadership as Man-To-Man/Woman-To-Woman – Restorative Christian Ministries). I was a volunteer with the program beginning in 1974, and never stopped visiting prisoners until the year of my retirement, 2014. I was first on staff with the program from 1980 to 1989, and served later as Executive Director from 1998 until 2014, the year of my retirement. I currently joyfully remain connected to many Restorative Justice initiatives.

My wife Esther and I had an amazing eight-week experience in **Rwanda May 18 to July 12, 2018**. We were exposed to much about Rwanda's post-genocide (1994) reconciliation journey. We were left with "impressions" when we departed, with no particular authority gained to "critique" realities there. While there I wrote a series of "Dispatches" about our reconciliation learning. They may be accessed [here](#).

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matthew 25)

It makes you think a lot. Jesus' words about the marginalized. I mean, unfortunately, he didn't tie salvation down to a formula, a creed, or a set of "spiritual laws". Rather, he connected our freedom to others' service. It is a representative list only, in Matthew 25. Really, simply no one is excluded – as that Legal Beagle in Luke 10 learned when he asked, "And who is my neighbour?" He wanted to "justify himself", the text says. So he asked the question. Quite plainly, our neighbour is *Everyman*. And we are, each one of us, a sheep or a goat, depending on how we respond to the neighbour. After all, our embrace of the other is the only thing that shows we have been justified, something we need not, cannot, do for ourselves anyway.

Included in that list is the prisoner. Let's face it: the criminal is an enemy. Sometimes Public Enemy Number One. And often rightly so. A crime has been committed, a victim or victims are left in its wake. They deserve justice. And so does the perpetrator. For that matter, the traumatized community also needs healing.

Enter "restorative justice", or better, according to lifetime Quaker activist Ruth Morris, "transformative justice". Ruth, in her advocacy for transformative justice, has taken seriously the Apostle's admonition: "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:2).*"

God's will for criminal justice is summed up in the Suffering Servant Song:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope (Isa 42:1-4)."

God's intent for the Suffering Servant, whom Christians understand is Jesus, is that through him and his church, a beachhead be established so that the healing powers of Restorative/Transformative justice might

change definitively and forever the nature of justice in every culture. As Amos the prophet pleaded for Israel, but no less for all nations: “*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream (Amos 5:24)!*” This is that same healing stream reprised in Revelation: “*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:1-2).*”

One eddy of this stream has been church-based one-to-one prison visitation programs, active in several Canadian provinces since 1966. The mandate is simple: provide friendship resources for persons inside prison, and reintegration assistance outside the walls. Thereby, conditions may be created for the healing powers of Restorative Justice to transform prisoners’ relationships to others, potentially the victim(s), the community, and ultimately God.

Sonya (not her real name) knew deep alienation in her marriage, and increasingly generally in life. One day, she acted out her overwhelming frustrations, and her husband lay dead. Still in prison years later, she has been on a longstanding healing journey. In it all, a volunteer has refused to let Sonya be a “project”, rather ever a friend. And friends never give up, even when rebuffed.

Jerry (again, not his real name), meticulously planned his sexual assaults. He had several rape victims before the police caught him, and a completely traumatized community. He too is still in prison several years later. But his transformation has been profound. First in conjunction with a faithful volunteer, who cheered him on through his very hard work on himself. Then in his professionally arranged, through months of case development, meeting in “therapeutic dialogue” with two of his rape victims, in which he found his own humanity rekindled in their reaching out to him. And they discovered, as one put it to national media subsequently, “a new birth”. The victim and wider community were thereby significantly impacted with hope.

Restorative/Transformative Justice defies any kind of easy definition or programmatic expression. Like Kingdom Come, it is rather an enthralling vision that ever proves at once elusive and transcendent of all attempts to “capture” its essence in words, programs, or systems. We in prison ministry acknowledge we are caught up in something far vaster than our little agencies and lives. As Paul puts it: “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:19-20).*” To which we all respond: “*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus (Rev. 22:20).*”

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