

Deacon Brad Taylor's Homily presented at Grace Mennonite Church in Prince Albert, SK.

On Sunday August 29, 2021

Based on the Gospel Reading: Luke 8:26-39

As I prison chaplain at SK Pen, I work with many men like the Gerasene man. Men from all faith traditions and cultural backgrounds, from good homes and from dysfunctional ones. Men who have caused serious harm to themselves and horrible crimes to a loved one or an innocent bystander.

Men who by their own actions are uncontrollable in their communities, possessed by a "legion" of personal demons, traumas, grief and loss. Many men in prison are victims long before they began to victimize others. I have spoken with far too many grown men first imprisoned by their own guilt and shame for being a victim of sexual abuse, so they turned to drugs to numb their pain and did smaller crime to pay for their drugs/alcoholic. While intoxicated or high, they lost control of themselves, blacked out, which led to committing a serious crime and doing federal time.

I have no problem saying upfront to the guys in chapel if you are going continue to hurt others, and then you need to be behind bars. If you are willing to change, then I am here for you. But being in prisoner is not what you were made to be, **As Cain was not born to Adam and Eve so he could grow up to kill his brother Able**, you were not made by God to spend your life in prison so a guard, a parole officer or myself could have a job. Your families need you to be with them at home and for you to serve in your community.

Now that you are in prison, your task is to leave the prison a better man than when you came in.

This is where you and I come in, where we insert ourselves into Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene men of our day, the imprisoned men and women we walk with and serve as we become engaged in restorative justice ministry.

Our goal as people of faith and of good will is to hold our brothers and sisters accountable for their actions. To keep them out of public circulation for everyone's safety. For a very long time, if necessary, **until such time that they can be returned to the community, like the healed Gerasene man, "fully clothed and in his right mind, sent back to his own people to tell them how much the Lord has done for him, and share his experience of God's mercy.**

Now normally, this is the spot where I invite you to be involved as a chapel volunteer, as a non-security escort or join the Person-to-Person Inmate Visitation ministry. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed all that. Since mid-March 2020 we have not been operating the chapel as we used to. Right now as a Chaplain there is very little, I can offer you to get involved in the chapel.

Kerry Reimer, our new executive Director for Parkland Restorative Justice, says there may be some limited opportunities opening up soon at the minimum security chapel and in the Structured Intervention Units, but at the Medium Security Unit's Chapel, where I work, we are still not open to receive volunteers. We have had two major Covid outbreaks in the Medium Security units; the medium security is the

most vulnerable of places as it has only bars cells, whereas the Max and Min units have closed doors. With the new variant being more air borne and contagious, we are very cautious who comes into the prison. Inmate are grouped into cohorts, which has changed the inmate movement patterns so much so that it is not a feasible option to have a group of inmates or volunteers in the medium chapel at this time.

Until current Covid restriction changes in SK Pen, I encourage everyone to focus on restorative practices where you live and worship.

Restorative Justice you know and know very well, but what do I mean by **restorative practices**? It is simply this, “practicing our Christian faith through the continuous building up of each other, our families, our parishes/congregations and our local civic communities”.

We build each other up whenever we gather to form life-giving relationships, to share our stories, to create an experience of family and/or community life.

For the most part, if we are in a close relationship with each other, it radically lessens our desire to harm one another.

How can we be reconciled to each other if we are not in a relationship with each other in the first place! If there is no Christian community, who do I contact to send a released inmate to for Christian support during his transition into the community?

Who is there for us to call to join P2P to build a new relationships and a healthy positive connection with the inmate if the Christian community is not in existence?

Restorative practices is simply this, to "Love each other as Jesus Christ first loved us when we were still yet sinners! Respect each other, love your family and your circle of friends, and learn to resolves our differences in positive ways...

If access to the prison is not open at this time, then focus on being pastorally sensitive to the needs of people who are impacted by crime in the community!

Crime affects us all, just someone breaking into our homes create a completely new trauma for anyone to overcome to feel safe and secure in our homes once again. Be it the victims of crime or the perpetrators families, each need our support and pastoral care. Be it members of your own family or your congregation, who are victim of a crime or the families of inmates, reach out to them. Keep connected with each other, as you would like people to be in connection with you.

I will now share with you one personal experience of God's love and mercy, witnessing the transforming impact of restorative justice at work.

On June 26, 2002, two men broke into an elderly woman Saskatoon home and brutally assaulted her. This elderly woman was a good friend of ours Peter Oliver's mother. My wife and I were staying at our friend's house in Leduc AB when they got the terrible news of what happen to his Mom. One of attackers cut off her ear. As she lay bleeding on the floor, they stepped over her as they carried the contents of her home out the door. The younger man kicked her as they passed. The incident left in its wake a tremendous amount of fear and pain. Arrests and convictions followed. About two years later the older of the two men was designated a dangerous offender.

Fast forward to 2015, Peter Oliver, our friend , was now working in Saskatoon with Micah Mission, a faith based organization that promote restorative justice by reaching out to ex-prisoners and I was now working at Saskatchewan Penitentiary as a Prison Chaplain. Peter called to invite me to participate in a Restorative Opportunities program run by the Correctional Services of Canada where he and his wife, his mom, several members of his family and a CSC facilitator would meet with the man who assaulted his mom.

This was the most powerful experience of restorative justice that I have had experienced. We sat in a circle each one taking turns sharing how this crime affected their life. To witness his sincere apology and his heartfelt request for her forgiveness, and for her Catholic Christian faith in action to grant it. Then to watch them get up from their chairs and walk across the floor to embrace each other with a hug. This is restorative Justice in action! This is the Gospel in concrete reality and in living color!

This past summer, my friend's mother died. I was able to serve as a deacon at her funeral and did her graveside service. The experience of the Restorative Justice Process is a part of their families lived history. Family members during the Eulogy, and when my friend Peter gave his reflection shared this RJ experience. After the internment service, the family and friend gathered for a shared meal and refreshments. Here some of the letters of the inmate to his mom where shared.

Because I was in previous established relations with my friend Peter, I was able to minister to him not only as a friend but also as a Chaplain during the RJ process and as a Deacon during his mother funeral and graveside interment. Because the inmate

was one of my chapel cleaners, I was able to minister to him while we worked in the chapel but also during the RJ process and during his time in prison.

Now that is an example of me in my ministry context as a friend, a Chaplain and as a deacon. What is yours? How are you as an individual or as a faith community able to reach out to others impacted by crime when we do not have the same access to the prison due to Covid -19 restrictions?

Today's Gospel still calls us to be "intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, to participate with Jesus in his ministry to heal and set free men and women who are unclothed and not in their right minds, possessed by the demons, traumas and the hardships of life.

Whom is Jesus calling you and me to reach out too, to build up and strengthen our personal relationship with during this time of covid-19?