

## Brave Church/Hard Topics, 4/5/2023: THE AMERICAN PRISON SYSTEM, Week 3 of 3: BUT WHAT CAN WE DO?

This is the chat log of the discussion. Names and identifiable information have been removed for privacy. References to slides for this session can be found in the *Brave Church – Prison System 3 4-5-23.pdf* document linked [Brave Church-Hard Topics web page](#).

Additional information added after the discussion are identified with “NOTE:”

### Discussion Questions 1 (slide 4):

**What do you know about restorative justice?**

**What are your impressions?**

**What are your concerns?**

Sounds great for misdemeanors

Involves both victim and perpetrator

Never heard of term - amazed at number of hits when googling

alternative to criminal justice system

not sure how effective

I don't know anything about it, but it sounds positive.

involves taking responsibility, repairing damage (including to relationships)

Starting to learn about it in the school system

Is there such a system in Fairfax Co? Fauquier County has the Piedmont Conflict Resolution Center.

I think there's something similar in Fairfax Co

Why aren't teen misdemeanors handled parent-to-parent?

Maybe you read about the dust up between Black Lives Matter Vigil attendees and All Lives Matter advocates, in Wa Po. The video went viral, the Red Truck Bakery involved got threats of vandalism. At the following BLM Vigil members of the Piedmont Conflict Resolution Center were there to do their part in ensuring peace between the two groups. These BLM vigils happen every Saturday in Warrenton since the murder of George Floyd. The ALM group, much smaller in number, show up, too.

If you haven't seen the whole Restorative Justice video (link on the web page), it's worth watching.

### Discussion on the restorative justice video (Slide 8)

**What were your reactions to the video?**

**(How) does RJ reflect Christian values?**

**How might RJ be worth using in our nation?**

## What limits would you put on it?

The prison system doesn't use names. Everything is impersonal – prisoners are known by number, not names. Would using names make a difference?

Humanizing people – giving people a chance to bring all of themselves to the justice system. To the extent that it has an impact, restore the victim to sense of safety/well-being; offenders to better sense of well-being part of the community.

We're not trying to punish people, but we're trying to get them to be more productive members of society.

Reading about what they did could have made a difference. Think about what impact it had. This video offers a sense of restoring people to the community. The people who are the responsible party gives them a different perspective. And there's a lot of good in that.

It might be a good program that could work when the victim and perpetrator know each other.

It's only applicable when the person agrees that they have committed a crime.

Surprised at the level of success in the video – other studies have shown lower success rates.

That the victim is involved makes it impactful for perpetrator. It also leads to more satisfaction on part of victim. Sees what perpetrator is going to do to make amends.

Struck by the way it's like a functional family would discipline children, or the way a marriage counselor would work with couples having issues.

It's a natural format.

Cannot be applied to every scenario.

**Discuss:** What values do you see in the restorative justice process?

Humanizing

It looks like the kind of process that Jesus would have encouraged and promoted.

In the current system, a mild infraction could keep the offender inside the system, unable to get out. This restorative Justice system seems to interrupt that, keep people out of system – a good thing.

Maybe it better reflects Christian values than our current system does

The current system is not working so let's give this system a try.

Doesn't the offender have to admit guilt in order for it to work? Yes.

Seems that this model works best for minor offense and for first time offenders.

Looking at indigenous models that didn't have prisons – they had to do something in those societies.

This is not exactly like those systems. There was definitely violence in those early systems. More like it was a communal response to the problems.

I'm thinking of very closed communities so that when they are shunned it's a very serious consequence.

There may be models in which RJ may be used without the victim participating directly. Example of a felony-level drug crime involving insurance fraud to get opioids: 1st-time offense, educated, stood to lose

everything. Family would be impacted. They did a RJ approach which included rehab. Victims represented by pharmacies, community members rippling out.

This has got to be a lot less expensive than a jury trial. And if you throw someone in a prison, the daily cost is quite a bit. There will be plenty of money left for it.

In VA, 95% of felony convictions obtained w/o going to court (plea deal).

Admitting that you are wrong can get you on the right path. It is an important piece.

This is where it goes with the plea deals. The current system incentivizes not taking responsibility. Will require a culture shift.

In watching whole video, I find it moving to think about how it can be healing for everyone involved in the process. Not in every case. But that circle of transformation is "Jesusy"

## **Discussion 2: Where Are We? (Slide 14)**

**What is one thing from our discussions you'd like to learn more about?**

**Is there one step, as an individual or as a Grace community, you feel drawn to take to get more involved?**

**NOTE:** We have links to the organizations (Slide 9) on the BC/HT web page

Restorative Justice – would like to learn more

Get in touch w/ Longmont community to find out more about how they started

Our justice system is working the way it was intended. It is based on the haves and the have nots. There is a huge amount of injustice. Keep that in the forefront of our conversations. Everyone in jail has not committed the crime for which they are in prison.

Be aware of the buzz words. Learning more. Being aware of who you are choosing to vote for and what the long-term ramifications are.

The system does not prosecute everyone fairly. Prisons are overpopulated w/ minority population. Not sure how to fix it except to be intentional about how we treat people. White crime is not punished. The system is not being fair. Choose carefully when you vote for people in the position to make these decisions.

Unless things change, those in the system don't have the means to help themselves and change the direction of their lives. Here is where we need intervention. Invest more money in good education.

Those in the juvenile justice system are often less educated, harder to get out of the system. RJ seems like it would work w/ the juvenile system – where intervention matters. Invest more on education. Most people in jails have low reading levels.

**We can talk about the things that are wrong w/ system, but are there small steps we can take.**

How about employment? Hire somebody coming out of prison.

Know who your lawmakers are. It is probably true that many at Grace Church don't know who things people are. What committees they work on. What bills they are supporting.

Could we as a church host a conversation with one or more delegates/senators around this topic?

Like the idea of one-church-one-prisoner. Grace has supported all kinds of missions: this seems like a mission Grace could do. Would like to see us look into the one prison one church idea.

Support politicians that stand up for police accountability, quality.

Address dyslexia early. I understand that many incarcerated have this disorder and never had the help they need to overcome dyslexia. So they do what they need to do to get by and often this involves stealing, drug dealing etc. and they land in prison.

A second person would like to support the one prison one church idea.

A child having a connection with an adult is just as important as teaching a child to read. Look for ways to help kids when they are young.

Let's do some things on the prevention side of things.

No one is born a criminal. Early investment in relationship and showing them a different way is very important.