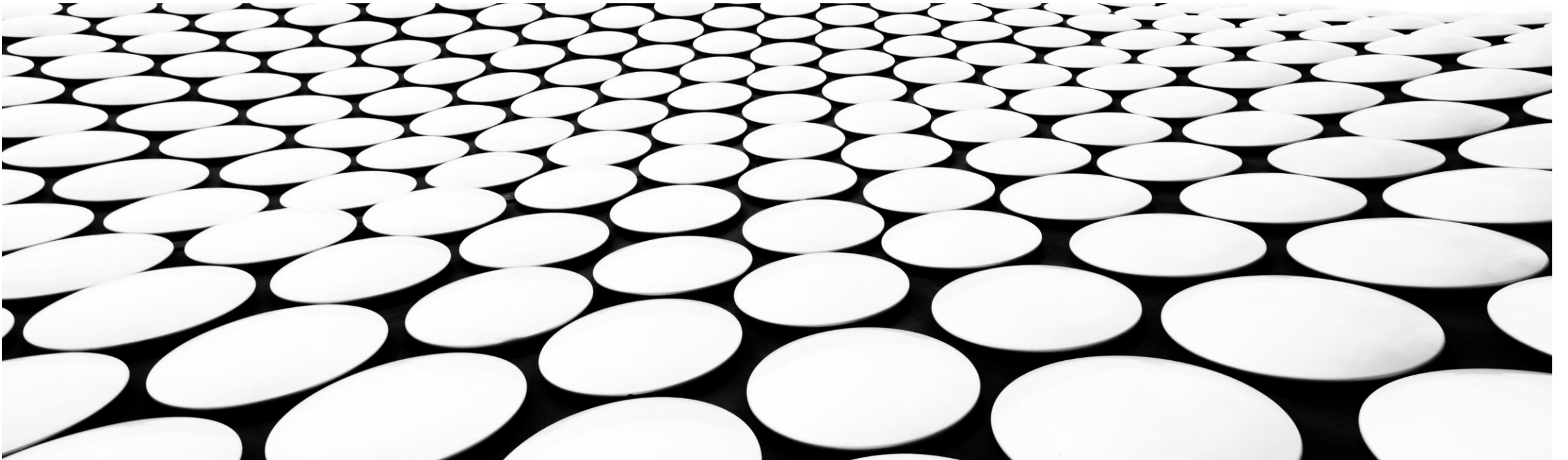


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# **BRAVE CHURCH – HARD TOPICS**

THE AMERICAN PRISON SYSTEM, WEEK 2 OF 3

CHRISTIANITY & THE PRISON SYSTEM



## BC/HT COVENANT

# BRAVE CHURCH

TACKLING TOUGH TOPICS  
TOGETHER

ELIZABETH HAGAN

We will...

accept conflict and commit to the way of kindness.

take responsibility for how our words are received.

ask permission before we challenge someone's views on a subject.

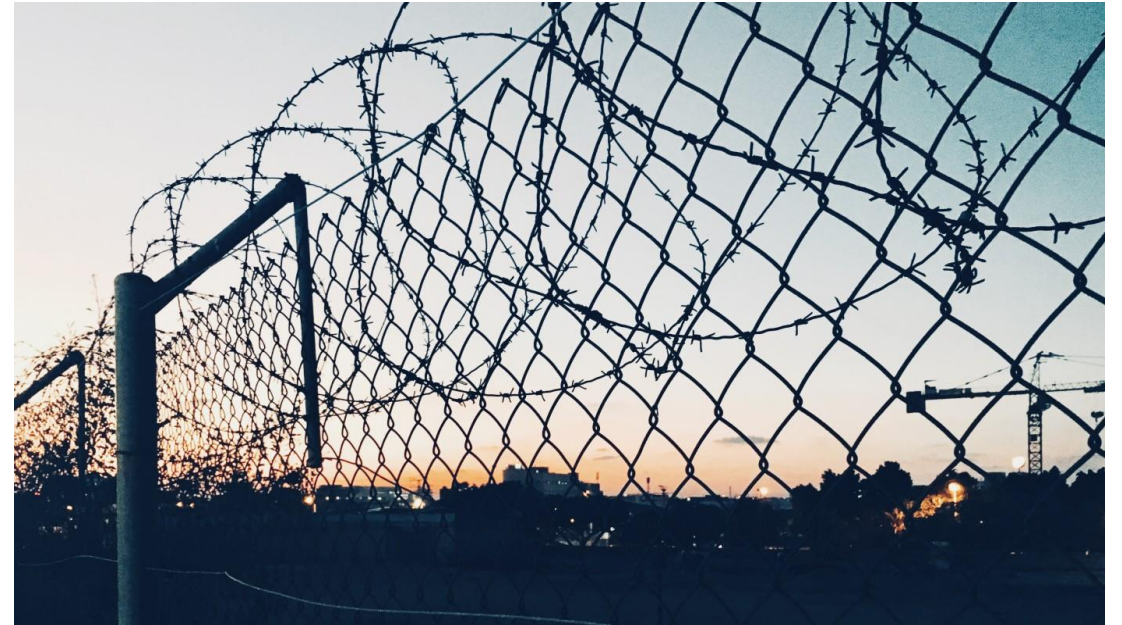
show respect for one another and graciously receive feedback if someone feels disrespected.

use 'I' instead of 'you' statements. We will not accuse or attack.

give everyone who wants to speak an opportunity to do so.

## AS WE BEGIN... SHARE IN THE WHITEBOARD

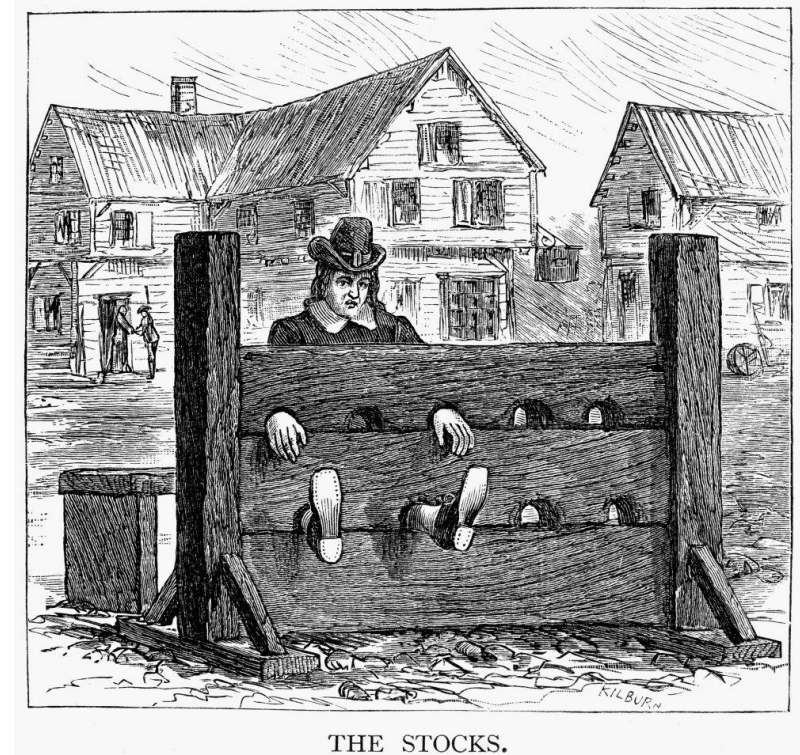
- What elements guide your thinking on criminal justice & the prison system?
  - What beliefs?
  - What scriptures?
  - What values?



# A SELECTED HISTORY OF RELIGION & INCARCERATION IN AMERICA

## Colonial Era: God's judgment & retribution

- Influence of Puritans/Calvinism
- Disorganized/ ad hoc system
- Physical punishment for crimes
- Temporary incarceration
- Execution sermons





# A SELECTED HISTORY OF RELIGION & INCARCERATION IN AMERICA

Antebellum era: The penitentiary

- Influence of Quakers (inner light)
- Movements to abolish physical punishment
- Rise of the modern “penitentiary”
  - Solitary cells for meditation
  - Handiwork and exercise
  - Religious programs and chaplains
- Initial idealism crumbles to pressures (gangs, finances, overcrowding, prisoner resistance)
- 1843: First women’s prison



# A SELECTED HISTORY OF RELIGION & INCARCERATION IN AMERICA

Progressive Era: individual personhood

- Influence of modernity
- Religious explanations for criminality replaced with social & biological explanations
  - Emphasis on anti-poverty, temperance, & more to remove “temptations”
  - Highly racialized
- Some reforms, education programs

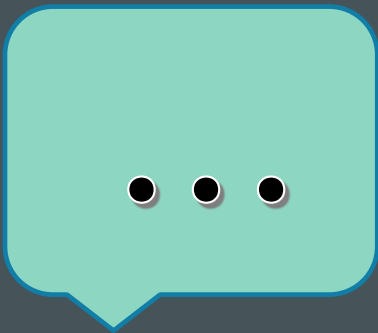


# A SELECTED HISTORY OF RELIGION & INCARCERATION IN AMERICA

## Post WWII: Prisoners' rights

- More therapies and educational options (but not equitable)
- Interfaith shift of religious opportunities (prisoners push back against control)
- Prisons remain extremely religious spaces
- Generally, the religious right at least has supported tough-on-crime/war on drugs\*
- PC(USA) positions
  - 1959, 1977, 1978, 1985, 2000, 2010: Various statements against capital punishment
  - 1988: Advocate for restorative justice and alternatives to incarceration
  - 2003: Call for abolition of private prisons

# Discussion



## SO FAR...

What stood out to you?

What religious beliefs & values are reflected in our current system?

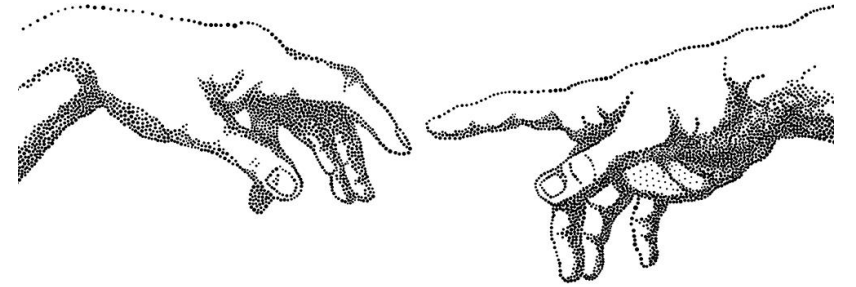
About God? Humanity? Justice ? Mercy ?



# WHAT CHRISTIAN IDEALS AND SCRIPTURES CAN HELP GUIDE US?

## ■ *Imago Dei*

- *So God created humans in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Gen 1:27*



## ■ Justice & equity

- Knowing that incarceration has been disproportionately applied to poor—how does that affect our views?
- *You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. Lev 19:15*

## ■ Jesus' approach to the "criminals" of his day

- *"I was in prison and you visited me...just as you did to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did to me." Matt 25: 36-40*
- *"Let anyone who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." John 8:7*
- *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43*

## ■ Mercy and second chances

- *"Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done" –Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy**

## BUT WHAT ABOUT....SAFETY?

Fear says: those people are *others* [*criminals, superpredators...*], and I need to keep *my* people safe from them

Proximity says: those people, whatever else they may be, are neighbors, and we are bound together



## BUT WHAT ABOUT....NEEDS OF VICTIMS?

“Tragically, I know more about victimization than I wish I knew. My grandfather was murdered when I was 16 by juveniles, four kids in a low-income project in south Philadelphia. Members of my immediate family have dealt with very serious crimes. It’s not a lack of awareness. We spend a lot of time with victims of violent crime. . . . I think we should be doing something radically better by people who are victimized by violent crime. But what we’ve done in the last 30 years is promised them revenge, mostly; we promised them blood and executions and extreme punishments. We do very poorly in providing them with counseling and support and recovery or the promise of a new society where there’s going to be less crime because we’re doing something constructive to help people who are at risk or hopeless or marginalized.” Bryan Stevenson

### DATA SAYS...

- 1) Victims of crime have complicated views.
- 2) Victims of crime are disproportionately from the same communities impacted by tough-on-crime policies.
- 3) Pilot programs of restorative justice report extremely high satisfaction rates for victims.

# Discussion



## WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE...

- To base our justice system in mercy, grace, second chances? (can you imagine a different system?)
- Are you concerned about a limit at which reforms become “too lenient”?
- How can we challenge our fears of “criminals” with proximity?
- What do victims or those harmed by crime need from the system?

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## **A FRANCISCAN BENEDICTION**

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within the heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done, to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor. Amen.