

MAY 2018

A STEP IN PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

Making a difference when we are faced with an enormous social problem can begin with something as simple as pulling on a thread and following where it leads.

One of the great injustices in our country is mass incarceration.

According to the Equal Justice Initiative, the United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other nation in the world. In 1972 the prison population was less than 200,000. Today there are about 2.2 million people in

American jails and prisons. Staggeringly, the United States has five percent of the world's population and yet twenty-five percent of the world's prison population. Mass incarceration disproportionately affects persons of color, especially young black and Latino men. There is overwhelming evidence of disproportionately high rates of incarceration for small crimes committed by minority male offenders. These findings are widely documented, recognized by bipartisan lawmakers, and can be found in Bryan Stevenson's

BY REDEEMER GRACE AND RACE
award-winning book *Just Mercy* and Ava Duvernay's documentary film *13th*.

To handle that level of incarceration America has turned to prisons run for profit. Today there are basically two kinds of prisons. One kind of prison is a prison run by the state or federal government. The other kind of prison is what's called a "private prison," which is a jail or prison that is built and/or operated by organizations with which state or federal governments contract. The profit that these
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FOR THE GOOD OF OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

April 16 marked the official one year anniversary of the launch of Redeemer Lincoln Square, and as you might imagine, that celebration has offered us a number of opportunities to reflect on how God has worked in our neighborhood over the last 12 months. Many of those reflections begin with the simple

fact that God brought us *into* the neighborhood to be *part of* the neighborhood.

In Hebrews 11, the writer reflects on the faith of Abraham, and how, although he did not know where God was calling him, he obeyed and followed. Wherever he went, he went with the knowledge

BY CHUCK ARMSTRONG
that this earth was not his final resting place. Instead, "He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (Hebrews 11:10) When we first moved into the New York Society for Ethical Culture's building on the corner of 64th Street and Central Park West,
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FIGHTING — AND WRITING — THROUGH FEAR

BY NORMA HOPCRAFT

It takes an inordinate amount of courage to reveal our lives — our bad choices, our weaknesses and foibles, our very souls — in our writing. So the title of the Center for Faith and Work’s workshop for writers, *Fearless: Accessing Hidden Creativity Through the Written Word*, snapped me to attention. We long to be known (and we are by God, thank God!), even as we fear people’s judgment. A prayer for bravery is probably the way to start any writing. It’s how I begin when I face the screen or the page.

I went to the workshop hoping to be strengthened and nudged to be more intrepid in my writing. I also hoped to meet Christian writers, a merry band that wanted to write to the glory of God while engaging human readers. This isn’t easy! We need each other’s encouragement and reminders to stay grounded in God’s word, in his love for us and for all human beings. I left the workshop with an action plan to fight — and write — through the fear.

The workshop leader, Jakki

Kerubo, helped the 30 writers begin to ease our fears with her easygoing, interactive approach. Though she earned her MFA from NYU’s prestigious Creative Writing program, and has been published in the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Quartz*, among many other outlets, the CFW Artist-in-Residence did not speak or teach from “on high.” She kept the event lively and interactive, encouraging the comments that flew from the audience.

Jakki centered the workshop around two scriptures: 2 Timothy 1:6-7 and Luke 21:15. These verses highlight the fact that God is strengthening us, giving us irresistible wisdom for this task of revealing ourselves in our writing. We need these reminders that we don’t have to be our own rock — that we have a Rock holding us up.

She listed our many fears: of putting a believer’s perspective out and being condemned for it, writing about our traumas and people judging us for the bad choices we made, or online reactions with trolling

and derogatory remarks. Then, Jakki reiterated the source of our courage: Christ.

“Knowing who we are in Christ,” Jakki said, “helps us not care so much what people think.”

Part of what makes this “knowing” real is trust. “Knowing our self-worth, putting our best work out, not caring what people think,” Jakki continued, means “letting go and trusting God for the outcome.”

It’s essential to remember that God is in control of the process of getting our words out as well as the way our work is received. “We’re not responsible for the reception of the seeds we sow, any more than the farmer in Jesus’ parable of the Sower was responsible for the condition of the ground the seeds fell on.”

She urged us as writers to find liberation from fears by shedding light on our own dark places. “Go to the dark stuff, even in a blog,” she encouraged. “Live the least secretive life you can possibly live, and you’ll have fewer worries to be afraid of.”

REDEEMER REPORT

Cregan Cooke, Kathy Keller
Heather Klein

Hunter College Auditorium
E. 69th St.
(btw Park & Lexington)
Services: 10:30 a.m.
and 6 p.m.

The Redeemer Report is a publication of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
Office: 1166 Avenue of the Americas, 16th Floor, New York, NY 10036
212-808-4460 (T) 212-808-4465 (F) redeemer.com

W83rd Ministry Center
150 W. 83rd St.
(btw Columbus & Amsterdam)
Services: 9:30 & 11:30 a.m.
and 5 & 7 p.m.

West Side Church Plant:
NY Society for Ethical Culture
2 W. 64th St.
(at Central Park West)
Service: 10:30 a.m.

Salvation Army Auditorium
120 W. 14th St.
(btw 6th & 7th Aves.)
Services: 9:30 a.m.
and 5 p.m.

HOPE THROUGH GRAFFITI

Raul Rivera grew up in the South Bronx in the 60s and 70s at the height of “The Bronx is Burning” moment. From a very young age he got into the vices the neighborhood had to offer — drugs, violence, crime. He spent years of his life in and out of jail — until he got connected with Graffiti, a Hope for New York affiliate in Alphabet City, at the age of 50.

Below, Raul shares his story of how God used people at Graffiti to show him His faithfulness and love — and to completely transform his life. Raul is now a deacon at Graffiti and works at the after-school program of Graffiti 3 in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

I was born and raised in the Soundview section of the South Bronx. I came from a single parent home, and I’m the oldest male of the six of us kids. Where I grew up was a very hardcore drug, prostitution, and crime riddled neighborhood. And I indulged in that life growing up.

We lived on the first floor of the projects, so I could jump out of the window and run away from home or sneak out. I started smoking marijuana and drinking when I was 11. I indulged in

criminal activity, like stealing from my mother. By 17, I was injecting heroin. That’s when my whole world started crumbling down.



Raul building gingerbread houses with kids at the Graffiti 3 after-school program in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

I started committing armed robberies. And it was just a crazy life. I just didn’t know any other life but that. I believed my life was just existing



Raul working with volunteers to prepare meals for a Graffiti outreach.

here on this planet and when I die, I just die. I didn’t believe in God. I spent a lot of years in and out of prison, selling drugs, robbing people.

BY HOPE FOR NEW YORK

Then in 2008, I was facing seven years in prison for an assault charge, but the judge mandated me to a residential treatment facility instead.

So I went to this program, and they assigned me to a GED class at Graffiti, which was three blocks away. When I got in front of the building, I thought they had to be out of their mind that they sent me to a church. I don’t believe in God. I don’t walk

into churches. But my vocational counselor told me my rules didn’t apply anymore.

So I went to the GED program, and I met a man named Kareem. At the time, I didn’t know he was the co-pastor. He was so happy, always smiling. I didn’t think anybody could be that happy in life. One day we were talking and out of nowhere I asked him if I could come to church here. He said, “We would

love to have you.” When I walked away, the first thing I thought was “What just happened here?” Then I thought

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NIGGLE AND ME: IMAGINE IF YOUR WORK REALLY MATTERED

BY JERRY DIENES

Artists tend to live in their imaginations. At least I do, and I'm pretty sure I'm not alone. It's not always great. We can be quick to imagine the worst case scenarios, and slow to imagine the best possibilities of any given situation. But the upside is we can imagine, and sometimes successfully create, beautiful, singular and even humorous works of art. My field is painting, and I can say that very few of my paintings reach the pinnacle of beauty they had when I imagined them.

One artist who wrestled with this was a Christian artist named John, who was trying desperately to finish his art work. Sidetracked by distractions and interruptions — his country was being pulled into a war, his duties as a teacher, helping friends in need, and his advancing age and approaching journey (“death day”) all worked against him — he was desperately trying to finish writing his gargantuan epic story. His immense story had many, many, details numbering like the of leaves on several trees. It imagined characters built upon old lost mythologies and languages — in fact, John was so engrossed in historical linguistics he would call himself a philologist before he'd call himself a

writer. It would be a wonderful artwork, if he could only finish it! The stress was building, until he developed what every writer fears — “writer's block.”

John began to work on a short story after seeing a neighbor's tree branches cut off. He came up with a story that both described his predicament, and offered hope for his fears of never completing it.

The story he wrote told of an artist, Niggle, whose name means one who is caught up in minutia, in petty details. He was an artist, and not a very good one, who was also worried about finishing his art, a large painting. Niggle was better at painting individual leaves than whole trees, and, with all his interruptions, feared he too would not finish his tree before he died. And, alas, he did indeed have to take “his journey” much sooner than he wanted to, leaving his large canvas behind to critics who would salvage it for temporary roof repairs, after disparaging how unimportant and unworthy it was as art.

But after a long journey, Niggle ended up in heaven. Roaming the hills there one day, he was overjoyed to see his bicycle, with his name on it. Riding it, he jumped off it,

exclaiming “It's a gift!”, when he saw his finished, painted Tree, in full blossom, there in heaven. Its “branches bending in the wind that Niggle had so often guessed at, but failed to catch.”

The story is “Leaf By Niggle,” written, of course, by the author who did, thankfully, finish his epic, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, along with a few other novels and short stories. John Ronald Reuel, or J.R.R. Tolkien, lived to see his great work finished, and even lived to see some of the success and popularity it enjoyed. And through his struggle not only did he come up with a short story analogy that helped him, but all of us, too, artists and non-artists alike who realize that our work really does matter. If we are building on the Rock of Christ's work, we will see that our labors here on earth were not in vain.

Jerry Dienes is a painter and a 2017 Center for Faith & Work Artist-in-Residence award winner. His exhibit, “Niggle's Studio: Leaf Paintings” by Jerry Dienes, imagines other leaf painting Niggle may have done, in addition to his famous unfinished magnum opus. The exhibition runs May 10 to July 2 at the 150 W. 83 Street Galleries, which is also the Redeemer West Side church ministry center.

organizations make is usually determined by how many people are in their prisons: the more people in jail, the more money they make. This dynamic of the prison industrial complex directly affects our entire criminal justice system and is one of the main causes for mass incarceration.

What's the Connection to Redeemer?

The Redeemer family of churches is part of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Our denomination's retirement and benefits are handled by PCA Retirements and Benefits, Inc., or "RBI" for short. RBI provides retirement services for Redeemer's staff, as they do for many churches and organizations within the PCA.

In 2016 it became clear to Jolene Halzen, part of Redeemer's staff as well as one of the leaders for Redeemer's Grace & Race ministry, that investment managers for RBI could invest retirement plan participant funds in some organizations that are directly involved in the private prison system. When organizations serving the private prison system are earning profits, the PCA retirement plan benefits.

Taking a Step

Recognizing the injustice

present in the prison industrial complex, Redeemer's Grace & Race ministry wanted to act. Led by the efforts of Jolene, the Grace & Race team began working on a proposal requesting that RBI prevent PCA Retirement Plan investment managers from purchasing private prison companies now and in the future. A letter outlining the request, along with significant research supporting up our theological and practical convictions, was sent to RBI in early February 2018. That letter was signed not only by the Grace & Race team, but also by Redeemer's founding pastor, Tim Keller, as well as Redeemer's senior pastors, and Redeemer's executive team.

At the end of March 2018 Gary Campbell, the President of RBI, responded. We were thrilled to learn that the board of RBI approved our request and has officially added three major private prison organizations to their exclusions list. Now RBI is screening for organizations that work with private prisons as they are investing monies from PCA churches. The following is an excerpt from the report of RBI's board and Exclusions Committee:

The fundamental problem with this model [prison industrial complex] is that

for-profit corporations are hard at work supporting, proposing, and writing laws designed to bring greater profits to the bottom line without limitation. This incentivizes more incarceration, which heightens the already disproportional burden on racial and ethnic minorities and the poor — citizens who are less able to defend themselves from a system designed to place increasing numbers into incarceration ... Whether or not one agrees with the racial injustice position in this analysis, it was quite clear to the Exclusion Committee that the business models of private prison corporations are severely misaligned and biblically conflicted.

Celebrate and Keep Working

The prophet Isaiah declared that the Lord is a God of justice (Isaiah 30:18). The Redeemer family of churches thanks RBI for joining us in taking this step that reflects God's heart of justice for our world.

We celebrate this step, small though it may be, towards a more just world. And with joy and encouragement we resolve to keep working, in the power of the Spirit, with confidence that one day God's justice will cover the earth as waters cover the seas.

we had no way of knowing how God would use this church's presence for the good of the Lincoln Square neighborhood. But in one short year, we've begun to get a glimpse.

Though New York Society for Ethical Culture and Redeemer Lincoln Square don't share similar beliefs when it comes to faith, we have been reminded of and encouraged by how God works through relationships of all kinds. We've made new friends with those on staff at the building, and we've been extremely blessed to have their help each week as we get things ready for our Sunday services. The building has also created a venue for us as we consider what sort of events we can hold throughout the week; we got a taste of this with our first-ever Open Forum back in February, and there's no question that New York Society for Ethical Culture provided a friendly and warm space for LSQ congregants to invite their friends to hear our discussion on the role of religion in today's society.

And of course, as we step outside of the building, it's hard to walk too far without being reminded of one of the most important Sunday rituals in this city: brunch! Thanks to the selflessness of so many in our congregation, each Sunday we have around 10-20 newcomers greeted and welcomed by our Brunch Bunch team, and they go out into the neighborhood to eat together and learn more about one another. Though this may seem like a small step forward, it has proven to be one of the best ways for visitors to feel immediately connected to the neighborhood and church body, often leading these people toward considering membership, joining community groups, and volunteering.

It isn't a surprise, then, that the growth of this congregation's love and involvement in supporting the Lincoln Square neighborhood has coincided with a literal growth of congregants within the church. When we first launched, our average attendance was in the upper 200s, growing to the 400s in late spring, and now nearing 600 every week.

What that means is our church's capacity to care and pray for Lincoln Square is only growing, and as seats continue to fill on Sunday mornings, we hope that our presence might be felt more and more, not for our own benefit or the glory of any one person, but so that all in our neighborhood might feel known and cared for by the very God in whose image they are created.

It's only been a year, and we've already seen God at work not just within the walls of our sanctuary, but throughout the streets of the Lincoln Square neighborhood. In their book *Stay in the City*, Mark Gornik and Maria Liu Wong write about the vast number of people across NYC, and the world, who leave their homes to "sing, pray, hear the word, and share a meal ... Surprised by what God is doing in the city? You are not alone. We are continually."

We are, too, and like Abraham, we look forward to that city with foundations built by God. Until then, we look forward to continuing to support, care for, and pray with our neighborhood.

about the word “We.” It turned on a light for me. It sounded like this church was a family.

That Sunday, I ended up in the front row. I didn’t know what I was doing there. I went home that night and asked God what he wanted. What was all this about? That was when I realized God talks through the Holy Spirit. He said to me, “I was very patient with you, now it’s my turn.” I said, “Okay, how are we going to do this?” And He said to me, “You’re not going to do anything. I’m going to do this. Just follow my lead.” I got to the understanding that day that God knows exactly where He needs to put you — and that the next step was to give my life to Him. But I didn’t think I could commit to that. I thought I would mess up.

I kept coming to church for a few months and one day Pastor Taylor invited me to a men’s group. I went to sit in and see what they did.

That night I was talking to the Lord, and I said, “I’ve had both feet over here in a life of drugs and crime, in and out of prison, not being a responsible dad. And He said, “I’ll take care of that. Don’t worry about it.” That’s when I told Him, “I surrender.” I felt this sense of trust in the Lord. I knew I was never going to



Raul making friends during a Graffiti 3 Memorial Day cookout at a local park.

get it right unless I gave it all to God. Without Him, I had nothing.

So, in April of 2010, I met with Pastor Taylor and told him I had made a commitment for 35 years of my life with Satan and all I got was misery, chaos, turmoil. I wanted to give myself to the Lord right now, right in the room

in front of Him. And that’s what I did. I don’t think I ever cried so much. I felt so full of compassion and truth. It was beyond understanding.

Now, I leave everything up to God. I know I have footwork to do as His child, but I give every situation to Him. I work at Graffiti 3 in Brownsville, Brooklyn, doing an after-school program with the kids. I’m also a deacon at Graffiti. That was beyond my wildest imagination. Through Graffiti, I serve the community Wednesday night meals and go out with FLIP, which stands for Free Lunch in the Park, to hand sandwiches to the homeless. But

nothing I do and nothing I give comes from me. It comes from God. I’m just an instrument that He uses.

Learn more about Hope for New York and how you can get involved loving and serving your neighbors in need through our 50 non-profit affiliate partners at hfny.org/volunteer.



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