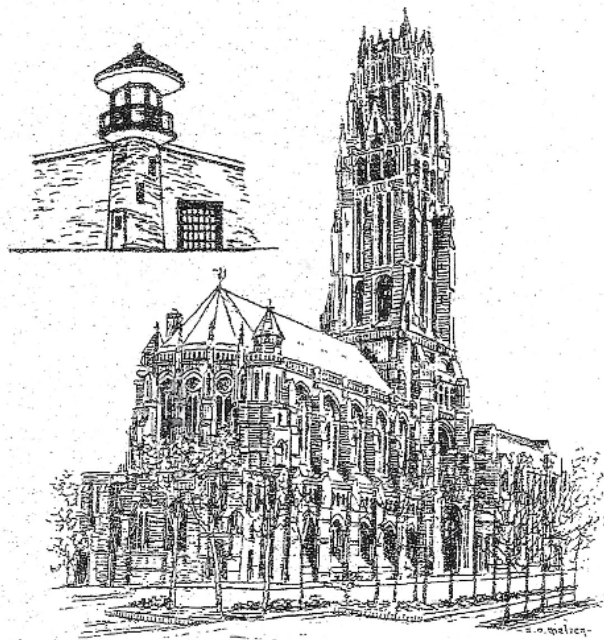


The Reverend Robert L. Polk Distinguished Criminal Justice Lecture Series

July 10, 2005

The Church And The Avenues Of Hope

by Rev. Edwin M. Muller



The Riverside Church in The City of New York

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Midway in the journey of my life, I found myself in a dark woods where the straightway was lost. To tell about those woods is hard – so tangled and rough and savage that thinking of it now renews the fear: death is hardly more bitter.... And yet, to treat the good I found there as well I'll tell what I saw....

— Dante, *The Inferno*

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

— Ezekiel 37:1–3

Introduction

I want to center my presentation today on the question of hope as it relates to the prison experience. Nikos Kazantzakis, in his book, *The Saviors of God*, points out that we face two roads in life. One involves the powers that ascend toward life, the other the powers that descend toward death. He raises the question: "Which of the two roads shall I choose? Suddenly I know that my whole life hangs on this decision." (pg. 65) The avenues that are life-giving and the avenues that lead to death are a stark reality in the prison experience.

Eddie Ellis developed "The Resurrection Study Program" several years ago. In it he incorporated the analysis of the seven neighborhoods that produce almost 80% of the people in New York State prisons. It included the analysis of the crime generative factors that produce the "avenues of death" that lead directly to prison. I hope Eddie will address that analysis in his comments today. Let me turn to the question of hope.

When I began my work as a chaplain, I found myself in a world where most people in prison lived in the absence of hope. It was Green Haven Prison in the late 60's, the pre-Attica

world. I felt very much like Ezekiel when he faced the valley of dry bones and the question asked by God: “Can these bones live?”

The first person I interviewed after becoming chaplain at Green Haven Prison had just finished a thirty-year sentence and was preparing to meet with the parole board. I asked him: “How does it feel to face the prospect of going home?” He replied: “I’m not going anywhere, I owe thirty more years in the State of Virginia.” Another man I met, early in my years as a chaplain, came to prison in a stagecoach in 1912. New York had an old law that if you became mentally ill while in prison your sentence was suspended. He was in prison for a \$250 robbery but suffered a mental breakdown. When the law was overturned in the late ‘70s, after sixty years in prison, he was evaluated and found not to be mentally ill.

Shortly after I came to Green Haven I was told by some of the people serving life sentences that they had gone on to strike when Warden Follette came. Follette had a terrible reputation for brutality at Clinton Prison and the strike was a protest to his assignment. I was told that he broke the strike by having each person taken out of his cell, stripped naked, beaten, made to crawl, oink like a pig, bark like a dog, and yell: “My mother’s a whore.” This brutal world was a place where people lived in the absence of hope. I always felt that Dante’s inscription over the entrance to the Inferno would have been appropriate for Green Haven Prison: “You who enter here, leave all hope behind.”

Hope is a foundational issue and critical to every person living in prison. In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, a conversation takes place in the prison mess hall between Red, played by Morgan Freeman, and Andy, played by Tim Robbins. Red says to Andy: “Hope is a dangerous thing, in here it can drive a man insane.” Andy responds: “Hope is a good thing, and perhaps the only thing.” Both are probably right. In prison hope can drive a person insane or it can be a life-giving path. I have seen both in my work as a chaplain.

Because prison is an upside-down world, often the hope that is manufactured there can be dangerous and false. People in prison will manufacture hope if it is not apparent. I have seen men go to the law library every day for years believing that they will find something in their case that will get them back into court and out of prison. And there is always someone in the common memory of a prison, maybe one out of five hundred, who did beat their case in court and get out. But when they find no break in their case they go on a search for new forms of hope.

The pursuit of hope can take many forms. A number of years ago we had as a guest in our Exodus meeting who was an 85-year-old Pentecostal bishop. He sat in the group but seemed somewhat removed from what was going on. At times he would begin to sing out loud or go into a trance where he would be deep in prayer. After the meeting I was surprised to find that he didn't miss a thing that was going on in the session. Three men stood talking with him as we were getting ready to leave. All three had at least fifteen years before their first meeting with the parole board. The old bishop told them that he was going to pray for them and that all three would be out of prison within two years. They thanked the bishop but told him how long it would be before even initial consideration. That didn't seem to bother the bishop at all, he assured them that they would be out. Two years later all three had received executive clemency and were released.

About six months after their release, Bennie, a member of our group, came running into my office and said to me: "Rev., you've got to find that bishop! I'm willing to try anything." We never found the bishop again, it seemed almost like both his coming and going were a mystery. People in prison at times do believe in and hope for miracles. Years later, most people believed that somebody made up the story about the bishop. Some of us were there. We had seen and heard the bishop and we knew the people involved who were released. Making sense out of it was another matter.

One form of hope that is always impressive in the prison arena is the family connection. In my early years as a chaplain I was puzzled by some men who had hopelessly long sentences but seemed to have a positive attitude and were quite upbeat about life in general. What I discovered was that in most cases there was the family factor. Solid support from the outside family often is a very life-giving thing.

I remember Charlie Acker. When he came to prison his aunt bought him a twenty-five-year subscription to a daily newspaper. During his long sentence several newspapers went out of business. He started with *The New York World*, which became *The World-Telegram*. This was followed by *The Herald Tribune* and *The Daily Mirror*. He finally ended up with *The New York Times*. But that daily newspaper over the twenty-five years was a constant reminder that his family cared. Added to this was the fact that his mother came to visit him at least once a month at whatever prison he happened to be in. Also, before coming to prison the family owned a 1939

automobile. His mother had it put up on blocks in a Harlem garage. There it stayed as a symbol of hope that Charlie would return. When Charlie was released twenty-six years later the car came off the blocks and returned to service. After release Charlie took care of his mother until his death in 1992. His mother at that time was over ninety and still in good health.

We held a memorial service for Charlie here at The Riverside Church. Some seventy-five people came to the service; most were people who had been in prison. One man who was still in prison sent these words to be read at the service:

*A person's name can call to mind many things:
a question mark, a frown, tears.
For Charlie's name always invoked hope and pride:
the hope that can survive decades of prison,
the pride that his humble leadership demonstrated.*

*Charlie showed us no magic roads or fast money,
but the hard steps of a man
determined to care for his family and community.
Let's share that fire he found in us
Let's keep it moving.
For peace and freedom.*

...
Charlie was a legend. A man of integrity.

The Biblical Foundation for the Avenues of Hope

Early in my years as a chaplain I realized that God's question to Ezekiel had to be answered: "Can these bones live?" In seminary I was told that "the Bible often answers its own questions." Remembering this I began to search and found many answers. What was to become the foundational passage of scripture for my work were the words of Jesus: "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." I realized that Jesus was the life giver and calls us, as this followers, to become life-givers. I soon found that when a life-giver shows up in a prison things begin to change and hope turns into possibility.

Several years ago a man who had served over 25 years called me up and said: "Hey, Rev., this is Eddie, just another life-giver checking in."

In scripture I saw how Moses, who was a “cop killer in Egypt,” found in the wilderness his confrontation with the divine presence, that he could become the liberator of his people. I saw in the story of the Prodigal Son that the young man who fled the bondage of his childhood and ended up in a pigsty, could move out in a new direction. I saw how a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years could pick up his bed and walk. The witness goes on and on, the blind could see, those condemned to death were set free on a new life-giving path. And in the wilderness there was a highway, we are told by the prophets, that is called “the Holy Way,” which leads from death to life. Believing that road still to be there, the road from death to life, I became determined that the main task of the chaplain was to establish and point the way to the avenues of hope.

The Chaplain and the Avenues of Hope

Early, I developed a small, disciplined, and intentional group called “the Cadre.” It later became the Exodus Cadre. We identified 1200 problems that people in prison faced and then began to build models or solutions to those problems. With the help of Bill and Helen Vanderbilt, we were able to implement several programs, which I called “Avenues of Hope.” The following is a list of some of those programs that emerged over a period of years:

- The College Program
- The Avenue Program
- The South Forty Workshops
- Post-Release Assistance Program
- Interact
- South Forty Intern Program
- Clergy Seminars
- Missionary Orientation Center Seminars
- Seminary Intern Program
- Program in Cultural and Religious Studies
- Family Visitation Program
- Summer Camp for children of people in prison

- Clemency Research Project
- NYTS's Master's Degree Program

I might mention that the first college program was partly made possible by a large grant from The Riverside Church Prison Ministry. Their vision and support was critical in the early development of that program. That program produced a number of men who today are clergy, lawyers, social workers, counselors, and business people. As an avenue of hope the college programs spread to almost every prison in the state.

The Church and the Avenues of Hope

Today, almost all the avenues of hope have been closed in New York State prisons. I believe that one of the main reasons for this is that after President Reagan's "Evil Empire," Russia, became our friend, we became a society in search of new demons. The "Evil Empire" had justified our spending enormous sums of money on the "Military Industrial Complex" for over 50 years.

In the late 80's we became a society in search of new demons and we found one in the common criminal – the Willie Hortons of this world. Once identified and demonized, we replaced "The Military Industrial Complex" with "The Prison Industrial Complex" All across the country prisons were built far beyond the need. To fill them sentences were lengthened and parole reduced or eliminated. Almost all the programs that produced "the avenues of hope" were canceled. With college and vocational programs closed and parole severely reduced, prisons returned to an arena where people lived again with "the absence of hope."

I would suggest that the major task of the church today, in the field of criminal justice, is to re-establish "The avenues of hope" that we know worked in the past and create new avenues that offer the promise of new life. To be specific this should include the following:

1. Support Parole Release for people in prison serving long sentences and who have the highest prospect for success
2. Restore College Programs – They worked and provided more hope than almost any other program in past years

3. Re-establish Work Release for people in prison with long sentences
4. Lay and Clergy Visitation Programs
5. Local Church sponsored Spiritual Direction Programs such as The Companions in Christ Project (CIC)
6. Offer Affiliate Church Membership for people in prison with churches in home
7. Church Mentor Programs such as The Exodus Avenue Program Concept
8. Establish an Interfaith Coalition to provide transitional resources
9. Create a Local Church Challenge to major corporations to provide transitional employment
10. Community Intern Program for people coming out of prison patterned after VISTA and the Peace Corp
11. Life Without Parole Projects – Meaningful work projects for people serving sentences of life without parole
12. Support The Certificate Program in Ministry and Human Services sponsored by Rising Hope Inc. This program offers serious religious studies on an Interfaith basis with college credit. It presently operates in nine facilities.

When there are “avenues of hope,” a life-giving intentionality will develop. In our Exodus Program we use a New Life Contract. Each member of the group is expected to have a personal contract that includes goals in the following areas: family ties; education; physical fitness; community involvement; spiritual growth; vocation; future goals. They also are asked to identify their primary issue, and a practical project.

One day I was walking down the corridor in Green Haven Prison and a member of our group named John was coming in the opposite direction. I asked him: “Hey what’s happening?” Usually in a prison you get a response like: “Ain’t nothing happening!” But John responded:

“Let me tell you what’s happening! I’ve been writing to my son each week and now he comes to visit me, and his mother is getting interested in our relationship again. I’m going to finish high school next month and then I’m going to enroll in college. I run fifty laps each day in the yard. I’m chairman of the NAACP voter registration project in the visiting room. I read the Bible each day and go to church on Sunday. I am in an auto repair program in night school. I’m going to get out of prison in three years, finish college in four years, and start my own business in five.” These were the goals in his contract. They reflected his hope and life-giving path. I said to him: “All I asked is what’s happening?”

Conclusion

The greatest avenue of hope the church has to offer is its belief in new life and that people can change. The parole board often assumes that “you are your crime,” you are what you did. The word of the gospel and the church is that you always have the option to become new. You can pick up your bed and walk. There is a road that leads away from the pigsty that offers new possibility and a new beginning. The church knows there is a “highway in the desert called the Holy Way,” and that it does lead to new life.

Let me close with these words from Nelson Mandela, a person who knows more about the avenues of hope than any one of us:

*We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.
It is not just some of us, it is in everyone and as we let our own
light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do
the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence
automatically liberates others.*

Mandela also said in a TV interview shortly after his release from prison:

Even when you are treated well, prison is a terrible place to be.