

Project TURN: Portrait of a Prison Ministry

BY SARAH JOBE

Through Project TURN, divinity school students join inmates in classes held in prison. Together they are seeking the pieces of theological reflection that become missing in a society willing to silence huge swaths of its population through incarceration.

The most faithful Christians I know turn to Matthew 25:31-46 for their marching orders: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. This passage is one of the only times in which Jesus talks about eternal life, and he does not mince words in explaining that eternal life in God's kingdom will be reserved for those who have done these works of clothing, feeding, and visiting. It is no wonder, therefore, that these "works of mercy" have become a tool to assess how closely our lives match up to Jesus' expectations.

But despite appearances, Matthew 25 is not primarily a to-do list. Jesus does not offer eternal life because his followers have done these works of mercy. He does not offer life because they have followed orders. Jesus offers his followers a place in God's kingdom because they have fed, clothed, and visited Jesus himself. Matthew 25 is not a to-do list; it is a list of places where we can go to meet Jesus in our world.

The Bible offers Matthew 25 as a roadmap for those of us looking for Jesus, and, as it turns out, Jesus is always right around the corner. To those seeking him, Jesus explains, "I'm standing in line at your local food pantry; you're welcome to come stand with me. I'm confined to a hospice bed, so you'll have to come to my house to visit. I'm locked up at your local prison, and I'm desperately in need of friends."

We go to prison not because Jesus told us to, but because Jesus is there.



Every Thursday night I enter Raleigh Correctional Center for Women (RCCW) expecting to meet Jesus. I drive from my home in Durham with a handful of students from Duke Divinity School. At the main desk, we sign-in and show our IDs. Sometimes we are asked to spread our arms and legs while a corrections officer waves a wand around our bodies, searching for items that have not been approved. Sometimes they know we are coming. Sometimes they cannot find the memo explaining our presence, and we wait while phone calls are made around the facility. Jesus can be hard to get to, even when you know where he is.

We pass through administrative offices, an outdoor quad, and the volleyball court, and past the trailers that serve as dorms. Through the windows we see the rows of bunk beds that leave our friends and classmates very little privacy. At the very back of the facility we get to a double-wide trailer with an inviting wooden porch. This is the Hope Center where we hold our seminary-style classes every Thursday night for two hours. This is where I go to meet Jesus.

I direct a program called Project TURN that teaches seminary-style classes in North Carolina prisons. RCCW was the first prison to welcome our program, but we also offer classes at Durham Correctional Center, a minimum security men's prison. Our professors are pastors, published authors, and faculty from Duke Divinity School. All of our classes are offered on-site at local prisons, but only half of each class is comprised of incarcerated men or women. Many of our non-incarcerated students are from Duke Divinity School, and they are taking Project TURN classes for credit toward their degrees. These students come into the prison each week to study alongside their incarcerated brothers and sisters.

Every Thursday night I go into RCCW expecting to see Jesus. Just a few years ago, this was not the case: I entered the prison with anxiety – afraid I would unthinkingly bring my cell phone in and be banned from the facility, afraid I look like a naïve outsider to the women incarcerated there. I was surprised, week after week, when I was met by warm smiles, hugs, and inquiries about how my week was going.



A few years before that, I just did not think to look for Jesus in prison at all. While I might have felt some responsibility to *bring* Jesus into prisons, I certainly would not have gone there looking for him.

I would not have looked for Jesus in prison because I live in a society that understands “inmates” to be fundamentally different from “the rest of us.” I have been taught that inmates are so different from “the rest of us” that “the rest of us” do not really have to treat them like humans at all. I have come to call this prevalent idea that incarcerated people are fundamentally different

from non-incarcerated people a “criminal anthropology.” Once I had eyes to see it, I could see this criminal anthropology at work everywhere: in our language, in our legal system, even in our missions.

“Anthropology” is a fancy word for what we believe about the fundamental nature of human beings: who people are and what they can become. “Criminal anthropology” indicates who we believe incarcerated people are and what they can (and cannot) become. The criminal anthropology at work in our culture starts by separating people who have been incarcerated into a permanent sub-category. Being in this group becomes one’s primary label. We label these people felons, offenders, criminals, convicts, and inmates. Even after incarceration ends (if it ends), people in this category continue to be labeled and categorized in this way. Once a felon, always a felon. Once an offender, always an ex-offender. Once a convict, always an ex-con.

As the story goes, this group shares common characteristics. They are manipulative, deceptive, and untrustworthy. They have a “criminal mentality,” a phrase that indicates that the minds of people in this group function in fundamentally different ways than “the rest of us.” As the label of incarceration follows for a lifetime, so does the label of these characteristics. Once incarcerated, never again to be trusted. This label renders finding a job after incarceration a herculean task.

Criminal anthropology serves a very important social function. By marking this group of people as “not quite so human as the rest of us,” it allows those of us who are not incarcerated to treat other men and women inhumanely without any guilt over our inhumane actions. Being a “criminal” means a woman can be ripped away from her children, partner, friends, and family. If a man is a “criminal,” he can be denied his right to vote. “Criminals” can be locked in cages—concrete boxes the size of a small bathroom—without access to natural light or human contact. Particular sorts of “criminals” can even be killed.

One problem with this story we tell about “criminals” in our society is that it is not true. It is not true that incarcerated people are fundamentally untrustworthy, twisted, and beyond change. It is not true that they are somehow less human than “the rest of us.”

For Christians, there is a second problem with criminal anthropology; namely, that it stands in direct contradiction to what the Bible says about who people are and what they can become. Genesis 1 tells a story about people being created in the image of God. The Bible suggests that when we look at one another, we should be able to see the face of God shining out. When we learn to see the shocking beauty of God in another person, we learn to see their immeasurable worth.



Project TURN witnesses to God’s story about who people are. In each of our classes, we break open a space where people can experience one another’s

worth. Duke Divinity School students are not invited into the prison as volunteers, chaplains, teachers, or mentors. They are invited to be fellow students, who sit with, listen to, and learn from those who society claims have nothing to teach and nothing to give. Each student in the class is invited to learn that they are nothing more or less than the image of an utterly worthy God.

Though some of our students are incarcerated and some are not, some have spent their whole lives in schools and some dropped out of high school, they all do the same reading and the same written assignments. We do not pretend that the different experiences of our students will not affect their performance. Instead, we create a classroom environment in which everyone's gifts can be highlighted, and everyone's weaknesses can be confronted and strengthened.

For example, we ask students who have easy access to computers to handwrite their work, out of respect for their classmates who do not have access to computers. This proves a particular challenge as we have come to favor assigning multiple drafts of the same written assignment over the method of assigning multiple papers during the semester. We find that a process of revising the same written piece over the course of a semester levels the playing field between students of different educational backgrounds.

We do not pick reading materials that unduly favor the gifting of only half the class. For instance, we assign only as much reading as students can be expected to complete, and do not favor academic articles over other genres of communication. Instead, we assign reading materials from a range of genres that will challenge everyone in the class to think in new and fresh ways.



Our classes are not the answer to a broken social system. While most of us would support drastic reform of our nation's rampant incarceration practices, Project TURN does not engage in advocacy work. Instead, we create demonstration plots in which people might imagine different ways to exist with one another across social divisions. Our hope is that students will leave the brief experience of our classes and bring a more just imagination to whatever task God calls them. In the past four years, we have seen signs that this is a realistic hope.

A few semesters ago, one of our students was placed in solitary confinement over alleged charges involving her prescription medication. I watched her classmates support her through a harrowing nine months in solitary. Her letter-writing with her classmates is, without exaggeration, the most consistent interaction she had with other human beings in those months. Their relationship as classmates has become an astonishing friendship that seems to be changing and sensitizing each of the women involved.

While incarcerated women do not currently receive Duke University course credit for their participation in our classes, I was encouraged that one of our graduates was invited by Duke's Center for Reconciliation to join in a

week-long Summer Institute. She was offered a full scholarship to participate in a track entitled “Reconciliation in the Prison Context.” At the end of the week she reported on her track to the entire Institute. With tears in her eyes, she testified to the God of astounding possibility who could bring her to the center of Duke University only three weeks after her release from prison.

The razor-wire walls between prison and academy should become more fluid. Our theological thinking is not complete when large segments of our population are barred from participation. We hope that as we bring small groups of Divinity School students into prison each week, both prison and academy will be reshaped to allow for more truthful and more faithful theological reflection in which all voices are invited to the table.

TURN stands for “Transform, Unlock, ReNew.” We take our name from Romans 12:2 in which the Apostle Paul pleads that we no longer conform to the patterns of the world, but instead be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Paul thinks this mind-renewal will yield a “sober judgment” about ourselves and the people around us: this transformation through learning will mean that “you [do] not... think of yourself more highly than you ought,” but are freed to see yourself as a member of a body in which each person has particular, God-given gifts. Paul imagines that this body cannot function without all of its members (Romans 12:3-8).

Project TURN imagines the same. So, each week we go into prison seeking the members of the body that have been cut off. We go into prison seeking the pieces of theological reflection that become missing in a society willing to silence huge swaths of its population. We go into prison to see Jesus. And by the grace of God, we are less and less surprised each week that we continue to find him there.



SARAH JOBE

is Director of Project TURN and a member of Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina.