

THE HOMILY ON PARTAKER SUNDAY

The First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

October 15, 2006

The Rev. Ken Sawyer

I want to celebrate the many ways that many of you take our religious values out into your lives beyond these walls – in your relations with family and friends, at your places of work, and in voluntary efforts to promote peace, justice, and what I recently heard a colleague describe as the gentling of the world.

Naturally, on this Sunday I want to celebrate the efforts of the Partakers group here at First Parish, who came together years ago and have stayed together to sponsor Adrienne Smith's participation in Boston University's College Behind Bars program. They are now going to be working with a male inmate, and new members have joined the group.

Ours is one of many groups around the state from many religious traditions that take part in the program, all to be celebrated, as is the professional leadership of Partakers, including the Rev. Ms. Tuash, the Associate Director, whom we are honored to have with us today. Half the people in the BU program are sponsored through Partakers. And good for BU and John Silber for keeping their program going, one of only a dozen in the country now, when only fifteen years ago there were 350.

The failures of our current criminal justice system seem glaring: the grotesquely large number of inmates, many serving long mandated sentences for minor infractions, the limited attention to rehabilitation, and so on. A brief accounting of what it calls "The Current Crisis" can be found at the start of the Statement of Conscience adopted by the General Assembly of the UUA in 2005, after two years of study and refinement. Titled "Criminal Justice and Prison Reform," it can be found online at the UUA site, and copies are available downstairs.

The statement goes on to declare, "Appalled by the gross injustices in our current criminal justice system, we the member congregations of the UUA commit ourselves to working in our communities to reform the criminal justice system and correctional systems and affect justice for both victims and violators." It calls in particular for "a new corrections policy [that places] a primary emphasis on community activities." Among the actions it suggests for congregations is to establish a prison ministry and encourage volunteers from the congregation to go into prisons. The Partaker group is always open to new members, and now you know who to talk to if you want to get involved, or at least learn more. There is also a program run by the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship that involves correspondence with prisoners that you can find out more about or join by way of the UUA website.

Another suggested action is to reach out and support congregational members who are personally affected by the criminal justice system, and I will have such a meeting in November.

Among the advocacy goals are these two: Promote "legislation that strengthens gun control, ends the so-called 'War on Drugs,' disallows mandatory minimum sentencing, provides for fair, equitable, anti-racist sentencing, and abolishes the death penalty"; and support "universal access to rehabilitation, education, and job training programs and restorative and recovery programs for ... prisoners."

Both Unitarian and Universalist histories provide us models of action in the area of prison reform, in the persons of Unitarian Dorothea Dix and Universalist Clara Barton. Dix is remembered for her pioneering role in the creation of hospitals for the mentally ill, but that grew out of her work in prisons, where she was teaching when she realized how many of the prisoners then, in the 1840s, were mentally ill and receiving no help for their conditions. She traveled afar

and visited many prisons, including every one in Massachusetts, before publishing the book, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States* in 1845.

Clara Barton is not well known for her prison work but for being the first president of the American Red Cross, for 23 years. But she also served for a time as superintendent of the women's prison in Framingham, which is the oldest women's prison in the country, having been founded in 1877. There had been one earlier women's prison, in New York state in the 1840s, a model of what reformers might hope for, a place where the inmates were – besides being all women, with a woman as administrator – treated with respect and offered classes, lectures, a library, and a relatively attractive environment – “a place of reform and education and hope.” [*A World Apart*, p. 71]

But there were those who disliked the whole idea. Two prison inspectors wrote the legislature, “Let prisons cease to be a terror to the depraved ... and the period will arrive when insurrection, incendiarism, robbery and all the evils most fatal to society and detrimental to law and order, will reign supreme.” [71]

This is recounted in Cristina Rathbone's fine book, *A World Apart*. Rathbone continues, “It apparently mattered little that crime was actually being reduced through the successful reformation of women at [the prison]. The charge of pampering criminals had already become an easy one to level, and politicians no more dared to disagree with it in the nineteenth century than they do today,” the experiment was brought to an end, and “across the state women were sent back to the unsupervised and darkened garrets of men's prisons. It would be decades before ... another women's facility [was] opened in America” [72] – in Framingham.

In her book, published last year, Rathbone follows the lives of six prisoners there, interspersed both with the story of her struggles with the Massachusetts Department of Corrections to gain access to the women, and with the history of women's prisons in the United States. At one point she writes, “The long dance of confusion over just exactly what we should do with female prisoners in this country continued in its antsy way: one step forward, one step backward; two steps forward, two steps back.” [134]

She writes that after she has described the great reforms at Framingham made by Clara Barton and her predecessor, and how they were undone thereafter. The pattern continued. “By the 1930's people traveled from all over the world to learn about its progressive, gender-specific policies.... Today,... it's hard to believe all that ever existed. In line with the prevailing trends of the past twenty years, MCI-Framingham has become an arid, isolated place....” [21] As the book ends, Rathbone raises the hope that under the new commissioner of Corrections, formerly administrator at Framingham, the pendulum will swing back. All return to humane and enlightened practices will be cause for celebration indeed.

And finally I want to celebrate all who go through hard times and persist to rise again, and again, those who help them – and of course, “them” will be any of us on occasion, when he must struggle through, sometimes because of our own doing, sometimes not. But thank goodness there are those who care – and may those people also be us on occasion. Let us celebrate Adrienne and Partakers and the human spirit for its buoyancy, its tenacity, and its kindness.