"Break Not the Circle"
A Sermon by Jaimie Dingus M.Div. Candidate
First Parish in Wayland February 18, 2018

When I was growing up, before my now 6 foot 8 baby brother had gotten taller than me, I had the upper hand when we would fight. In the summertime when there wasn't enough water melon or swimming pools in the world to keep our cranky, sweaty bodies from finding something to bicker over, be it TV remotes or the front seat of the car, I would always win. And sometimes when we would fight, we would end up on the opposite sides of a wooden bedroom door. One of us wanting to get at the other one not entirely sure what we would do once we reached them. We would lean our shoulders into the door, twisting the handle violently, trying to force the door to open. Sometimes my brother would end up on the inside of the door, as I pushed all my weight against it, blocking him in. No amount of him twisting the handle and pushing with all his might, would free him from his room. It was not until I got bored, or our mom broke up the argument that the door would open again, and his frenzied angry body would run out. Even as children we knew how painful it was to be locked in a room, unable to get out.

When you walk into a medium security correctional facility in Massachusetts, there are no wooden bedroom doors with faded gold painted door knobs, instead 6 heavy metal doors, 3 sliding steal sally ports, three razor wire topped chain link fences, a metal detector, a finger print scanner, and 2 or 3 very angry German Shepherds separate those who are incarcerated from the rest of the world. The doors are a lot thicker, more secure, but the message is the same, no amount of you pushing with all your weight will open the door. You are locked in your room unable to get out until the state of Massachusetts gets bored with you or in the case of far too many people who are incarcerated indefinitely while awaiting trial, your mom comes through with the bail money to get you out.

There are currently around 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States, with another almost 5 million under correctional control either on probation or on parole. That's close to 7 million human beings whose freedom has been systematically taken away. I spent the summer of 2017 with around 1200 of these men, learning their stories, listening to their pain, and baring witness to the unimaginable suffering of incarceration. It is the privilege of my life to have known and loved them, and knowing the truth of their experience has fundamentally changed my faith. Some of these men were innocent, many had yet to stand trial or accept plea deals, many had committed terrible crimes, and all of them share the shame and despair of their isolation.

In his 2017 Ware lecture at the national gathering of Unitarian Universalists called General Assembly, Bryan Stevenson, lawyer and advocate for those incarcerated on death row in the south, called Unitarian Universalists across the country to get close to, to get proximate to those who we view as other. I'm hear to tell you that there's not much in this world that makes a person more "other" than an orange jump suit, ankle shackles and a two inch thick steal door. Yet Stevenson called us to be proximate to otherness and brokenness and suffering. We need to get close to that otherness, until we are unable to overlook it. He

called us to chip away at the fear and the indifference in our own hearts until we can find common humanity with our incarcerated siblings.

Tears welled in my eyes as I took in his charge to get proximate and find kinship with those who I still treat as other. I thought about my guys. And I thought about what his charge asks of us as Unitarian Universalists. Our faith calls us to honor the inherent worth and dignity of each person and it teaches us of a universal saving love that holds each and every one of us. These ideas are beautiful and important, but they are shallow and useless if they stay only in our heads and on our lips. If we are to be prophetic in the world, then our message of inherent worthiness and of unconditional love has to be active. It has to take the form of us sacrificing our own discomfort to get up close and personal. It has to take the form of us vulnerably investing in relationships with people who are different from us, people who we have perversely deluded ourselves into believing are less than us. Our call, everyday is to stretch open the circle of those we feel capable of loving, for the sake of our own hearts.

This process of widening our circle of love is a little like what happens to our bodies when we strain our muscles. I'm remembering a weekend visit to my best friend in Ithaca New York. Her cousins have a lake house on Cayuga Lake, and we spent one whole day out in the sunshine tubing off the back of their motorboat. If you haven't been tubing before, I highly recommend it. Imagine yourself with your body sprawled across this round blow up raft and holding on for dear life to these two rope handles. The motorboat zips and turns up and down the lake as fast as it can until your exhausted arms can't hold you on anymore, and you fly off into the water, as your friends on the boat howl with laughter. It is a perfect day. But now imagine waking up the next morning. The muscles in your arms will not have forgotten the fun of the day before. When I woke up I could feel what happens when you overwork your muscles. The fibers in my muscles had stretched and torn apart with this unconventional type of use and, I was so sore. But, as also happens, those fibers that were stretched and torn grew back even stronger, tire muscles replaced with more vital tissue. What was stretched open made me stronger. So too are we transformed, when we stretch open the walls of the circle of people that we feel able to love. We may feel a deep soreness, sadness, fearfulness as the pieces grow back toward one another, but through that stretching and soreness we become stronger and more loving. We live closer and truer to our values. And we are touched by the sweetness of being in relationship.

We are gifted with a propensity to expand the circle of those we find loveable. We can grow our circles and deepen our relationships so that they include incarcerated people, but broader than that we can include people with different immigration statuses, people with different abilities, people experiencing homelessness, or even those people in our own life that we struggle to forgive. It is my sincere hope that we might each find those people, those beloved and broken people, who currently live outside of our circle of love. Let us find them and stretch ourselves through proximity and relationship until no one is outside of our love. When we get close to those who suffer, to those who society has decided matter less, inevitably we find that the allusion of superiority is false and that in fact there is humanness that connects us across that gaping chasm of difference.

I'd like to share with you now a few stories of the humanness and connection that I found working in prisons this summer.

I visit Jason almost every week in his cell in solitary confinement. He's never revealed his charges to me, but his codefendant that lives in a cell a few doors down has filled me in on some of the gruesome details of his murder charge. Jason knows that he will likely be sentenced and spend the next 25 years or more of his life locked up somewhere in Federal Prison. He is accused of that crime that for many of us, removes him from our circle of forgiveness and compassion. He has a lot to be fearful of, but each week when I spoke to him, the only concern on his mind is his three young children. He shows me their pictures. Two little girls and a boy, all under 8. Each one of them has a name that starts with the letter J, just like my family, and they have a dad that loves them very much. Jason still wants to be a good father, whatever that means with a murder conviction. Him loving his children doesn't excuse the despicableness of his crime, but him loving his children is a reminder that he's a human being capable of love. Him loving his children is a point of kinship for us that reminds us that Jason could belong within our circle of compassion.

Kareem is always enthusiastic when I come by to visit. He's been on the streets for most of his 35 years, and really only knows how to be in a gang and how to sell heroin. He's rough around the edges, to say the least, and truth be told, If I had seen him on my street, I might have crossed to the other side of the road. One day as we were talking, I asked him what he would do with his life if he could do anything. He told me that he would be a writer. And then he read me one of his slam poems. His words were poignant and powerful, and the meter and cadence of his delivery contained so much passion. He lit up, finally able to share with another person, that thing that makes him feel proud of himself. He is creative and thoughtful, and despite my judgments, he is someone I am capable of including in my circle of love.

Now, Juan has a big personality. He is just as loud and in your face, as the interesting collection of tattoos that cover almost all of his body. His gregariousness doesn't have much of a filter when it comes to the colorful language he likes to use. He was telling me the story of how he got his assault charges. While we spoke he probably used a particularly unpleasant racial slur atleast 18 times. Now this word is not uncommon in prison, but it never really loses its knife like effect on me. As he was telling his story, in part of the explanation he described a woman in the story with an another derogatory word typically aimed at women that starts with the letter B. Too my shock and amusement instead of saying this offensive word with the candor he had been using, he put his hand to the side of his mouth and spelled the word out. I knew him pretty well, and so I called him out. I asked him why he would spell that word, but say the other so casually. He looked at me seriously and with this childish shame and discomfort, he said, "I was just trying to show you a little bit of respect." I felt the stretch right there. This kid with the tattoos, and the big mouth and the assault charge, had just widened the circle of who I'm capable of loving.

Besides the one on one conversations in solitary confinement, a lot of my work was leading faith sharing groups where men speak safely about their lives and their feelings. Durell walked in to my group with a hollow look in his eyes. It was the week before Father's day

and as we went around the circle many of the men shared their sadness about being locked away from their children on father's day. Durell started to cry as he spoke. A few weeks earlier his infant son had been killed in a car accident. The air went cold for a moment when he shared this tragedy, and then without any prompting the other men started offering their support. They told him which sergeants to write to make sure he got the right mental health care and support. And they told him how deeply sorry they were for his loss, a loss they wouldn't wish on their worst enemy. I barely spoke the rest of the hour. The others in this room sat eagerly in their chairs, waiting for the opportunity to be kind to someone suffering, relieving themselves of some of the suffering they feel every day. At the end of the group Durell got up and hugged every man in the circle. Some strangers, some enemies, now brothers.

Friends the allusion that we are separate, and that any of us might not be worthy of love is just that, an allusion. Each of us longs to love our children. Each of us longs to express our truths and be heard. Each of us wants to show respect and appreciation. Each of us would step up to comfort another.

Before settling on "Break not the Circle" I had thought about titling this sermon Children of God, in honor the only name I did not change for anonymity. On Fridays, I held a small group for the men on the protective custody units. Though, not true of every man on the unit, this unit has a reputation because it houses men charged with sexual crimes and crimes against children. Their actions are despicable and it makes them the most vulnerable men in any facility. On my first day when we went around the circle sharing our names, one man introduced himself as Child of God. Child of God always carries a dog-eared waterlogged Bible to the group, and he grins when I ask him to read the passage he's been studying this week. Child of God reads from the bible so incredibly quickly that his words are almost indiscernible. And as he reads, we all sit quietly listening a little more carefully to the sacred words, content in this strain.

Now I don't know what legal name is printed on the strip of paper inside his barcoded ID bracelet, but I think he just might have the same first name as every holy and imperfect man I worked with this summer. And the same first name as every person in this world. His name is Child of God. Their names are Children of God. Our names are Children of God. Let us expand our circles of love seeing each person, in prison or not, guilty or not, making us comfortable or not, as a lovable child of god.