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UUCB: Sermon

November 29th, 2015

9&11am

War on Families

I

I’ve heard it said that there is a war on families. That the rising divorce rate and the legalization of gay marriage are eroding the moral character of society. That access to birth control and the increased rate of single mothers is leading to the decay of tradition.

I’ve heard it said that families are in peril, and that we should be concerned for our children…

Perhaps “war” isn’t the best word to describe what is really going on. It’s not a war exactly, but still something is threatening families. And as near as I can tell, it has nothing to do with marriage and birth control, single mothers or divorce.

Instead, it seems to be a more complex intersection of issues that’s breaking down the bond from one generation to the next. Leaving young people alone in this world, struggling to relearn the lessons of generations past. Struggling to connect in a meaningful way to the world they inhabit.

So what is it that’s putting families at such risk?

II

In 1990, approximately 1-in-125 children in the United Sates had a parent incarcerated. Today, that number has risen to 1-in-28 children. That’s approximately 2.7 million (or 3.2%) of children in this country impacted by the incarceration of a parent.

These numbers start to become even more staggering when we look along the lines of race and find that children in families of color are at least twice as likely to be impacted by this issue.

And out of all the incarcerated people in this country, only 1/3 of them have committed violent crimes…the other 2/3 are locked up primarily for drug related offences, an issue that seems more a matter of public health than of criminal prosecution.

The separation that the children of incarcerated persons experience, is not just one of space and time. The wounds caused go much deeper. Feelings of guilt or anxiety are common among these children. And these patterns of emotion echo long after they have entered adulthood.

There even seems to exist a correlation between children with a parent incarcerated, and failing grades in k-12 education—especially in the academic year immediately following the arrest of the a parent.

The problem has grown to have such an impact on children in our country, that in 2013 the well-known children’s program Sesame Street added a new character to its cast.

Alex is part of the “Little Children, Big Challenges,” series on the show. The aim of the series is to help kids find a way to interact with and express some of the more difficult issues they may be facing.

The fact that Alex was included on Sesame Street, is an indicator as to the seriousness of the impact the incarceration of a parent has on children. The problem has grown to be so ubiquitous that it could no longer avoid being talked about.

And through talking, transform the lives of those impacted.

**This is an issue that has impacted me personally, and in many ways is part of my call to ministry…**

Twenty-five years ago, I was one of those 1-in-125 children with a parent incarcerated. My father Tom, was arrested after taking part in a controlled buy that was part of a larger FBI sting.

“He had some questionable connections, and knew where to get things,” my mom has told me since. As a result of this reputation, he was approached by undercover FBI agents and asked to procure some cocaine. The buy went off without a hitch…

Several days later, FBI agents showed up to our small single wide trailer. It was around 4am on a November morning in 1988, when they served a no knock warrant. Ripping the door open they flooded inside and arrested my father. My sister Sadie would have been two years old, and I was just two months old.

When the date of his trial came, there was little question as to his guilt. It was pretty clear cut as to what his part in the whole situation had been. It turns out that these sort of things are fairly well documented, and leave little question as to what transpired.

In the end my father was sentenced to 6 years in a federal prison in Colorado, over a thousand miles from any family who might visit. A practice that has since been called into question by the Urban Institute, as a result of a 2004 study.

This study found that inmates who were incarcerated in areas where close family connections could be maintained were significantly less likely to reoffend. They also found that families who maintained such connections experienced significantly less anxiety, and had higher rates of reunification after being released.

Growing up I never got to know my father. In fact I only got to talk on the phone with him twice. Both phone calls took place at my grandmother’s house, because she was the only one in the family who could afford to pay for the expensive calls from prison.

The calls were short and mostly left me confused. I remember the first call. I was about 5 or 6 years old. My grandma handed me the phone and told me to say hello. I spend most of the conversation trying to figure out who I was talking to.

“Is this Uncle Bob,” I asked?

“No it’s your dad. Bob is my brother,” came the response.

“Oh…?” I replied.

My dad tried to keep the conversation going, but not knowing each other there seemed little for us to talk about, after a few awkward questions, our conversation ended. I handed the phone back to my grandmother, who continued to talk, and left the living room.

The second (and final) call was just as bewildering. It came just a month later. I still couldn’t quite seem to make the connection between him and myself. Perhaps the confusion was brought about by the fact that no one in my family talked about my dad, I knew he was in prison, but beyond that nothing.

Or perhaps I was confused because I had never actually spent any time with my dad that I remembered. At that age, it’s hard to understand the connection between yourself and another person you don’t even know.

When my Father was finally released from prison, he moved back into the same trailer park where he had been arrested. My family had long since moved to Washington State. A little over a year later, a gas leak in his trailer caused an explosion that killed him. I never got to see him, or spend any time with my dad.

I didn’t know how devastating this loss would be at the time. Even when my mom told me what had happened, I couldn’t understand why she was telling me. I felt disconnected from the whole issue.

Now, years later I am finally starting to see the impact my father’s incarceration and eventual death had on my life. There are the obvious things like the gap in my family health history and missing family stories and traditions…and then there are the questions like.

Do you love me?

Are you proud of me?

Can we play?

Can we spend the holidays together?

These questions still exist within me today, but speculation and conjecture are the only answers I seem to find.

It has only been in the last few years that any of the story I am telling you, has even come to my knowledge. I knew bits and pieces of what happened, but no one was willing to share the whole narrative as a result of the emotion that was still there.

Even to this day, my grandma starts to cry when I ask questions about my dad. She says she can’t bear to think of it, and I can’t bear to press her.

Most of this information has been gleaned from between blacked out lines in FBI files that I received after filing a freedom of information act request.

Additional information was dug up for me by an editor at the Anchorage Daily News after I explained why I was interested in the old articles.

All this in an attempt to find out who my father was, and still there are so many questions that will never be answered...

This is just one of the many such narratives impacting people in this country, and such stories only seem to be growing more and more frequent.

III

We have normalized a system of separation, and the system only seems to be gaining more momentum. Part of this momentum has come as a result of the re-privatization of prisons, a practice that mostly died out in the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century.

Since the 1980’s, however, this practice has come back into use, and currently 16% of federal prisons and 6% of state prisons are being run by private corporations. Corporations that have an obligation to produce profits for their investors. Turning the incarceration of people into a business rather than a system aimed at the correction of behavior.

The profits to be reaped from the privatization of prisons has led to a rise in lobbying efforts to increase prison size and impose stricter enforcement measures on non-violent offenders. With the two largest companies—GEO and Corrections Corporation of America—funding more than 10 million dollars in candidate contributions and 25 million in lobbying efforts since 1989. Currently these two companies are raking in over 3 billion dollars in annual revenue.

Unsurprisingly, this is the same timeline of events that got us from approximately 1-in-125 children having a parent incarcerated, to 1-in-28.

Demonstrating that when the pursuit of profit is allowed to guide the political and legal process, no one but private interests win. And with the expansion of private prisons still on the rise, we can only expect the number of families impacted to continue to grow.

Unfortunately, prisons are not the only place where profits are to be made at the expense of families. We need only look to our immigration system and its practice of detention and deportation to see the same pattern play out again.

Here we find some of the same companies behind private prisons, operating detention centers and lobbying for tougher immigration practices. This too has turned into a rather booming business.

Many of the families impacted are just trying to escape the violent and often desperate conditions in their countries of origin.

Trying to escape the violence of drug cartels in Mexico and El Salvador.

Trying to escape the violence of extremist groups in Syria.

Trying to escape the violence and build a better life here…

Consider the young men in these places being forced into militant groups as young as 8 years old, and how they are fleeing to this country only to have to hide from INS agents.

Consider the starving families, not just in this community, but around the world who are searching for a place to thrive.

Why can’t we be that place? Are we that afraid of change, that we aren’t willing to try something new?

We have allowed corporate interests to dictate the direction of our country for far too long, and unless we do something the problem will only get worse.

IV

The way we deal with people in the criminal justice system does little to actually bring about the outcomes we purport to seek. We are not indemnifying (or making anyone whole) when we treat offenders the way we do. We are not seeking Justice, but rather vengeance in a manner that only seems to cause further harm. We are not rehabilitating or correcting behavior, but rather damaging families in ways that cannot be fully measured.

We have seen time and time again that incarceration does little to actually fix crime. At what point will we realize that the means we are using not only don’t bring about our goals, but are actually advancing their own agenda?

And with these same practices spilling over into immigration policy, it seems to only put families in greater peril…

It is in our interest, as a society, to preserve families in whatever shape they come in, and make sure that the knowledge and wisdom of one generation is passed onto the next, so we need not repeat the mistakes of our ancestors.

There has to be another way to deal with offenders and ease the immigration process in this country, and that’s why as a Justice seeking people, Unitarian Universalists should be concerned about these issues.

We are a people who have a special love of questions and seeking out answers to the challenges of our time. Can we be the ones to ask the tough questions that drive the reform that is needed—seeking out alternatives to incarceration and deportation? Seeking new ways to uphold Justice and welcome the huddled masses to our shores.

I know that these are issues that this community cares about and has taken up, and that members are working to stop the expansion of the jail here in Contra Costa County, but there is still more work that needs to be done.

There is far too much in profits to be lost for corporations to give up. That’s why it is up to us to make a statement letting the powers that be know, we will not accept this any longer.

V

For the truth is that one among us cannot suffer without having an impact upon the rest of us. This impact may not be immediately understood, but it’s there. We share a world in which each being is intimately connected to another, in such a way that the welfare of one holds sway over the welfare of others.

It is for this reason we should be concerned about the welfare of others regardless of whether they have committed a crime or are here illegally. We must still affirm the worth and dignity of such people, and seek out actions that keep families together for the benefit of all of us.

For, in a house that becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart… that is why it is in our best interest to insure that the links between generations remain unbroken.

May we embrace the mystery ahead, and always remember that through the love of shared community, all things are possible.

Amen and Blessed Be