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▪ Chapter 3 ▪

Finding a Lazarus

KEITH REEVES

Remembering those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.—HEBREWS 13:3 (NIV)

...find a Lazarus somewhere, from our teeming prisons to the bleedign earth.—HISTORIAN TAYLOR BRANCH ON THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S "LAST WISH"¹

On Sunday, November 15, 2009, in a rough, inner-city neighborhood of Chester, Pennsylvania (about fourteen miles southwest of Philadelphia), two young black males, ages seventeen and nineteen, engaged in a most incomprehensible act. Seeking to avenge a friend who had been shot in the eye, one of the two young men allegedly fired a gun in the direction of the violence-plagued William Penn public housing development. A stray bullet ripped through a brick wall and struck the head of Kathy Stewart, a devoted mother of three who was caring for her ailing eighty-five-year-old mother.

Police presumed the shooting was sparked by an ongoing feud between young men from the housing development and a neighborhood faction in the city's grim East End. According

to the arrest affidavit and media reports, the two young men were laughing the next day about the shooting of Ms. Stewart. What's more, the affidavit indicates that the nineteen-year-old was dismissively blunt about his role: "They don't give a **** if one of our moms got shot, so I don't give a **** about her. . . . Yeah, we did that shit; we was chasing the bull on Franklin Street and hit the corner while we was shooting. . . . It is what it is."

We decry the senseless violence, even as we ponder the perennially urgent questions of "how" and "why" so many of our young black men could engage in such destructive behavior. Arguably, the path that leads to criminal activity—and inevitably to jail or prison—is set early for some. Chester, with a population of just 36,854, is a landscape fraught with despair, risks, and threats that often imperil young black males' opportunities. The statistics are staggering: an unemployment rate of 17 percent; 27 percent of the city's population living below the poverty line; 43 percent of the population under age twenty-four; and a sobering 32 percent of those age twenty-five and older who did not graduate high school. But equally unsettling is the brash tone and substance of the nineteen-year-old's remark—"It is what it is." For these words convey the blithe indifference, the sense of hopelessness and even rage of far too many young black males who are making life-altering mistakes and decisions against the backdrop of poor, drug-infested, inner-city neighborhoods across this country.

But in another sense, the words of the young man who fired the fatal shot that took Kathy Stewart's life hints at a deeper gulf—one that is more cultural and spiritual than anything else. Despite the fact that the percentage of black men graduating from college has nearly quadrupled since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,² or that the ranks of professional black men have swelled over the last four decades, or that household income for African Americans more generally has improved,³ not to mention the historic election and

swearing-in of the nation's first African American president, ever-increasing numbers of young males, disproportionately black, continue to swell the nation's jails and prisons. According to Harvard University sociologist Bruce Western, almost 60 percent of black male high school dropouts in their early thirties have spent time in prison.⁴

In Pennsylvania, Jeffrey Beard, the secretary of the Department of Corrections (now retired), has urged lawmakers to stem the growth of the state's prison population, which is bursting at the seams at 51,000 inmates, exceeding its capacity by 1,800.⁵ Incredibly, the state's correctional system will expand by an additional 8,000 beds by 2013.⁶ This is a chilling harbinger of not only the crisis to come—but also of the crisis already here. Indeed, the continued large-scale imprisonment of young black males (and, as this volume will also highlight, of young, low-income black women) threatens to overshadow and overwhelm all the strides African Americans have made since the days of Jim Crow and state-sanctioned racial segregation. And so we stand “at the corner of progress—and peril.”⁷

This chapter seeks to accomplish several aims. First, I'll provide a broader, more nuanced, and extraordinarily telling portrait of young black males who are entangled in the criminal justice system. Second, based on my nearly seven years of experience mentoring incarcerated black males, I wish to present an explanation that challenges the prevailing wisdom regarding the reasons so many young black males are on a crime-prison trajectory in the first place. This alternative perspective will shed light on the views and behavior of those who often spend long stretches of time in and out of jail or prison. Finally, understanding that the experience of black male imprisonment is now almost commonplace in virtually every urban community, I'll conclude with a few pointed observations about what this disturbing trend portends for the relevance and cohesion of the contemporary African American church. With an estimated 50,000 black churches

(including quite a number of wealthy, dynamic, and influential megachurches) and millions of congregants, there is reason to believe that black religious institutions can make a meaningful difference. The operative question is not so much what “the black church” will ultimately do or not do, but what role, exactly, it will play in raising the life trajectories of dispirited young black men and their families and children (the vast number of whom are left with deeper emotional and financial scars). Nothing less than the comprehensive and concerted engagement of the black church holds any promise of significant success.

Who Is in Prison—and Why?

The unparalleled and steady expansion of the U.S. prison population is a glaring symbol of something seriously run amok. As other writers in this volume have mentioned, the incarceration rate in the United States began to increase dramatically in the early 1970s. Incredibly, the incarceration rate today is nearly seven times what it was at the beginning of the twentieth century and experienced an almost threefold expansion between 1987 and 2007.

Providing explanation and context about the three decades of growth of people behind bars, Todd Clear, the author of *Imprisoning Communities*, has written:

Back in 1970, when the prison population began to grow, nobody would have consciously chosen this future. But we have gotten here, surely and precisely, from making a generation of choices, starting about that time...during two lengthy periods of increasing crime rates, the prison population went up. But during the two periods of dropping crime rates, one in which we now find ourselves, prison populations also went up. That is, prison populations have increased during both economic downturns and economic recoveries. . . .

The most obvious consequence of unparalleled growth in the U.S. prison population is that it is now out of line, both historically and when compared with other nations.⁸

According to a widely publicized study by the Pew Center on the States and Public Safety Performance Project, “The U.S. is the global leader in the rate at which it incarcerates its citizenry.”⁹ That is, the United States imprisons more of its citizens than any other nation in the world—including South Africa, Iran, and China with its more than 1.3 billion people; and has a higher per capita incarceration rate than any other industrialized democracy.¹⁰ At the start of 2008, more than 2.3 million adults in this country were behind bars, leading the Pew Report to conclude somberly: “Three decades of growth in America’s prison population has quietly nudged the nation across a sobering threshold: for the first time, more than one in every 100 adults is now confined in an American jail or prison.”¹¹

Meanwhile, the mushrooming and upward prison trend “brought about both an absolute increase in the numbers as well as a disproportionately greater impact on persons of color,”¹² most particularly young black males. More than a fifth of all black men ages thirty-five to forty-four have been in prison—twice the percentage of Hispanic men and six times the percentage of white men in the same age group.¹³ In fact, the Pew Center, having conducted an independent analysis of data from state and federal correctional agencies, calculated that 1 in 15 black men age eighteen and older was behind bars on June 30, 2006, as compared with 1 in 203 black women age eighteen and older.

There is one additional and important point to make about the scope and scale of these incarceration trends. That is, “the growth in imprisonment has been concentrated among poor, minority males who live in impoverished neighborhoods.”¹⁴ There is broad agreement, too, that the growth in the nation’s incarceration trends that directly impact these urban

neighborhoods is the direct result of a "wave of policy choices," including "the war on drugs," "three-strikes" measures, as well as sentencing policies and practices that kept lower-risk offenders in prison longer.

In the end, young black men in jail or prison constitute a fraternity all their own. And the troubling ramifications have been laid bare by social and policy analysts Peter Edelman, Harry Holzer, and Paul Offner who have argued that the impact of all this is easy to determine: "The effects of low incomes and high crime and incarceration rates are borne not only by the young men themselves, but also by their families and children, their communities, and the nation as a whole—which pays an enormous price to administer a massive prison system, and is also denied the productive labor of so many of its young men."¹⁵

Misguided Decision-Making on the Part of Young Black Males

How do we explain the grim statistics concerning unprecedented numbers of young black men in the bulging prison pipeline? Theories invariably include factors like: (1) the seeming intractable nature of inner-city poverty; (2) continued racial residential segregation and the attendant social isolation of those poor neighborhoods; (3) educational inequality and underperforming schools; (4) weakening family structure; (5) racism in the criminal justice system; (6) blighted and crime-ridden neighborhoods; (7) exogenous economic structures (i.e., the decline of manufacturing jobs, the suburbanization of employment, and the rise of a low-wage service sector); and (8) the lack of positive role models. Additionally, the suspicion of a causal relationship between the incarceration rates among black males and the destructive pressures and influences of the neighborhood and peer environment has been growing for some time as well. Clearly, the reality

that an estimated 1-in-3 black men in their twenties is under correctional supervision or control is felt most acutely at the street and neighborhood level in urban communities. Importantly, this dynamic influences norms of social behavior and interaction, as well as the way in which young black males connect (or fail to connect) with the critical web of family, children, education, work, church, and authority (i.e., law enforcement and the courts).

In his deeply insightful book *Code of the Streets*, sociologist Elijah Anderson details the widening social isolation and disaffection of African-American males who reside in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods in inner-city Philadelphia. Anderson asserts that this isolation nurtures in these young black men an "oppositional culture" that is marked by alienation and "a certain contempt for a system they are sure has contempt for them."¹⁶ Anderson's insights are supported by the research of Janelle Dance, who studied urban young people's attitudes toward traditional schooling. Dance finds that mainstream rejection "takes its toll with some students: it deflates and levels aspirations, creates a fertile ground for survivalistic, anti-mainstream sentiments, and renders individuals who are black...males, urban, and low-income more vulnerable to involvement in illicit street cultural activities." Professor Dance goes on to conclude: "During their middle and junior high school years, the vast majority of students in my study hold fast to their dreams despite this rejection. But as they mature into their late teens and early twenties, the constant mainstream rejection begins to weaken their resolve."¹⁷

Certainly, it is hard to refute the way in which these factors come together to limit the opportunities available to many young black men and to derail them in their pursuits. But based on my experience mentoring incarcerated black males during the last seven years, I suggest that there is something far more compelling going on: the penal crisis ensnaring young black men is rooted in misguided decisions on the part of the young men themselves. This alternative explanation—

that imprudent decision-making is a critical part of a complex puzzle of destructive community pressures—helps us get to the root of the problem.

In my years of conducting one-on-one mentoring with black men incarcerated for crimes they actually committed, the pattern was disturbingly common: growing up in single-parent households (not always female); coping with boredom; being exposed to values and behavior emphasizing toughness and a blatant disregard for authority; losing interest in school and eventually dropping out; selling drugs (and viewing it as an acceptable means of income and work); choosing the “wrong” friends; and, in the end, predictably being “at the wrong place at the wrong time” when something went awry. To be sure, poverty and cultural context play a key role in many cases. But the crisis is also one of values and behavior. In virtually every case, the incarcerated young black man whom I mentored had very damaged decision-making abilities. And in far too many instances, the erroneous decisions—often involving drugs and gun possession—proved catastrophic in the form of a lengthy prison sentence.

Dr. Milton “Mickey” Burglass, a former New Orleans inmate, contends that the central trait of those serving time is, in fact, the inability to make wise decisions. The majority of those who end up behind bars lack the skills required to set and prioritize goals and to carefully consider the immediate gains and risks as well as the long-term consequences of one’s actions. In essence, they lack “the ability to think ahead, plan for the future, and repress impulses.”¹⁸ Burglass observes: “Most inmates live their lives simply reacting to what life throws at them...rather than stopping to choose how they would like their lives to be.”¹⁹ With this awareness, Burglass has established a targeted, motivational program (with curriculum) called Thresholds,²⁰ designed to teach incarcerated men six essential steps to decision-making. Through the use of a curriculum guide (or “workbook”), trained volunteers from the community teach inmates (or “clients”) how to: (1) define

situations, (2) set goals, (3) develop possibilities for reaching those goals, (4) evaluate these possibilities and explore the alternatives, (5) decide on a course of action, and (6) stay focused until one's goals are achieved.

In the Thresholds program, a volunteer from the community meets with a client once a week for a period of seven to ten weeks. Each meeting lasts one to two hours. During this time, the teacher and client cover the six steps outlined in the curriculum guide. Further reinforcement of the material is provided during group sessions, which are also held once a week. The group sessions include discussion, videos, and role-playing. Upon completing the program, each client is awarded a Certificate of Achievement. The program's central premise is that a person's image of himself/herself in relation to society strongly influences his/her actions. By learning to problem solve and make better decisions, clients raise their self-esteem, which enables them to be more productive upon returning to the community.

One mother who raised three children in the same Chester neighborhood where Kathy Stewart lost her life expressed her utter frustration this way: "Most kids get into trouble. But parents and mentors have to be there to help kids learn to make the right decisions." In fact, bad decisions need not be disabling. She continued: "Everyone is hopeless without goals. . . . The kids who are headed for trouble just want to make fast money. But you've gotta crawl before you can walk. It's a slow process to make a lot of money. But the end results [of working] are worth it. These kids just don't want to wait."²¹

The idea that the misguided decision-making of the young black males who are currently incarcerated contributes mightily to the bulging prison pipeline in this country is hardly astonishing. But it is troubling how much of our discourse avoids this fundamental fact. Too often we "miss the forest for the trees." And the tragic story of Kathy Stewart and the two young black men charged in her death is emblematic of how bad and impetuous decision-making sets

in motion a chain of events that takes an incalculable and sorrowful toll on families and entire neighborhoods alike. And in this way, misguided decision-making is cause, correlate, and consequence for young black men living in impoverished neighborhoods. Even so, the poet Maya Angelou reminds us of something quite essential: "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them."²²

Implications for the African American Church

Arguably, the African American church is uniquely equipped to deal with what criminal justice reform advocates have called "the collateral consequences of mass imprisonment."²³ And surprisingly or not, the church would likely find a receptive hearing. While the declining significance of religion in the United States is often lamented, according to a 2006 *Washington Post*-Kaiser Family Foundation-Harvard University national survey, some 81 percent of black men say that "living a religious life" is either "very important" or "somewhat important" to them. Among black men ages eighteen to twenty-nine, the percentage was even higher, with 87 percent agreeing with this value sentiment.

But addressing this need will require the black church to reexamine its assumptions regarding our often frayed and fraught relationship with young black men in prison, specifically, and inner-city communities, more generally. Economist Glenn Loury aptly describes why the church—with its prophetic voice—must act:

I once heard a twenty-two year old former gang member, who had had quite a few scuffles with the law, say, "You know, there's some stuff wrong with us only the Lord can fix." He was in church, trying to find his way back to a

life of dignity and responsibility. . . . Fortunately, in every community there are agencies of moral and cultural development that seek to shape the ways in which individuals conceive of their duties to themselves, their obligations to each other, and their responsibilities before God. The family and church are primary among these. These institutions have too often broken down in the inner city, overwhelmed by forces from within and without....If these institutions are not restored, the behavioral problems of the ghetto will not be overcome. Such a restoration...must be led from within the communities in question, by the moral and political leaders of those communities. In the end, we are spiritual creatures, generations of meaning, beings who must not and cannot live by bread alone.²⁴

The moral prestige of the black church is a resource and an asset such that the church ought to be a thriving and prominent institutional player in the restoration of the web of community, law enforcement, school, and government partnerships that once flourished in big cities.²⁵ Indeed, the breakdown of black families coupled with destructive community pressures mean we must demand more from the black religious institutions in our communities.

In the often-chaotic inner city of Chester, Pennsylvania, where more than 140 religious and faith-based institutions are sprawled across just 4.8 square miles, the gathering consensus is this: The ministry of the black church must reach beyond its provincial parishes and build a holistic ministry of caring—for ourselves; for our families, friends, and members; and for our communities. One of Chester's churches is the historic Calvary Baptist Church, where a young Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. preached and taught Sunday school while he was a student at nearby Crozer Theological Seminary. King lived in the Chester community for three years, and I have little doubt that he would be deeply troubled by the fact that many of our young black men in that city and others are

“trapped in a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment, and premature death.”²⁶

In what historian Taylor Branch refers to as Dr. King’s “last wish,” the great preacher offered a profound challenge to us, urging everyone to “find a Lazarus somewhere, from our teeming prisons to the bleeding earth.” The black church can help us recognize—and aid—the young black males in jails and prisons who are Lazaruses in need of our care. Only then can we begin the difficult but necessary task of helping them fashion a future for themselves, their families, and their children. As Branch argues, “That quest in common becomes the spark of social movements, and is therefore the engine of hope.”²⁷ Suffice it to say that one prediction seems safe: hope will be a powerful determinant of whether the young black men returning from jail or prison are welcomed home by neighborhoods teetering on the brink of “chaos or community.”

■ NOTES ■

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3. The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, “The Educational Crisis Facing Young Men of Color: Reflections on Four Days of Dialogue on the Educational Challenges of Minority Males” (January 2010), 7.

4. Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, (New York: Russell Sage, 2006).

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6. *Ibid.*

7. The line here is the subtitle of the text, The Staff of *The Washington Post*, *Being a Black Man: At the Corner of Progress and Peril*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

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14. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities*, 5.
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17. L. Janelle Dance, *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2002), 5.
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21. Personal communication, March 2005.
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23. See, Mauer and Chesney-Lind, *Invisible Punishment*.
24. Glenn Loury, "The Spiritual Dimensions of a Societal Life," in E.J. Dionne Jr., Jean Bethé Elsthai, and Kayla M. Drogosz, eds., *One Electorate Under God?: A Dialogue on Religion & American Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press), 140–41, 143.
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27. Branch, "Last Wish of Martin Luther King," WK 15.