

# Lift Every Voice and Sing

January 16, 2022

Thank you again to Mr. Carl Fields and Mr. David Liners for driving up here in the bitter cold today to lead us in worship. We are deeply grateful, both for your time today, and even more importantly, for the ongoing work you do for the cause of justice and freedom.

Just one note that is both pragmatic and symbolic, before I spend a little time setting a spiritual context for their remarks: in non-pandemic times, both Mr. Fields and Mr. Liners would be speaking from this pulpit, the symbol of speaking the Word of God, the symbol of speaking authoritatively, the symbol of the Spirit of the Lord being upon those speaking. However, as the Omicron Variant continues to bring floods of people into our region's hospitals, today health trumps symbolism, and we are going to be staying more than six feet apart. Know that, while they're speaking from the lectern, there is no less power to their words implied.

Our scriptures this morning start out with 1 Corinthians 12, inviting us to think of the people of God as a body, with all of its diversity of parts and roles. The passage Julie read for us today is actually quite comical, as we imagine the whole body being an ear or an eye. But, as happens often in rhetoric, Paul is being funny, absurd, even, in order to put people off guard so that he can find an inroad for changing their thoughts. After creating this absurd picture in their minds of giant ears running around without a body, Paul then draws us into the depth of the matter: church members were behaving as if some of them were better than others, as if some of them weren't needed, were expendable, were less than.

Paul's image of an eye trying to hear is supposed to remind us that every one of God's people is absolutely essential to the triumphing of God's reign, absolutely essential to the Body of Christ, or to use the term that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was best known for, every one of God's people is essential to making the Beloved Community a reality. This is why it is no stretch of the imagination or intellect at all to envision that, were Rev. King with us today, the state of the criminal legal system in the United States, and particularly here in Wisconsin, would be a cause he would be championing. Our system is beyond broken, throwing away thousands upon thousands of lives every year, and as 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us, each of those lives is an essential member of the Body of Christ, the Beloved Community, and those who have struggled, those who are vulnerable, are indispensable.

Because Mr. Fields' and Mr. Liners' remarks are the truly prophetic words we will hear today, I don't want to belabor my remarks, so I'll just briefly draw your attention to our Continuing Testament reading which Michael offered so eloquently. For the sake of time today, Michael only read a small portion of Rev. King's "The American Dream" sermon just now, but I highly recommend you google it today or tomorrow, and read it in its entirety as your prayer. Sit with it. Ponder how horrifying it is that someone would have to make the case for other humans' basic God-given dignity, and linger with where this is calling us as a nation, as a church, and where this is calling you as a member of Christ's body.

Speaking of calling, I'll wrap up by drawing your attention to our Gospel. In the Gospel of Luke, the passage that I read today comes immediately after Jesus' temptations in the desert. In that, as Jesus' first act of public ministry after his baptism, it is his thesis statement. Jesus is laying out his agenda, and in doing so, is giving us our commission: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. As followers of Jesus, this is our commission.

And so, with that, I think I have prepared the soil as best I can, and so I ask Mr. Carl Fields and Mr. David Liners to sow the seeds of God's justice and liberation with us this morning:

EXPO and WISDOM leaders Mr. Carl Fields and Mr. David Liners reflected on the Transformational Justice Campaign. While a text of their reflections is not available, much of the content has been included at the back of this sermon.

Thank you so much Mr. Fields, Mr. Liners. Your witness not only inspires our action, it gives us hope, hope that we, too, can be a part of building Rev. King's beloved community.

Before we move on, I'd like to reflect a little bit on our music today, particularly the next two hymns, and in that the practice of a predominantly white congregation celebrating King Day. As a community that is striving to be anti-racist, all of our practices and behaviors are fair game. It is not only reasonable, but critical that we hold our traditions up to the light, to examine their potentially racist tentacles.

And so it is with this lens that I spent some time this month with these next two hymns. The hymn we are about to hear, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson for the 91st anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Twenty years later, it was first called the Black National Anthem by the NAACP.

Like many national anthems, it's loud and bold and strong. And, unlike most national anthems, it is harrowing, tragic even, while it remains hopeful. In processing whether it is appropriate for a largely white congregation striving to be anti-racist to sing this hymn with integrity in 2022, my confidant asked, "What is your purpose in singing it; what are you trying to do?" Without even having to think, I said, "It's confessional."

Friends, as a largely white community, a community composed of many, many folks who have experienced the privilege of whiteness, today, I'm glad that most of you are worshipping from home, so that I can invite you to lift EVERY voice and sing till earth and heaven ring with the harmonies of liberty, and I invite you into a stance of confession, especially as we sing, "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope, unborn, had died."

Hope, unborn, had died. This is too often the experience of our brothers and sisters of color, and our prayer today is not only a call to action on behalf of criminal legal system reform, it has to start from a place of confession regarding our complicity in the horrors of racism.

But, we cannot end there. We are a Gospel people. We are a people of the Good News. And that is why our service will crescendo today to "We Shall Overcome." Our faith is only genuine if we can be honest and confessional, but it is also only faith if it draws us into hope.

Friends, we shall overcome. Some day. Our God will see us through. Some day. We shall live in peace. Some day. And it is through honest confession, action for justice, and unwavering hope that "We Shall Overcome" will be not just an anthem, but a reality.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
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**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21**  
January 16, 2022



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Linking communities across Wisconsin to work for justice

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Join the *Transformational Justice Campaign* leaders of EXPO and WISDOM for:

## Taking On Mass Incarceration in Wisconsin

a 5-part Zoom series

**When:** Thursday evenings, 6:30-8:00 p.m., January 27, February 3, 10, 17, 24

**Register here:** [Taking on Mass Incarceration - Jan 27-Feb 24](#)

Or by scanning QR code below

In the series, we will learn from experts, including people directly impacted by Wisconsin's criminal legal system. We will learn about many aspects of the system, including:

- **Front End Issues:** Things that happen BEFORE a person goes to jail or prison, like the "school to prison pipeline," policing practices, and the availability of alternatives to incarceration, especially for people with mental health and/or addiction issues;
- **Sentencing:** How Wisconsin's sentencing policies and practices have added to prison populations and have resulted in more elderly and seriously ill people behind bars;
- **Conditions of Confinement:** Including how the use of Solitary Confinement makes prisons less safe, and makes rehabilitation harder;
- **Crimeless Revocations, Probation, Parole and Extended Supervision:** How Wisconsin's overuse of "Supervision" leads to unnecessary incarceration and unnecessary hardship for people after they are released from prison;
- **Bringing More People Home:** How programs like "Earned Release" and "Compassionate Release" can be used to reduce the number of people in prison;
- **Local Issues:** How local campaigns and local elections can make a difference.

Besides learning *about* the system and how it works, you will learn how **YOU can be part of the effort to make a difference**. The series will show a variety of "on-ramps" for people who want to be part of the solution. There will be options for people without much time, and options for people who want to be deeply involved in an issue. The goal will be to help **everyone** find a place in the campaign for change.

The series is open to everyone – including "beginners" who only know that there is a problem and that they want to help. We also encourage veterans of the campaign for reform to participate. Together, we want to build the campaign that can reverse the injustices addressed on the other side of this document.

### Questions?

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Register here:



## What is at Stake: Which Wisconsin Do We Want to Be?

Wisconsin is one of the best places to live in the nation. We enjoy a beautiful natural environment, an excellent educational system, and renowned health care. We think of ourselves as a friendly, caring people. At the same time, we confront realities that reveal that Wisconsin is failing in its treatment of people of color.

The national Sentencing Project recently released a report showing that Wisconsin is *still* the state that incarcerates the highest percentage of its African American residents. Here is a link to the report: [The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons](#). Or you can download it from [WISDOMWisconsin.org](http://WISDOMWisconsin.org). Please read and share this report, especially the table on page 6.

Wisconsin incarcerates 1 out of every 36 Black adults, far above the national average of 1 out of 81. While only 6% of Wisconsin's population identifies as African American, they make up 42% of the state prison population. Wisconsin's incarceration rate for African Americans is 12 times the rate for white adults.

The report notes a series of factors that have placed African Americans and others at significant disadvantage. These include but are not limited to poverty, education outcomes, unemployment history, and criminal history. It further reports that the totality of the research literature on race and ethnic differentials in imprisonment lead to a clear conclusion: ***the racial disparity in prison populations cannot be explained by racial patterns of criminal behavior. The system itself is racist.***

Many states have begun to chip away at their incarceration rate. Nine states, led by Republicans and Democrats, have *lowered* their prison population by *30% or more* in recent years. This decline has been accomplished through a mix of reforms that reduce prison admissions as well as lengths of stay in prison. Other research has shown that those reductions have not compromised public safety.

In contrast, Wisconsin has made no major reform to its policies and practices, but blindly sticks with the expensive, failing Truth In Sentencing scheme passed in 1999, which increased most sentences by 50%. The report notes that *"harsh punishment policies, some of which were put into effect after crime began to decline in the early 1990s, are the main cause of the historic rise in imprisonment that has occurred over the past 40 years."*

Failed policies like Truth in Sentencing, and ongoing practices that reinforce and worsen racial disparities have kept Wisconsin as the state with the highest incarceration rate for African-Americans in the entire country.

Many people of faith and ethical principle in Wisconsin believe we are called to build the "Beloved Community" about which Dr. King often spoke. We need to ask what our values say about this shocking disparity in whom we incarcerate. We need to ask how our faith traditions call on us to respond. We do not believe that silence is an option. **We value redemption, restoration, healing, second chances, and the alleviation of human suffering.** Please join WISDOM in working for racial equity and for transformation of our criminal legal system.

We know we can be better than this.