**Prisoner Number: 3912351112122425316**

**Sermon (FCC)**

**September 23, 2018**

**Scripture**

Genesis 39:1-23

Matthew 5:11-12

**Background**

**“Injustice anywhere** is a threat to justice everywhere. **We are caught** in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. **Whatever affects one** directly, affects all indirectly.” **The Reverend** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

**“The Innocence Project,** founded in 1992 by Peter Neufeld and Barry Scheck at Cardozo School of Law, exonerates the wrongly convicted through DNA testing and reforms the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice. **The Innocence Project's** mission is to free the staggering number of innocent people who remain incarcerated, and to bring reform to the system responsible for their unjust imprisonment. **Prior to our founding,** the idea that the criminal justice system made mistakes was not widely held. **Through the growing** chorus of stories from the innocent, there’s a greater understanding among the public, lawmakers, law enforcement and judges that our criminal justice system is fallible and we can change it. **Careful examination of** the hundreds of exonerations has identified disturbing trends that contribute to wrongful convictions–misapplication of forensic science, eyewitness misidentification, police-induced false confessions, government misconduct and inadequate defense. **We work with** the federal government and the states to secure resources and shape policies to help ensure that evidence used in investigations and courtrooms is based on the best science and guided by appropriate standards. **Over more than** two decades, we’ve helped restore liberty to hundreds of innocent people and reformed almost as many laws and judicial practices, protecting millions more.”[[1]](#footnote-1) **All of the preceding** information was gathered from the Innocence Project’s website, “innocenceproject.org.”

**Our scripture today retells** for us the story of Jacob’s son Joseph who had been sold into slavery by his brothers and then imprisoned by his Egyptian master. **We recall that Joseph** in slavery was so successful that he got his master’s attention and was subsequently made overseer of his master’s house. **As the story goes,** Joseph’s master’s wife attempts to seduce him and when she is rebuffed chooses to falsely accuse him of assaulting her and he was afterwards imprisoned.

**In light of the atmosphere** and what is currently going on in our country and around the world I want to be sensitive to and do not want there to be any thought that in any way am I being dismissive of the chorus’s of voices of women who are long overdue beginning to have their voices heard and stories of sexual assault told. **Instead my focus** for this morning is on what it means to be falsely accused as well as how prison bars are closer for each of us than we might be aware of.

**First, I want to share** with you a deeply personal story of an accounting of my own experience of being falsely accused.

**Me Experience**

**When I was fifteen years old** and in Junior High School; for those of you young folk who didn’t have that experience, Junior High was grades seven through nine. **High school did not** begin until reaching the tenth grade. **Anyway, as a fifteen** year old I had a job cleaning classrooms in an elementary school a few nights each week. **After working at** this school for a few months I was wrongly let go from my job for supposedly not cleaning chalkboards in the classrooms. **When I made my argument** that not only was this accusation false but I had proof in that in the rooms I cleaned, the teachers were present and could vouch for me. **The person who** supervised me and also made the accusation didn’t want to take my word and investigate, so I was sent on my way. **At fifteen years old** I pretty much brushed it off knowing that I could find a job somewhere else. **However, the story** gets a little strange for me.

**A week or so later** I was in the backyard of my home playing with my Saint Bernard named Governor when suddenly my mother comes to the back door and frantically calls me into the house. **When I entered** our living room, there stood two police officers with a summons for me to come appear at the Downtown Denver police station to be questioned on actuations that I had broken into the elementary school I had worked at. **The person making** the accusations was to no surprise the supervisor that had let me go.

**I was not the least** bit worried because I knew I was innocent since I had never committed any crime let alone broken into anyplace. **Yet my parents** obviously were disturbed by the accusations and probably more so by what it meant to be questioned by the police in the atmosphere that existed at that time and unfortunately to a degree still exist today. **My alibi** however was solid. **I had an** uncle and aunt that lived north and east of where the current Denver International Airport is located, in what we called back then, “the country.” **I was along with** my parents and sister at their place on the Friday that the said break in took place.

**On the morning that** I had to go into the Denver police station for questioning my father had to take off from work and take me out of school to travel downtown. **In all honesty as** a fifteen year old who had never been in trouble I was a bit intrigued by the process. **I actually** wanted to check all of this out because at the time I was very familiar with how law enforcement and questioning worked. **After all,** I religiously watched crime dramas to include Starsky and Hutch, Ironside, Police Woman, Barnaby Jones, Kojak, Baretta, Columbo and perhaps mine and everyone else’s favorite, Hawaii Five-O. **So when my father** and I arrived at the police station I was taken to an interrogation room leaving my father in the waiting area. **Not failing to meet** my expectations, in the small room there was a small table with two chairs and a light literally hanging from the ceiling. **I believe it was** swinging a little, just like in the episodes of Columbo and Baretta that I had seen. **And yes there** were also two detectives ready to start the questioning. **The door closed,** the questioning started and the gravity and reality of the situation set in for a fifteen year old who was innocent of the accusations being levied.

**In all fairness the** detectives questioning me were very polite and actually tried to make sure I was at ease answering their questions. **They asked the obvious** questions of where was I at the time the crime was committed and probed to determine if there were any reason I would have committed the criminal act. **Towards the end** of the questioning the detectives explained that whoever broke into the school had cut themselves badly on their arms trying to climb through the glass of a broken window. **So they asked me** to lift my sleeves and show my arms. **I believe they had** additional reasons for wanting to see my arms but, that’s a sermon for another day. **Seeing that I didn’t have** any cuts, bruises or marks on my arms and body, they closed the interview and allowed me to depart with my father and return to school. **Of course all of** my classmates wanted to know what the experience was like and I certainly gave them the Hawaii Five-O version minus the “Book ‘Em Danno” ending.

**In many ways** this experience of mine is a bit humorous however considering how well I can recall these events from some forty plus years ago you can perhaps glean how traumatic these accusations were for a fifteen year old. **I was never** or ever have been jailed or imprisoned and certainly my experience does not weigh on the scale of what happened to a seventeen year old Joseph in Egypt. **It could have** gone as sideways for me as it did for Joseph and does for so many others whom the Innocence Project commits to exonerating but it did not. **Joseph did not** have detectives fairly questioning him and there were no DNA test available. **All his master’s** wife had was a garment he had dropped in his attempt to flee from what was obviously issued on her part as an unwelcome invitation to Joseph.

**Perhaps there are some** here under my voice that have been detained under false allegations and perhaps not. **But as we** reflect more on Joseph’s imprisonment I would argue that with the exception of those of us who are perfect, and I am not on that list, we have all been in prison at one time or another. **And even at** this very moment might be serving a sentence.

**Prisons We Put Ourselves In**

**You see I’m talking** about the prisons we put ourselves into. **Innocently God brings** us into this world and unfortunately we on too many occasions unjustly imprison ourselves even if it is unintentional on our part.

**Let me be a bit more** direct and to the point. **Perhaps the prison** we might have found ourselves in is one of drug or alcohol addiction. **There might have** been a time when gambling was the cell we were confined to. **Maybe you are a** prisoner to the need to gossip about someone ultimately tearing them down with your words. **Not having empathy** with or patience for strangers, friends or family members might very well be the holding pens you have thus far not been able to escape. **We are sometimes** prisoners of aloofness and affluence. **Indeed many who** do not manage resources well and are not very generous have become prisoners to their money. **On the other hand** maybe it is our jealousy and envy of other people that incarnates us. **We can also be** prisoners to our class and social status. **By virtue of artificial** markers to include the country we are citizens of, holding power over other human beings is another method of detention we put upon ourselves.

**How then do** we rescue out of these prisons we are constantly placing ourselves in, the innocent part of God’s creation, which has from birth dwelled in us?

**Prisoner Number**

**As you read in** your bulletin for this morning and see on its cover, I have titled my sermon: “Prisoner Number 3 – 9 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 5 – 1 – 1 – 1 – 2 – 1 – 2 – 2 – 4 – 2 – 5 – 3 – 1 – 6. **On television** and I suppose in real life you have never seen a prison number this long before. **Maybe you already** have figured it out. **Feel free** to follow me on your bulletins cover page and let’s now take a look.

**The first five** digits are 3 – 9 – 1 – 2 – 3. **That might** be an easy one. **It’s today’s** scripture out of Genesis 39:1-23. **I won’t reread** it for you, instead I want to point out how although Joseph was innocent and imprisoned, God was still with him. **We are informed** that “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the jailer.” **Not only was** the Lord with him but: “whatever Joseph did, the Lord made it prosper.” **If this message** pertains to you then hear me clearly in that no matter the depth of an addiction you might have, the Lord is and always will be with you and desires a freeing of your innocence from the grips of addiction.

**The next five** are 5 – 1 – 1 – 1 – 2. **Matthew 5:11-12,** also part of today’s scripture. **We find encouragement** from our savior in this particular Beatitude where we are assured that blessed we are when people insult, persecute and falsely say evil things against us. **For God does not** desire us to be in prison nor to leave us alone to suffer without a comforter.

**Then we come** to the following six figures: 1 – 2 – 2 – 4 – 2 – 5. **The reference** for this is 1 Peter 2:24-25. **Peter or “Simon Peter”** you might recall was one of Jesus’ disciples and whom many historians believe was the first of the twelve. **He was the one** who would deny Christ, and even on one occasion not stand for truth. **Yet in 1 Peter** he writes of Jesus: ““He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds we have been healed.”” **At one time before** his calling from Christ, Peter had been a fisherman and well-to-do businessman described as a “natural born leader.” **If there were ever** one who was perhaps a prisoner to wealth and status, it would have been Peter. **Yet the Savior** rescued Peter out of his imprisonment resorting the falsely accused self to its innocence. **So much so** that his original name Simon was changed to the Greek name Peter by Jesus, which holds the meaning of “Rock.” **As we know** Jesus explained to Peter that he was giving him this new name because he Peter would be the “Rock” upon which Christ’s church was to be built. **How wonderful** it is to know that just like with Peter, Christ is steady in being with each of us no matter where our egos and accomplishments might be imprisoning us.

**Finally, and I bet** that probably everyone has figured out the last three numerals: 3 – 1 – 6. **Yes it is** John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” **Along with the** Twenty Third Psalm, John 3:16 is probably the most quoted scripture in our Bible. **We see signs everywhere** from church marques and political events, to sports competitions and car bumper stickers. **It is a powerful** and calmly liberating message to know that in spite of what ever prison we find ourselves in, justly or unjustly accused, God is with us and we are not ever left to perish alone.

**Joseph knew this** and I bet if we formulated his prison number it would stretch a mile long with all of the hope and belief he had in a God whom he knew was with him in the direst of circumstances.

**Closing**

**Today it is sobering** to believe how under different circumstances and less caring law enforcement officials I could have had a life altering experience at fifteen. **Our prison system here** in the United States disproportionately incarcerates large numbers of its own citizens in comparison to the rest of the world. **There is no** doubt that there are too many innocent people without resources who are being unjustly sent into our prisons. **Dr. King’s words** of how we all are indirectly affected when a single person is the victim of injustice, still rings true today.

**God the Creator** has always been working the Innocence Project for each of us through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. **When we** know and accept that there is no force greater than God, we despite our condition are able just as Joseph was, to live joyously in the most trying of circumstances. **I want to challenge** you on this morning to search for those places where you are being imprisoned or perhaps have imprisoned yourself, and then to invite Jesus in to liberate you in whatever way necessary so that you might live an even more joyous and abundant life. **“This is the day** that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!”[[2]](#footnote-2) **Amen and Amen!**

1. https://www.innocenceproject.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 118:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)