



Remembering
March 10, 2021
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The crowd swelled outside the convention center. They had a cause and a destination. The energy was high as hundreds began their march down the major street that ran between the convention center and the courthouse. Traffic couldn't pass and had to be re-routed. Arm-in-arm, they marched and sang and chanted. After rallying at the courthouse and taking the action they had plotted ahead of time, the protesters returned by the same route.

Three panicky city residents stood in bewilderment on the corner, where I encountered them. "Where did they go? I saw them coming down the street, but now they've just disappeared," one business owner said. "I don't know," replied another, "I was worried they were going to break my glass windows." "No," I explained, "we're Presbyterians. We just went back into the convention center for more meetings." This march was organized at our 223rd General Assembly in St. Louis to protest against the practice of cash bail and to make a donation toward the bail of people confined on minor charges. That day, windows weren't smashed, nor buildings broken down. Something much more biblically radical happened: we proclaimed liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. (Isaiah 61:1 NRSV).

At yesterday's Presbytery Gathering, we shifted our Matthew 25 focus to the issue of criminal justice reform, including the issue of cash bail. Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul, our guest speaker, addressed criminal justice problems that exist in our state, cash bail among them. He distinguished the federal release system in which the judge weighs two considerations: is the arrested person a danger; and is the person a flight risk? If the answer to either is yes, the person is detained until trial or released on conditions.

The state system is different, with cash bail set for minor offenses and with no showing of flight risk. People end up detained for months until trial because they don't have bail money, the Attorney General explained, and not because they're inherently dangerous or evil people. In contrast, we see examples of people charged with capital crimes who are released because they can afford to post million dollar bail. Security is not heightened by keeping poor people behind bars, while the wealthy go free. Attorney General Kaul cautioned against any criminal justice system that treats people differently because of their wealth.

The repercussions are severe. Unjustly detaining people because of their poverty can mean they lose their jobs, their homes, their transportation, and sometimes custody of their children. When they are released, they're in an even worse position. The cycle of poverty is perpetuated.

During our Presbytery worship, we focused on both Matthew 25's admonition to visit those in prison and Hebrews 13:3: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured." Were we in prison ourselves, what would bring hope? Perhaps the possibility of release before a full and fair trial, the comfort that the Church was advocating on my behalf to government and judicial officials for reforms and humane treatment, the naming and tearing down of systems that disproportionately harm those in poverty and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, or shared communion with the jail chaplain. These are but a few of these ways we hope the Presbytery will embrace this segment of our Matthew 25 vision. Watch for upcoming opportunities to learn and to act. Together, let us remember those who are in prison, rather than rendering them invisible.