

On most Sundays before worship, Pastor Meredith and I cross paths in the office. Last Sunday, Leslie Weaver and Colleen happened to be there as Meredith and I compared notes about how we were interpreting the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in our respective sermons.

Lyndhurst Community of Faith heard me talk about the need to respond to God's invitation by faithfully and conscientiously living into the values of God's kin-dom. Pastor Meredith shared with the Noble Road congregation that this interpretation was perfectly valid.

But she was inspired to offer a different interpretation: What if the one who showed up at the king's party and chose not to dress the part was meant to stand in for Jesus?

Jesus, who was browbeaten by the hoi polloi of his time for eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, who allowed a woman of questionable reputation to anoint his feet with oil and tears, and proclaimed, "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

This Jesus, Meredith suggested, didn't mind being thrown out into the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, because the people there were thirsting to receive the good news of God's radical love for them!

It was also into the darkness that Jesus was taken to be crucified. He stood with those whose rights had been stripped away, those forced to toil and suffer in forsaken places, sometimes for generations. Jesus doesn't mind being thrown into the briar patch.

The Apostles' Creed includes that mysterious phrase about how Jesus descended into hell before rising from the dead on the third day. Indeed, Jesus travels to hell and back to stand with those whose souls are in turmoil.

This is the Jesus whom Thomas Dorsey invites to "take my hand, lead me on, help me stand." Dorsey wrote out of his experience as an African American navigating daily life in a society systematically constructed to work against him.

I am grateful to Jan Giles for lifting up the life and work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, whose anti-lynching crusades, women's suffrage activism, and civil rights leadership remain so important for us to hear. For those who did not know her story, Jan has helped us discover her light.

The awful thing is that, in recent years, many of the advances for which Wells-Barnett fought have been threatened or rolled back. The tide of progress is ebbing.

This year, the U.S. Supreme Court weakened protections against racial discrimination in voting, opening the door for states to racially gerrymander voting districts. In many states, women have lost access to abortion. And just

recently, I learned that prisons in the United States are forcing inmates to perform hard labor with very few protections.

Consider what is happening at Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, in a practice known as the Farm Line.

At the end of the Civil War, Angola was a plantation named for the African nation from which many of the enslaved people forced to work there had been taken. The plantation was eventually sold to a convict-leasing company—a business that offered incarcerated people to bidders for whatever labor they required.

According to the Angola Museum, in 1870, former Confederate Major Samuel L. James was awarded the lease of Louisiana State Penitentiary and its prisoners. The conditions of the lease were marked by a lack of accountability and transparency. Most Black inmates were subleased to landowners to replace enslaved workers, while others continued building levees, railroads, and roads.

James established the penitentiary on the plantation grounds, where it remains today.

Eventually, convict leasing was outlawed, but its legacy endured. The prison population grew, disproportionately including African Americans, and the practice of using incarcerated people as field workers continued.

In September 2023, several incarcerated men filed a lawsuit alleging that conditions on Angola's Farm Line violated the Constitution and federal disability

law. They sought to end compulsory field labor, arguing that they and others were forced to perform hours of manual agricultural work.

Although the penitentiary has modern farming machinery, officials require men on the Farm Line to plant, water, weed, and harvest crops by hand. And this is Louisiana, where exposure to extreme heat can be deadly.

Bobby Wallace, who spent more than 22 years at Angola, described what happened when he arrived in the 1990s. “It was understood. After the (initial) physical, you going to work in the field.”

Wallace was a city guy with no farming experience. He struggled to keep pace with the other workers. When he slipped while digging canals or failed to move quickly enough, he was threatened with disciplinary write-ups that could send him to lockdown. “If you can’t keep up or you refuse to do the work,” Wallace explained, “they threaten you with calling the truck to bring you to the dungeon.” Compulsory field labor was a core part of prison operations throughout his time at Angola.

Crews of predominantly Black men, supervised by armed white guards, working the grounds of a former slave plantation: the arrangement perpetuates profound historical harm. As one attorney for the plaintiffs observed, the negative social connotations of the Farm Line are rooted in its historical connection to slavery.

Wallace felt he was following the path of his enslaved ancestors, participating in what he called “this new slave activity. It felt degrading to me,” he said. “I feel like Angola took a strong piece of me.”

The lawsuit was eventually settled in June 2026. Although working conditions in extreme heat were addressed, the question of whether the Constitution permits the government to compel incarcerated people to perform hard labor remains contested.

Do you hear the echoes of the Exodus story in this situation?

The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude, making their lives bitter with mortar and bricks and every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks they imposed on them.

And when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor.

Pharaoh, Caesar, the Louisiana Department of Corrections, the Supreme Court: institutions of power can become so invested in maintaining their authority that they show little interest in what is best for the people under their control. Sometimes, they actively create conditions of suffering—conditions of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Moses was so distraught by the plight of his people that he killed an abusive overseer. His Hebrew brothers, themselves entrapped by their circumstances, turned against one another and then against Moses.

Is this what God wants? Is this God's intention for humanity?

According to the prophet Isaiah, and according to Jesus, the answer is a resounding NO!

Isaiah proclaims:

The spirit of *Adonai* God is upon me
because *Adonai* has anointed me;
God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of *Adonai's* favor.

And later, God declares:

For I, *Adonai*, love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

So, what happens when the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's cannot coexist?

Will God act to bring justice to those who have been robbed and wronged?
Perhaps. But that is not mine to answer. I do not know the mind of God.

What is mine to answer—and what is *ours* to answer—is how we work as agents of what is of God in this world.

The truth is, there are too many fronts on which justice is needed. Individually, and even collectively, we cannot hold it all or address it all.

Earlier, Martha shone a light on the affordable housing crisis in our nation. Jan bore witness to the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the causes to which she devoted her life.

So let me ask you: Where do you see our congregations putting their energies into the things that are God's? What are we addressing, and how?

[Listen for responses.]

And there is our answer.

When the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's cannot coexist, we work together to discern what is of God—and we advocate for it.

We will not all choose to wear the robe that gets us thrown out of the party. But every single one of us is called to follow Jesus in our own way, to stand with those who suffer, and to work toward the world God intends.

One final historical note:

In 1972, a small group of white South African activists walked from Grahamstown, now Makhandla, to Cape Town to protest the injustices of

apartheid's migrant labor laws. Their 900-kilometer pilgrimage sought to shock the white electorate out of its complacency.

The pass laws and migrant labor system tore Black families apart, forcing men to live in single-sex hostels while their wives and children remained in impoverished homelands. The marchers wanted white South Africans to confront the human cost of an economic system from which they benefited.

In response, Brian Wren wrote a poem and hymn subtitled "Pilgrimage of Confession." Its title is "Spirit of Jesus, If I Love My Neighbor."

As we sing it, we are invited to consider where its words resonate with our own experiences and struggles to live into the call to be anti-racist, formed by Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves.