by A.R. Quinn

Ironically, a national movement to reduce urban violence began with an act of bloodshed.

One Thursday evening in 1992, hundreds of people from Boston’s low-income Matapan neighborhood gathered at the red-brick Morning Star Baptist Church to attend the funeral for the victim of a drive-by shooting. According to a story that appeared in The New York Times the following day, a dozen young men with sweatshirts pulled low over their heads interrupted the service. They singled out another young man, threw chairs at him, and stabbed him 8 times in front of the altar. Guns were fired in the sanctuary. Panicked people fled for the exits, and some, including small children, were injured in the stampede. It was later reported that the attack was gang-related.

At the time of the stabbing, Rev. Jeffrey Brown, then 30, was the pastor of an African-American church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Boston. His goals were modest. In his own words from a presentation he gave earlier in 2015, he wanted “just to be a good pastor, to be able to be with people through all the passages of life, to preach messages that would have an everyday meaning for folks.”

But the Morning Star incident, part of a steep rise in crime among the city’s youth, changed the direction of the minister’s life. Boston-area faith leaders, including Rev. Brown, came together to address a crisis they could no longer ignore.

Street-Corner Conversations
A small group of pastors decided to do something unusual. Just as violence had come into a church building, meeting them where they worked and lived, the pastors would go out to the streets, the source of the violence. They simply began to walk around in poor neighborhoods late at night, making connections with youth who were caught up in the culture of violence. The young people they met might never come to a church service, but the faith leaders could listen. They could learn to understand them better and help them find direction for their lives. Their conversations were profound.

As Rev. Brown later said, “I’ve learned some of my most important life lessons from drug dealers and gang members and prostitutes, and I’ve had some of my most profound theological conversations not in the hal-

Continued on page 2
Season of Peace
Continued from page 1

Dropped halls of a seminary but
on a street corner on a Friday
lowed halls of a seminary but
on a street corner on a Friday

Colson Task Force

The article in the summer issue
on the Colson Task Force re-
ally hit home, especially since
the problems identified in the
federal prisons can be applied
to the PA D.O.C. I was really sur-
priised to see that the secretary
of the PA D.O.C., Mr. John E.
Wetzel, was on the panel. Mr.
Wetzel knows what problems his
department is facing, and his
being on the Task Force gives
me some hope that there
could be real change in the
PA D.O.C. after the Task Force
has issued its report and
recommendations.

– W.O., Pennsylvania

Letters to the Editor

Remembering Incarcerated Vets
I recently received a copy of
your Inside Journal Spring
2015 newsletter. I found it very
enlightening! However, when I
read the two letters from former
soldiers, my heart nearly broke!
One was from C.H. in Missis-
sippi and the other from D.G.
in West Virginia. I have always
had a soft spot for our veterans,
as I remember the Vietnam
days and how I wanted to do
something for our servicemen.
... Their letters brought tears to
my eyes.

– K.D., Missouri

Colson Task Force

A Day With Mom
I am honored to say that today,
something broke inside me
because of a day known as
Day with Mom through Prison
Fellowship. I am completely
shattered by the realization
that we are so loved, even
(extraordinarily) inside these walls.
And that no matter what I have
done out there at the ranch that
caused this incarceration, I am
accepted, forgiven, blessed, and
loved, more than I could have
ever known. See, all those years
I spent out there busy getting
high, running from myself and
those who loved me, God had
already seen, and let me as-
sure you He causes all things
to work together for our good.
... I admit, it is a daily struggle,
especially inside this prison,
when our fellow prisoners see
only our flaws and do everything
to upset us and draw us away
from God’s light. But today
I realized that there is absolutely
nothing greater than love, God’s
love, and the love our moms
feel for us as we are here and
the love we feel for our children,
when we must let them go after
a two hour or four hour visit.

– E.G., Texas

Subscription Info
At Inside Journal (U), we receive many letters each week from
prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. We are grateful
for the interest and support of our readers—however, because of limi-
tations on our staff and budget, U is only available in bulk shipments
to your chaplain, programming coordinator, or a volunteer who visits
your facility. Chaplains, to set up these shipments for free, please
contact our editorial staff at PO. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-
1790 or insidejournal@pm.org.

Leads to Crime or Away from It?

Dropped halls of a seminary but
on a street corner on a Friday
lowed halls of a seminary but
on a street corner on a Friday

“Leaders need
to get
together
and say,
‘Let’s
squash
this beef.’”

Life in a Broken World

Sometimes we hit a low point
that makes us realize how truly
broken we are and how broken
the world is. We look around,
we look inside ourselves, and
and we want to fix things, but
what can we do if all we see everywhere
is ... rubble? How can God
make something beautiful from
the misshapen remnants of our
mistakes?

1. Realize God is not scared of
your mess. God never said
that you have to be a “good
person” for Him to love you.
In fact, He makes it pretty
clear that none of us are good
people without Him. Jesus
compared Himself to a doctor
who had come to treat spiritu-
ally sick people—not ones who
were already healthy. And if
you read the Bible, you’ll see
pretty quickly that many people
God cherishes have checkered
pasts. He’s not intimidated by
your rap sheet.

2. Give God what you have.

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Can the Violence be Reduced?

If God’s plan for His people
is peace, yet the world is so full
of turmoil, how can the violence
be reduced? The end of an era
comes when leaders commit
to a truce.

The End of an Era
Along the way, Rev. Brown
visits prisons. He believes that
men and women behind bars hold
the keys to ending urban vio-

“...O people, the Lord has
told you what is good, and
this is what He requires of you:
to do what is right, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God.” - Micah 6:8

Prayer Warriors Corner
This fall, please pray for the following concerns:
• Pray for the physical safety of all people behind bars,
  but especially those who are engaged in dangerous
  occupations like firefighting.
  “He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you
  with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and
  protection.” - Psalm 91:4
• Pray that God would establish His peace in the hearts
  of people in prisons and jails as well as on the streets.
  “God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called
  the children of God.” - Matthew 5:9
• Pray that state and national leaders would base criminal
  justice reform on the God-given worth of those
  who commit crimes and those who are harmed by them.
  “...O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and
  this is what He requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy,
  and to walk humbly with your God.” - Micah 6:8
Turning a Mess Into a Message

by Bill McCombes

A t a low point in my life, I went to see Ethel “Sister” Lee. She was a kind, grandmotherly woman who lived in a little shotgun cottage in a not-so-great part of town. She stood less than five feet tall, but she was a giant when it came to spiritual insight. Pastors would often call her for help and prayer. I went knocking on her door to seek her counsel, and she let me in. After taking me to her kitchen and setting a bowl, an egg, and a fork in front of me, Sister Lee said, “Son, do you know how to scramble an egg?”

At the time I owned and operated nine restaurants. I liked to cook, and omelets were one of my favorite dishes to make, so I nodded. “Show me,” she said. Taking an egg in one hand, I cracked it on the side of the bowl without breaking the yoke and gently let it slide into the bowl. I then began to scramble it.

In the classic 1994 film, Forrest Gump’s mother tells him that life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re going to get. At that time, my life seemed more like a box of chocolates; I had been given less than one year to live. I was not sure what any of this had to do with scrambling an egg.

An Impossible Task

With a penetrating gaze of her deep blue eyes, Sister Lee said, “Now, unscramble it!” I stared at her, not understanding what she wanted.

“Go ahead, unscramble the egg,” she repeated.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, I stammered, “I can’t. I can’t unscramble an egg.”

A profound stillness filled the small kitchen. I looked down at the bowl, filled with a very scrambled egg, and slowly turned my gaze back to her. As I looked into her eyes, it was as if I was looking into the heart of God. With quivering lips, I mumbled again, “I can’t unscramble this egg.”

Her next words cut straight to my heart. “Son, you can’t unscramble eggs. You cannot go back and undo the broken, scrambled places of your past. You cannot unscramble your mess, but you can take that same mess and turn it into a message that will help others.”

Free From the Past

As tears rolled down my cheeks, I felt something crack and break inside me. I didn’t have to carry around the weight of my past anymore. With a deep breath, I filled my lungs with the hope of the future and looked once more at the scrambled egg. It felt as if a 50-pound backpack had been taken off of me. The mistakes and hurts of my past weren’t just messes; God could take them and make them into something more beautiful and useful than I ever imagined. My past would no longer prevent me from living in my present or having hope for my future.

When I looked up, Sister Lee was back in her chair in the living room. I’m not sure how long the tears fell off my chin into the scrambled egg, but when I left the kitchen, I had given all my past to God. I knew that I could become all that He had created me to be.

Sister Lee had taught me to start a new life of forgiveness and wholeness by knowing God and following Him, inside and outside. Through one of our partner organizations, you can receive a free correspondence Bible study, and an NIV Bible, if you don’t have access to one, by writing to “All Mixed Up,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. The materials are available in English and Spanish.

And God can unscramble your most mixed-up situation.
President and President Visit Prisoners

In recent months President Barack Obama and Pope Francis have made separate, historic visits to U.S. correctional facilities. Their actions have helped bring a national focus to the incarcerated population and boosted efforts to reform the system.

President on “Fixing the System”

In July, during a week of speeches and events designed to bring attention to criminal justice reform, President Obama became the first serving American president to go to a federal prison. He went to western Oklahoma’s FCI El Reno, which houses more than 1,200 men in its main medium-security facility and a minimum-security satellite camp.

While at the prison, the president met with six incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. The president’s conversation with the prisoners was filmed for an HBO documentary hosted by Shane Smith, co-founder and CEO of VICE Media. The hour-long film, called “Fixing the System,” was released earlier this fall.

In remarks to the press afterward, President Obama noted that his direct conversation with prisoners was the most poignant part of his visit. “When they describe their youth and their childhood,” he said, “these are young people who made mistakes that aren’t that different than the mistakes I made and the mistakes that a lot of you guys made. The difference is they did not have the kinds of support structures, the second chances, the resources that would allow them to survive those mistakes.”

He added, “I think we have a tendency sometimes to almost take for granted or think it’s normal that so many young people end up in our criminal justice system. It’s not normal. It’s not what happens in other countries.”

The president said that he feels empathy toward prisoners, many of whom share a background similar to his. He grew up with a single mother and had only a limited relationship with his Kenyan father.

“There but for the grace of God,” he said to reporters. President Obama’s July visit to FCI El Reno was part of a larger second-term push for justice reform. In the days prior, he gave a major speech about criminal justice to the NAACP and commuted the sentences of 46 nonviolent drug offenders.

Pope Visits Curran-Fromhold

Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, made his first visit to the United States in late September. Millions of American Catholics and admirers of the pope thronged to the White House and Congress headquarters in Washington, D.C., and the headquarters of the United Nations in New York.

On Sunday, September 27, the pope stopped at a location less well-known to the world at large: Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a large facility with thousands of residents.

Pope Francis, a 78-year-old native of Argentina, met with 100 prisoners and members of their families in Curran-Fromhold’s gymnasium. At the front of the room was a six-foot-tall walnut chair that prisoners had built especially for the pope’s visit. The pontiff thanked them for it, saying, “It’s very wonderful. […] Thank you very much for the hard work.”

Dressed in white robes and speaking in a soft voice, the pope, who has washed the feet of prisoners at other facilities in the past, shared about the scene in the Gospel of John when Jesus washed the feet of His followers.

The pope explained, “In those days, it was the custom to wash someone’s feet when they came to your home. … Everyone walked those roads, which left their feet dusty, bruised, or cut from those stones. That is why we see Jesus washing feet, our feet, the feet of his disciples, then and now.”

“[W]e know in faith that Jesus seeks us out. He wants to heal our wounds, to soothe our feet which hurt from travelling alone, to wash us clean of the dust from our journey. … He doesn’t ask us where we have been, he doesn’t question us about what we have done. Rather, he tells us: ‘Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me’ (John 13:8). Unless I wash your feet, I will not be able to give you the life which the Father always dreamed of, the life for which he created you. Jesus comes to meet us, so that he can restore our dignity as children of God. He wants to help us to set out again, to resume our journey, to recover our hope, to restore our faith and trust. He wants us to keep walking along the paths of life, to realize that we have a mission, and that confinement is not the same thing as exclusion.”

Pope Francis encouraged all prisoners to support one another and take advantage of every opportunity for restoration and rehabilitation. “Jesus always wants us to save us from the lie that says no one can change,” he said. He helps us to journey along the paths of life and fulfillment. May the power of his love and his resurrection always be a path leading you to new life.

Prisoner Crews Tackle Wildfires

by Steve Rempe

As the wildfires raging through much of California continue to challenge the abilities and resources of professional firefighters, assistance is coming from an unexpected source—men and women in the California corrections system.

As a record-setting drought dries out the state, 4,000 prisoners have joined forces with roughly 6,000 firefighting professionals in an attempt to tame fires that have burned hundreds of thousands of acres, destroyed property, and cost lives. Working for about $2 a day, the prisoners are, in the words of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokesman Bill Sessa, “in the thick of it, cutting fire lines and drags to keep large areas of California.”

Jacques D’Elia served as a member of a similar fire brigade, fighting fires in the Mendocino National Forest for nearly three years between 2011 and 2013. After he was released, he reflected on the time spent in a fire camp in an interview with The Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization focusing on the criminal justice system. “It was so physically demanding—but I have to say, it was an honor, a privilege, and a gift to be doing it,” D’Elia told The Marshall Project. “Every day, we wanted to prove we were better than the professional firefighters who were there. And it made me understand how much good I could do and how proud of myself I could be at the end of the day, which never happened in prison.”

“I almost forgot I was incarcerated sometimes,” he added. “The staff treated you like a human, not a number.”

The job is dangerous. As Sessa noted, “When you’re actually in a fire—this is not a small grass fire, these are fires with flames 100 feet tall.”

Still, many California prisoners volunteer for firefighting duties. The money is good by fire suppression projects, like breaking a path through vegetation in an effort to stop a fire in its tracks.

Cory Sills, a California prisoner interviewed for a public radio station, recalled one of his first mornings on a fire crew. He said, “The lieutenant comes out and he goes, ‘Look, we’ll treat you like men first, fire-fighters second, and prisoners if we have to. That right there, that stick in my head for two years now because now I have a chance to be treated like a man.’”

Dill also reported a good overall experience battling blazes. “I truly believe that the fire camp saved my life,” he said. “I had always struggled with drugs and alcohol, and I have been sober ever since that camp, which is partly because of AA but also because it made me appreciate myself, feel as though I had a purpose in me.”

Despite the dangers, many incarcerated people in California volunteer to battle the drought-stricken state’s frequent wildfires.