



Weekly Resource

June 1, 2020

Dear friends,

In the wake of so many racial injustices, many of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19, we are grateful to see so many of you across the country demanding change. We stand with you in solidarity and seek to support you through our programs, weekly resources, community, and our prayers.

This week's resource is built on a letter written within the Marion Correctional Institute and published by Michelle Alexander in *The New York Times*. It was passed on to us from our Faith and Racial Justice pilot group, who helped us write our not-yet-released third racism program on systemic racial injustice and grassroots change. We hope this resource will break your heart and then enrage you and then get you talking and asking important questions (loudly) and demanding that the public see what is going on within our criminal justice system.

A logistical note: You may want to email out Michelle Alexander's article ahead of time so that group members can read it before you meet. Alternatively, you can take turns reading it aloud during your time together. [Click here](#) to access the article.

A little background if you are new to our resources: we're sending them every week during the pandemic because we humans are built for community. You can use it to stay connected with your current and past JFM small groups or with your family and friends. Or you can use it as an individual resource for personal prayer and learning.

In the meantime, [now is also the perfect time to start one of our regular programs](#), perhaps one on racism. We're offering tips and tools for facilitating all of our current programs through videoconferencing, including tutorials on how to use Zoom. The call to seek justice is just as important now as ever!

Last but not least, generosity is, at its core, a benefit to everyone. When you donate today, your gift helps us sustain individuals committed to making the world better. [Click here to help out](#). Also, please feel free to **forward this resource** to friends and family!



Stay well,
The JustFaith Ministries Staff

Welcome and Opening Meditation (5 minutes)

When everyone has dialed in, begin your time together with these or similar words:

Welcome, everyone. It's good to be with all of you. Our theme for today is mass incarceration during COVID-19. Though today's session will certainly not be an uplifting one, I hope that it will inspire us to ask hard questions and to take action, so that together we can participate in God's liberation. Before we begin, let us pause for a moment to silently honor God's presence.

Pause for 30 seconds then say:

"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." Jeremiah 8:9.

Let us pray.

Spirit of fire,
Blaze in us today.
Set a fire in our bones,
A flame so red-hot with love for your people,
that we grow weary with holding it in,
and we can no longer be silent.
Amen.

Check-In Time (10 minutes or so)

Ask this open-ended question. If you are by yourself, journal about them.

- During this time of COVID-19, have you seen acts of injustice, either on the news or in person, that have enraged you or broken your heart? If so, how did you respond?

Reflection (30 minutes or so, depending on if your group read the letter ahead of time)

Option 1: [send out this article](#) for group members to read ahead of time.

Option 2: read [the article](#) aloud, perhaps taking turns reading paragraph-by-paragraph.

Discussion questions (pick the ones that seem the most interesting and relevant):

- What are your initial reactions to this article? If participants have the article in front of them, ask them to take a minute or two to pick out a sentence that particularly stood out to them.

- At the end of the article, Alexander says:

If we, as communities and as a nation, fail to free people in this pandemic because we'd rather risk their lives than allow them to come home earlier than our criminal injustice system originally planned, we should consider ourselves guilty of utter disregard for human life.

What do you think about her statement?

- The author of this letter references King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. He says:
"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

How are King's words relevant to our society today?

- Alexander writes:

Equally important is the fact that who's behind bars today has more to do with our collective choices than individual ones. Our nation has spent trillions



on endless war and systems of mass incarceration and mass deportation; yet basic human rights such as a living wage, health care, housing and quality education are routinely denied on the grounds that we – the richest country in the world – cannot afford to provide to all of our people what citizens of many other nations are granted as a matter of right. If we had invested heavily in the communities that need it most, rather than pouring our resources into policing, surveillance, prisons and jails, most of the people who are behind bars today would not need to be freed by a group of protesters staging a “die-out” on the Statehouse grounds.

- What do you think of Alexander’s suggestion to reform our government’s spending habits?
- What are some first steps we could take to make Alexander’s suggestion a reality?

Let the group know that, if they would like to learn more about racial justice, two programs are currently available on this topic: Faith and Racial Equity: Exploring Power and Privilege (which explores racial privilege) and Faith and Racial Healing: Embracing Truth, Justice, and Restoration (which uncovers the history of racism in the United States, a subject not taught in our history books that is foundational to understanding current racial injustices).

Closing Meditation (10 minutes)

Read aloud Exodus 1:8-14 (NRSV):

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

Then read Exodus 9:1:



Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me."'"

If you have time, ask: The title of Michelle Alexander's article is "Let my People Go." Do you see any parallels between the Exodus story and mass incarceration?

If you don't have time: Allow for one minute of quiet reflection.

Then invite the group into the closing prayer with the following words:

Our closing prayer is called "Jesus, Our Tortured Brother Today" and was written by Sr. Dianna Ortiz, OSU and re-printed by [Pax Christi USA](#), the national Catholic peace movement. Though Sr. Dianna speaks from her experience of torture in Guatemala, her words are also relevant to the death that plagues our prisons and immigration detention centers.

Reader 1: Jesus, our Tortured Brother,
In this world, so many are forced to walk your path today—
the suffering and pain, the humiliation,
sense of betrayal and abandonment,
for those with power, the Romans of today,
Continue to condemn others to modern crosses.

You said that what was done to the least of these
was done to you and so each day,
You are tortured anew.

Reader 2: Jesus, Our Guardian of the Wounded and Tortured,
Bid us to look into the secret prisons — the unmarked graves —
the hearts and minds of torture survivors
Bid us to wipe the tears of the families
of those whose decapitated bodies were cast into the open sea.
Bid us to embrace the open wounds of the tortured.

Reader 3: Jesus, Guiding Spirit,
Teach us to be in solidarity with those who hang from these crosses.
Call out to those who torture, "Know the evil you have done and repent."
Call out to the rest of us, "What meaning does love have if you allow torture to
continue unopposed?"

In the name of all the tortured of the world,



give us the strength, give us the courage, give us the will
to bring this horror to an end,
in the name of love, justice, and the God of us all.

Then, in these words, invite any participants who have a prayer, a concern, or a request to briefly share it:

We are disciples on a journey.

We are the body of Christ, broken for the world.

We hold one another as we carry the concerns of our neighbors.

If you feel moved, please share your prayer aloud.

Leader: We pray also for the members of the JustFaith community across the country. Unite us through the power of your Holy Spirit, that together we might participate with you in the building of your Kingdom, in order to create a more just and peaceful world. Amen.