Hi! Before I begin, let me give you a brief introduction about myself. My name is Terri Stewart. I’m a pastor in the United Methodist tradition and I founded an organization called the Youth Chaplaincy Coalition – that is, I work with youth affected by incarceration.

In today’s scripture, we hear the story of Paul and Silas who are imprisoned. They are imprisoned not because of what they have done but because of who they are and the threat that they represent. Paul and Silas are arrested because they have committed an act of faith that threatens the system of exploitation that Roman society rests upon. They freed a slave girl from an “occult” spirit causing her to be worthless to her owners. This then upsets the social order and Paul and Silas are arrested, beaten, and imprisoned. When the slave owners plead their case, they say, “These men are troublemakers, disturbing the peace of our great city. They are from some Jewish sect, and they promote customs that violate our Roman standards of conduct.”

They should just shout: They are not like us. They are different. They do not honor our economic program. We can’t have that!

This is the same argument that the south used to start the civil war. You do not honor our economic program! We will not stand for that! And then we had the civil war, the emancipation proclamation, and the end of slavery. And for a brief moment of time after the civil war, we tried to integrate and to create a more just society during reconstruction. Freedom for African Americans lasted for about a heartbeat. Starting in 1865, Black Codes were passed by Southern states that had the intent of restricting African American’s freedom and compelling them back to work on the plantation. Black codes were developed because after being slaves and being forced to work all the time, African Americans were exhibiting anti capitalistic behavior! Mothers wanted to stay home with their children. Fathers wanted Sundays off. There was a massive work slow down. Former slaves were rebelling against the slave economy and against capitalism. Black Codes were copied directly off of the slave codes and implemented quickly.

Then, a mere 15 or so years after the civil war ended, we gave up on reconstruction, Jim Crow laws began to pop up across the United States. Why? Because African Americans were gaining too much progress in power circles by being elected to Congress and to the Senate. They are not like us. They are different. They do not honor our economic program. We can’t have that!

Laws such as separate lunch counters for white and black. Separate drinking fountains. Separate waiting rooms in bus terminals. No interracial marriages, totally segregated schools. It became illegal to be black and unemployed. Or black and resting on a public bench. Or black and loitering. Or black and vagrant. Justice was rough. Lynching became popular in the south and laws were passed that gave white people privilege over black people.

You get the picture. It was not our finest moment in American history.

Unfortunately, this moment in history lasted until the civil rights movement started going full speed in 1955 in Brown vs. the Board of Education. The period of Jim Crow laws stretched nearly 80 years before victories were had in court and in political circles that began protecting African Americans and began to strike down these laws with the culmination of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And it took years after this to untangle all the
institutional challenges coming forth from the states. Then, when the Black Panthers began to rise to power as a community organization, they quickly became criminalized. They originally developed to protect African American neighborhoods from acts of police brutality. Well, when you are willing to fight the police, you then become the criminal. Couple that with their adoption of Marxist philosophy, and you can practically hear the shouting, “They are not like us. They are different. They do not honor our economic program. We can’t have that!”

And so it continues. Today, we have discarded black codes in favor of poverty codes. So rather than rewrite laws in such a way that we can address the root cause of loitering, vagrancy, and unemployment, we are simply arresting more people. And we have, of course, enacted the war on drugs. In 1971, President Nixon, declared a war on drugs. Mandatory minimums, taking away judicial discretion with regard to drug involvement, were first enacted in 1973 in New York and then spread across the United States. The problem with mandatory minimums and the war on drugs is that study after study show that all ethnicities use drugs equally. And yet African Americans are incarcerated at higher rates than any other ethnicity. We have simply expanded black codes so that we are arresting more people rather than dealing with the roots of slavery and the issue of being African American in today’s United States. Now, nearly every marginalized community is incarcerated at higher rates than those of the dominant, Western European, cisgendered, heteronormative society.

Like the Romans, we stand and say “These men are troublemakers, disturbing the peace of our great city. They are from some gang, and they promote customs that violate our standards of conduct.”

But I’m here to tell you, we can do better!

Turn to your neighbor and say, “We can….do better!” One more time, “We can…do better!”

Turning the clock back on the mass incarceration system is possible, but it will take two things. Listening and loving. Silas and Paul sang so loudly that the ground begins to shake, the prison foundations begin to crack, the jangling chains unfasten, and the doors open. The jailer hears what is happening and awakens!

People listen. That is step 1.

I firmly believe that we are in such a time as this. We are in a time where we are hearing the voices cry out of seven year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones of Detroit, Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri, Tamir Rice of Cleveland, Ohio, Eric Garner of New York, New York, and the latest, Freddie Gray of Baltimore. And these are just a sampling of the names of unarmed African American killed by the police. Their voices are crying out in the protests of the local communities that do not know what to do any longer. Martin Luther King Jr. said that a riot is the language of the unheard. Please, today, hear their voices and their cries of pain. Step 1, listen.

One of the foundational programs that I run as the Director of the Youth Chaplaincy Coalition is the MAP program. MAP stands for “My Action Plan.” It is a process whereby a trained mentor listens to a youth and reflects their own wisdom back to them. It is a deep listening process. In this process, I have heard stories that would break your heart. Recently, the team of chaplains
were doing MAP with a youth, we will call John, at King County Juvenile Detention Center. We were using the team of us because John seemed so vulnerable. To the outside world, he probably seems like a tough, gang-hardened thug. But to us, he was a youth who cried out for love. A youth made in the image of God. Wholly good. Wholly loved. One of the activities we do is create a support tree. It is kind of like a family tree, but you fill in your support systems instead. When we did this with this John, he balked at the assignment. He could only think of one person that would be able to offer any kind of support or encouragement. And that person was not in his home.

This concerned all the chaplains. We had a confab together and discussed what to do. And we were going to work on filling out his support system creatively with YMCA’s and teachers and medical centers and churches! Anybody we could call and get to commit to help him. I went in to discuss our new plan with him and he was gone. Completely gone. Now, as a chaplain outside of the system, i.e. not a county employee, I have no right to contact him after he leaves. However! I knew that he had been also involved at the state level at Echo Glen where we also provide services. I contacted the state administrators and asked for his information. But to ensure that I followed the spirit of the law of no contact, I did not contact him, I passed the information along to another organization called 118 that works with gang involved youth on the street. This was within 24 hours of John’s release. 118 called John’s home repeatedly and left messages. Then finally, John’s mother called back two days later. It seemed John had gotten home, picked up his things, and immediately left and hit the streets. Now, just two days later, he had been arrested and booked as an adult for armed robbery. He’s looking at 7-10 years behind bars. And why? Because nobody in the institution listened to him.

He begged to go to rehab and to work on straightening his life out. He did not want to go home. He told us over and over, all I want is a bed in rehab. He told us he had nobody to support him at his house. His mother was not able to provide the kind of structure and guidance he needed because of her own issues. He told us that. But the system did not listen. That is so frustrating to me.

**We can…listen better.** Say it with me! **We can…listen better.** Listen to the voice of history. Listen to the voices of the rioting. Listen to the voices of our youth, like John. Listen to the voices of those crying, like Eric Garner and Freddie Gray, “I can’t breathe!” Listen.

Listening is the first step of transformation. Now, loving. It is hard to even imagine what loving looks like in the justice system. We may not even label it love, but as Dr. Cornel West said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” What is justice in the context of mass incarceration? For Paul and Silas, incarcerated for who they were created to be, justice was freedom that loosened the chains of the incarcerated and the chains of the jailer. What will shake the foundations of the mass incarceration system? It all comes down to us. At this point in time, it is the power that we share, the privilege that we extend on behalf of others, what we are willing to lay down in the interest of justice…of love…for all.

As we can see by the jailer’s reaction to the thundering freedom that tore through the jail of Paul and Silas, they, the jailers are just as caught in the system as anyone else. But the jailer did not
only hear the thundering crack of broken foundations and unfastened chains, he heard the stories of Paul and Silas. Scripture says that the jailer brought them to his home and they had a long conversation together. Paul and Silas told him the story of who they were. And the jailer washes their wounds and feeds them. Paul and Silas, in turn, baptize the jailer and bring him into their family. This is a communal healing. A communal justice. A communal loving. I believe they all learned to love better than day.

We can…love better. Your turn! We can…love better.

Well, it is a little difficult to imagine how this might happen today. We see the resistance of power structures, the resistance of jailers to changes in their system of policing and incarceration. Right now in Ferguson, Missouri, the Department of Justice has issued a 102 page report concluding, and I quote, “Ferguson’s unlawful police and court practices have led to distrust and resentment among many in Ferguson.” So, Ferguson, instead of figuring out how to adopt the 10 practices that are recommended by the DOJ has hired a lawyer to fight the recommendations.

We can…love better.

Here in Seattle, 123 police officers filed a lawsuit in 2014 asking a judge to block federally mandated reforms in our police department rather than to comply with the recommendations that came after the SPD was found to have a practice of excessive force and biased policing. I see the evidence of biased policing in detention. When we have a church service that is attended by nearly every youth in detention, I look out at the youth in detention and I can see the color of their skin and it makes me weep. In King County, 70% of the population is white. But they only make up 55% of the incarcerated population. If we enacted systems of restoration, reparation, and rejuvenation, this would not be true. If we diverted drug users to addiction treatment. If we diverted mental health patients to treatment providers. If we diverted students who were suspended back into schools. If we love better, we can change mass incarceration.

What does loving better look like for an individual person or even an individual church? There are several possibilities.

1. You can step forward and become a mentor for those who are incarcerated
2. A church can enact policies that ensure that people who are incarcerated are not just a ministry, but are included in the community. Policies like praying for them as you do shut-ins. Ensuring your leadership is empowered to visit people who are incarcerated. And referring to the incarcerated as returning citizens.
3. Last, there is advocacy. Know your local Congressman and Senator! Advocate for sane policies that include repealing three-strike laws, repealing mandatory minimums, and implementing parole for returning citizens. Did you know that Washington is one of eight states that has eliminated parole altogether? If we had parole, it makes the argument for repealing mandatory minimums much easier since there will actually be oversight! And there are more policies that can be changed.

We can…love better. We can…love better.
Listening and loving will return sanity to our system of incarceration just as it returned sanity to Paul and Silas and to the jailer. Both the oppressed and the oppressor benefit from a system built on co-creating justice in this manner. The revolution begins in this room. Here and now. Through listening and loving with the power of God’s love, we can co-create a thunderous roar that will shake the foundations and unfasten the chains that bind!

Amen! And Amen!