

"Are there no workhouses? Are there no prisons?" Daily Southtown: Archive (Chicago, IL) (Published as Daily Southtown (Chicago, IL)) - November 26, 2006

By Marlene Lang

The holidays approach. I thought of this caring-at-Christmas thing one day, on the job as a county court reporter. My duties encompassed covering the rule-makers, rule-breakers and the ever-popular rule-enforcers. That day I was to report on the sentencing in a murder case -- a drug dealer who had months earlier shot someone in the parking lot of a housing project. I'd been following the case since the morning of the murder, when I was sent to the scene and asked to interview the victim's widow, who, like her two children, seemed too young to grasp the tragedy.

That sentencing was not the only one, that day in court. It was drug dealers on parade, all gussied up in festive orange and jingling shackles, like it was a holiday bash, or Mardi Gras -- but without the dancing. I was forced to sit through the train of pronouncements as I awaited my convicted killer's turn before the judge. I wouldn't report on every crack or heroine dealer who was being sent up; only on crack dealers who shot people dead while on the job. That made it news. I could easily have slipped into a state of journalistic Scroogeness. "Are there no workhouses? Are there no prisons?" "Does another crackhead going up constitute news?" But a strange spirit showed up in court that day and rattled my cage. Maybe it was the Ghost of Christmas Present, or maybe my higher consciousness. Maybe it was Jesus himself.

A thin man stood before the high bench, his head hanging off his shoulders in front of him, out of shame or weariness -- I couldn't tell which. "I sentence you to eight years imprisonment." Eight years? I looked up, and quickly checked my docket notes to see that he was a repeat offender, convicted of selling crack cocaine -- again. Felony, felony, we all fall down. As if someone had heard my thoughts, I heard a woman's voice call out, "Eight years!" For those not familiar, the rules are: You don't yell out commentary on the judge's decisions in courtrooms. But this one woman forgot the rules. She was seated in a bench directly across from me, with a boy about 7 sitting on her right side, and a smaller boy, maybe 3, standing on her left, with his hands resting on her thigh. The woman began sobbing loudly, hysterically. "Eight years?" she said again. "That's too much."

The boys looked bewildered -- the 7-year-old a little scared -- as courtroom security guards made their way to the bench to escort the three out. The sobs turned into what could only be called wailing, as security soberly walked her to the door, the small child almost slipping off her hip as one guard guided her elbow along. The older boy turned around to look at the man I presumed was his father, who was still standing with his head dropped, facing the judge.

Was eight years too much? I don't know. I didn't have the details of the case, the man's criminal history, the incident reports. But even if eight years was just and appropriate, justice wasn't going to give those boys a father. It was December and I thought of long-ago memorized Biblical admonitions to help the stranger, the widow and, especially, the fatherless. With more than 2 million people incarcerated in the United States, we have a new brand of fatherless -- and motherless -- children today. Jesus.

The Old Testament prophets predicted the coming of a messiah who would make crooked paths straight, who would bring mountains down and build valleys up: Some take this to mean he would be a great equalizer of humankind. The New Testament tells of the fulfillment of prophecies; a birth marked in the heavens, recognized as unique by elderly temple servants, feared by kings. Yes, this Jesus stirred the pot. I love pot-stirrers. He did this mostly by pointing out the glaring lesson that we drag out into the holiday lights this time every year: Love your neighbor as yourself: This means everybody.

That alone would not have gotten him in trouble, likely, had it not been that Jesus insisted that loving your neighbor, and loving God, were as important as keeping all the other rules. This was unpopular among the rule-enforcers. Jesus had a nose for rule-keeping devoid of mercy and justice.

I wondered, that day, from my seat on the courtroom bench, if Jesus would have yelled out, "Eight years is too much." I couldn't decide, but I was certain of one thing: He would have visited those boys – and their dad.

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