

Isaiah 42:5-7 (NIV)

⁵ This is what God the LORD says— he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ⁶ "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Although this appears to be the job description for Jesus, it is also our job description as His disciples. God has called and equipped us with His Holy Spirit for participating with Jesus in the works of mercy described in this passage. There are many ways we can be involved in setting spiritual captives free and sharing the light of Christ to release people from darkness. But few of us have experience with prison ministry—literally setting captives free and releasing people from dungeons of darkness. We hesitate to enter the prisons or even to have relationships with prisoners who are released on parole. For those who have recently been incarcerated, the world outside (and even the church) can be a very inhospitable place where stigma and prejudice follow them. Yet, caring for prisoners is in our Wesleyan DNA and is encouraged by Jesus. "I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:36 NIV)

Bishop Kenneth Carder writes: "Wesley was convinced that faithful Christian discipleship required visiting those in the prisons as an expression of love for God and love for neighbor. Christ's admonition to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick or in prison was not a list of optional multiple choices. The Methodists were to visit the imprisoned because Jesus said to visit them, and Jesus promised to meet us in the prison! In other words, the Wesleyan way of Christian discipleship includes a pathway to the prisons where God's grace meets both the inmate and the visitor."¹

Discuss the following questions:

- 1) What are your hesitations or fears about visiting prisoners?
- 2) How might you take steps to address those hesitations and fears?
- 3) What opportunities do you have in your community or nearby for ministering with prisoners or those who have been paroled?
- 4) How might you participate with Jesus in setting captives free and releasing prisoners from dungeons of darkness?
- 5) How might visiting in the prisons or welcoming the newly released in your congregation be a means of grace for you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to overcome our hesitations and fears about ministering to prisoners or those newly released from prison. Show us opportunities for caring and for meeting you in the prisons and in the prisoners' lives. We want to be willing. Grant us grace that it may be so for your glory and for the sake of setting captives free in your name. Amen.

¹Carder, Kenneth L. "Castle Prison and Aldersgate Street: Converging Paths on the Methodist Way." This address was given February 5, 2009, at the annual dinner hosted by Vanderbilt Divinity School for United Methodists in the Nashville Area, including staff members of denominational boards and agencies. Kenneth L. Carder is a retired United Methodist Bishop who currently serves as the Ruth W. and A. Morris Williams, Jr. Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School.