

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #26

Title: *Reflection on Restorative Justice Circles*

For several years I have been a co-facilitator of Restorative Justice circles at New Lisbon Correctional Facility. To the men at NLCF I would say that the conversations we had in the circle were the most meaningful ones I had all week. To anyone on the outside who asked I would say it was the best thing I did each week. I looked forward to our Thursday sessions as much as the men in our circles. This past spring, we began a pilot program – a three-session RJ Refresher course - and we looked forward to seeing men that we had grown to know and care about in previous circles. On Thursday, March 12th we had our first session of this new program. And on Friday, March 13th we received notice that all volunteer programs would be postponed until a later date due to the coronavirus.

Every Thursday morning, I think about the men who had signed up for the refresher program with hopes of gathering with others to share how they have been making positive life changes and to find support from others in the circle for living out those changes within the confines and difficulties of prison. The men talked about the importance of family support and how many of them wanted to be a better person for their children. During this pandemic I have missed not been able to gather with family members who live out of state and I've been thinking about the men in our circles who look forward to visits from their loved ones. Like me, they've not been able to see their family since the Covid-lockdown began in March. For those of you in prison, these months have meant a double lockdown – locked down in prison and locked down because of Covid.

One of the things I often share with the men in the circle is my involvement with Palestinians living in Bethlehem. I do this for a reason. The people I meet in Bethlehem share a somewhat similar experience with men in prison. They, like you, live in a confined space, surrounded by walls, unable to move freely, watched over by guards, and vulnerable to rules imposed by the state. For some they have lost homes and livelihoods. Often they are separated from their extended family because of the walls that imprison them within the confines of the city. To visit loved ones they must get approval from the guards. Many have been confined in refugee camps away from their former homes and communities for 70 years. They have had to rebuild their lives, and now, in the days of confinement imposed by the coronavirus, it has become impossible not only to make a living for their family, but also to believe that their dreams, for themselves and their children, are possible.

My friend Mitri Raheb, an Arab Palestinian Christian leader in the city of Bethlehem, believes we are not bound by the limitations imposed on us, by the state or by the virus. He encourages members of his community to look up at the vast expanse of the sky instead of the walls that surround them and make plans for the time when the walls will come down and they will be free to pursue the life they dream of.

Mitri urges: Learn a trade. Develop a talent. Do something that brings you joy. Contribute to your community. Don't let others define you; work to become the person you want to be.

Even when all seems hopeless, Mitri inspires his community to hope and to believe in a vision of the world as it could be.

The hope and determination of the Palestinian people I've met inspire me. And this is why I tell the men in the circle about my experiences in Bethlehem. Even in the midst of an occupation – or incarceration – you have the opportunity and ability to grow into the person you want to be in order to live the kind of life you want to live. So, I encourage you as Mitri encourages people in his community, to believe in yourself as a person with potential, find something to learn that interests you, surround yourself with people who will encourage you - and know that there are people out here, people that you don't even know who want to see you succeed.

I know this is not easy. There will be obstacles to overcome. Even more in these double lockdown days. There will be those who think you are naïve or arrogant. You may have setbacks along the way. But each of you has the capacity to improve yourself and your community. Your life matters. All of us who have volunteered in Restorative Justice programs whether at New Lisbon or Fox Lake believe in you and look forward to seeing who and what you will become.

And hopefully, we will be able to gather in these circles of support in the future.

~ Rev. Van Overbeke, Restorative Justice volunteer