

God, Life, and Everything
for February 26, 2014
"Educating the Prodigal"

I don't love to get people mad at me, but I suspect this one will do it - at least to some. Oh well.

The reason I think people will be mad is because I've seen such venting of spleens surrounding this issue that it's almost frightening. No, it's not Common Core (though that's a pretty hot potato, too). I'm talking about Governor Cuomo's proposal to fund college education for prison inmates.

His reasoning behind this is fairly straightforward:

1. Educating inmates reduces recidivism rates significantly. Those who complete educations behind bars are far less likely to return to prison later. According to the *New York Daily News*, "The Bard Prison Initiative has enrolled hundreds of inmates in New York State, granting degrees to half their students. Most importantly, just 4% of enrollees have ended up back in prison so far."

2. Educating inmates costs about \$5,000 per inmate per year. When you consider that it costs \$60,000 per year just to warehouse a single inmate, the reduced recidivism saves the state a bundle of money. *Forbes* magazine estimated that every inmate who leaves the system and stays out saves the state about \$25,000 a year.

3. Former inmates with degrees go on to become productive members of society - just as the original concept of "correctional facility" had intended. Those who do not receive these educations tend to return to society just long enough to rob, rape and murder again.

In short, the program is proven to save money and make the streets safer.

So what's the problem?

The problem is that a lot of people hate this idea. Assemblyman Steve McLaughlin (R-Troy) started a petition called "Kids before Cons" protesting the Governor's move. His argument is that these cons are undeserving of the help of the state while lots of honest, middle class folks are struggling to pay tuition.

As one of those relatively honest middle class folks struggling to pay college tuition, I'd like to have my say.

Yes, tuition is too expensive. Our state universities are out of reach for many of us. We actually sent our son to a private school because scholarships made it cheaper than any SUNY school.

But when you think that the prison initiative *saves the state money*, it's hard to see how the high cost of my kid's education has anything to do with inmates. Mr. McLaughlin *could* have done something about the high tuition long ago, and I would have been right there beside him. The fact is, we did *not* hear our elected officials doing much about it - because they didn't care

What's more, now that the inmate initiative can save the state so much money, there's no reason why we can't take those savings and invest them in our kids' educations. That would be a win-win for everyone. Fewer people in prison, safer streets, and more money for our kids to get a college education. Maybe Mr. McLaughlin should put his energies.

Buts he won't.

Because the issue isn't money, and it isn't our kids.

It is manufactured outrage founded on the concept that people who do bad things don't *deserve* to have anything positive happen to them. Ever. It is this childish notion that "it's not fair."

Well, life is not fair, and if you're a Christian, you know that God is not fair - and you're thankful for it.

Here's what I mean.

One of Jesus' most powerful parables - a story that tells us about God and ourselves - is the Prodigal Son. Some call it the Prodigal Father because the father in this story is so absurd. If you don't know the story, here's the Readers Digest version.

A rich father had two sons. The older one worked hard and never gave his dad a moment of worry. The younger son was a jerk. He decided he wanted his portion of the inheritance before Dad knocked off, so he pestered his father until he got it. Then he left home and blew all his money on dissolute living. When his money was gone, so were all his friends - and he was left begging and slopping pigs to stay alive.

One day he decided to try to get a job with his father because Dad's servants lived better than he was living. He figured he couldn't just go back home as a son, but maybe as a servant. Well, the father saw him coming down the street, and before the kid ever got a word out, Dad ran to him, kissed him, ordered fancy robes for him and threw a big party to welcome him home. The older son was royally ticked off because he had done everything right and never got a party. In short, he says, "It's not fair!"

Dad's response? "You're always with me, and what's mine is yours - but your brother was dead and now is alive. We must celebrate."

In a way, giving inmates an education is allowing them to come home again. Sure, those of us who don't get in trouble may not get the party, but the household is better off - more harmonious and safer - for welcoming the prodigals back.

Christians ought to realize that we are all prodigal children - some just more than others. When we desire to harm others (and "making them pay" is harming), we reject what the Father desires.

Rejecting education for the inmates is not only impractical and costly to society, but it is curiously at odds with what Jesus teaches us through the Prodigal Son. I imagine many will have strong words of outrage at my thoughts here. But then you have to ask yourself what you're really angry at: the fact that we'll save money and make the place safer or the fact that someone who was once dead to us is now alive.