Hello, everybody. Great to be here. Thank you so very much. In this room, it’s warm in Chicago. Thank you for your spirit, for that very kind and magnanimous introduction. Wonderful to be here among so many friends.

I'll get in trouble if I start naming all the preachers and teachers and professors I know in this room. But once again, in a real sense, our icon patriarch, somebody I grew up looking up to, and that all of these years later, I'm able to say I know: the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson. Give him a great big round of applause.

His son and my colleague, Jonathan, is in the house. Congressman Jackson – let's hear it for Congressman Jackson. Thank you. Grateful to all the leaders who are here. I would like to welcome and publicly congratulate someone. You know, I'm pastor of Ebenezer Church, and a junior United States Senator from Georgia. I have another proud distinction: I'm Brad Braxton's successor at the Douglas Memorial Community Church in Baltimore, Maryland. We both serve that church. I came after him, right after him. He's the new president of the Chicago Theological Seminary! Bless you, brother. I have to acknowledge that lineage. Reggie Williams, Dr. Proctor would be proud.

Thank you so much for this kind invitation. As I thought about the Colver Lecture and the reinauguration of this lecture series and all that that legacy represents: this bold abolitionist and leading light for freedom during tough times, out of which the legacy of Virginia Union springs, the Baptist Theological Union.

I want to talk in that spirit from this title: "Let My People Go: The Scandal of Mass Incarceration in the Land of the Free." Fifty-five years ago this month, Martin Luther King, Jr. took his last stand for freedom. In a very real sense, he was summoned to Memphis by the sacrifice of two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, who were literally – literally – crushed to death in the back of a trash truck where they sought shelter from a storm. They were there because sanitation workers were prohibited from riding in the truck with their white counterparts. And so viewed as disposable refuse, they could only ride on the back of the truck or in the compactor area.

And in a country where we too often tell ourselves a simple story, even about the Civil Rights Movement, I want you to observe that this is 1968 – four years after the Civil Rights Law of 1964 with its integration of public accommodations. Three years after the Voting Rights Act. They were seeking shelter from a storm, but there was no shelter from the rains and the storm of white supremacy. And so, the Black bodies of Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed and killed by the vicious machinery of Jim Crow segregation.

Yet tragically, it was these crushed Black bodies – the latest blow in a long pattern of neglect and abuse – that finally gave fuel to the fledgling Memphis movement, triggering the radical spirit in action of the local Black churches, and producing those historic and iconic signs: "I Am A Man." Here's how you know when you are an oppressed people: when you have to have a movement or make signs or have a campaign to declare about yourself that which ought to be obvious. I can think of nothing more sublime, nothing more basic. I can think of no more humble assertion than to simply say, "I am a man." Or in the case of Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a woman?" Or in more recent days, "Black Lives Matter."
Matter. Matter. Those who retort, "No, all lives matter," manifestly miss the point. It is oppression itself that makes necessary movements to affirm the truth of what ought to be obvious. And one of the biggest obstacles to genuine human community is a glib, unreflective and uncritical universalism. Justice demands the honest recognition that not all lives are imperiled in the same way.

That's what summoned Dr. King to Memphis. He was there to stand with those who needed a movement. A little over two months later, he would be slain by an assassin's bullet on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. His last book, published a year later, was entitled, "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?"

I ask this afternoon, this evening: where indeed? Specifically, 55 years after the Memphis movement and the Poor People's Campaign, where are the places that poor bodies and Black bodies and brown bodies are being crushed by the machinery of the state, or the society at large, demanding the attention of the church and the larger community? While recognizing the structural complexity of racism and its inextricable link to and participation with other constituent parts of hegemonic power – including sexism, classism, and militarism – I would argue that today, mass incarceration is Jim Crow's most obvious descendant. And like its ancestor, its dismantling would honor the Colver legacy, would represent both massive social and infrastructural transformation and immeasurable power in a society still steeped in the ideology of white supremacy.

The ideology of white supremacy has created the massive infrastructure of the American carceral state. And I argue that this massive, privatized infrastructure, the carceral state, has in turn constructed its own distinct ideology. The infrastructure has created an ideology that has a life of its own. And it is this ideology – the distorted fear-based logic of the carceral state, and its construal of blackness as dangerousness and guilt, that imperils all of us – but especially Black bodies. During routine traffic stops: Sandra Bland, Philando Castile. While running in the rain through one's own community: 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. While playing in a park: 12-year-old Tamir Rice. While eating ice cream or playing with family members in the sanctuary one's own home: Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson. More recently: Tyre Nichols, beaten by a gang of Black police officers. Same sickness. Don't be confused by phenotype. The sickness is the same.

I would argue that 16-year-old Ralph Yarl – who was shot in the head by an 84-year-old who spends all day watching Fox News, listening to conservative television and radio – I would argue that 16-year-old Ralph Yarl, in many ways a model of a kid, is like too many Black men, a victim of the carceral state. Rang the wrong doorbell. Snatched by the tentacles that have hollowed out entire Black communities.

I submit that at root, this is a spiritual problem, which is why we ought to be dealing with it in seminary. It is not just a political problem, but it is symptomatic of a sickness in the body politic. And here again Dr. King, and those who marched alongside him, helps us, because I'm always struck by the fact that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s model was not to end segregation in America. That was their goal. It was not to secure voting rights. Their model was not to secure civil rights. Their model was to redeem the soul of America. Yet again, it is the soul of America that is, again, that is in trouble.

The United States of America, the land of the free, is by far – by far, by far – the mass incarceration capital of the world. Think about that. The land of the free, mass incarceration capital of the world. Shining city on this hill shackles more people than any land in the world. Nobody even comes close in the rates of incarceration or even in the sheer numbers of people incarcerated. It is a scandal and a scar on the soul of America that we are a nation that comprises 4% of the world's population and warehouses nearly 25% of the world's prison population – is a scandal and a scar on the soul of America. That we lock up people awaiting trial and keep them there for weeks and months and years. Remember Kalief Browder? Not because they pose a threat to society, but because they cannot afford to pay a bail bond is a scandal
and a scar on the soul of America. That we criminalize poverty and penalize people for being poor, is a scandal and a scar on the soul of America. That we have a greater percentage of our Black population in jails and prisons than did South Africa at the height of apartheid is a scandal and a scar on the soul of America. That in all of our large American cities, as many as half of the young Black men are caught up somewhere in the matrix and social control of the criminal justice system – and that Black men have been banished from our families, devastating generations of our families – it's a scandal and a scar on the soul of America.

These men – and increasingly, women – then come out carrying the mark and the stigma of “convicted felon” or “ex-felon,” and are therefore confronted with all of the legalized barriers against which Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson and others fought in the old Jim Crow. Housing discrimination: legal. Employment discrimination: because you have the mark “felon” – may have taken a plea, may have spent no considerable time in jail – legal. Barred from voting, some professional licenses – in some states like mine, even the license to be a barber. Public benefits, student loans.

And most of the Black men in America's jails and prisons today are charged with non-violent, drug related offenses. They are casualties in America's War on Drugs. At least, it was a war when the drug was crack and the bodies were Black and brown in places like Detroit, Baltimore, the South Side of Chicago, South Central LA, and certain communities in Atlanta. We had a war on drugs. But now that we are talking about opioids, it even sounds nicer. And meth. And the faces of the human tragedy are white and suburban. Suddenly, we have a public health emergency. Two very different responses to the same problem. Public health emergencies are addressed through doctors, public health officials, social workers, therapists and clinics. Wars are prosecuted against enemy combatants, who are either killed or become prisoners of war.

The data shows that Black people and white people use and sell drugs at remarkably similar rates. We're all entitled to our own opinion, not our own facts: Black people and white people use and sell drugs at remarkably similar rates. Yeah, Black people are 12% of the general population, over 50% of the prison population. And that's why Michelle Alexander has persuasively argued that the mass incarceration of tens of thousands of Black bodies for non-violent drug-related offenses, and the long consequences that result, are constituent parts of the new Jim Crow. Legally barred from the doors of entry to citizenship, symbolized in the right to vote and denied access to ladders of opportunity and social upward mobility – she observes that those who have served their time in America's prisons, or who plead guilty in exchange for little or no actual prison time, are not part of a class, but a permanent caste system.

I agree. And in theological terms, in theological terms, I submit that they are condemned to what I call eternal social damnation. Even in the face of heroic efforts to carve for oneself a path of redemption, ours is an exceedingly punitive system that routinely produces political pariahs and economic lepers, condemned in a very real sense to check a box on applications for employment, and other applications reminiscent of the ancient biblical stigma: “unclean.”

There is no clear example of America's unfinished business with the project of racial justice than the 21st-century caste system engendered by its prison industrial complex. Moreover, I submit that there is no more significant scandal belying the moral credibility of the American churches than their conspicuous silence as this human catastrophe has unfolded now for more than four decades.

To be sure, scores of American churches have prison ministries, and some even have reclamation ministries for returning citizens. But there's a vast difference between offering pastoral care and spiritual guidance to the incarcerated and formally incarcerated, and challenging, in an organized way, the public policies, laws, and policing practices that lead to the disproportionate incarceration of people of color in the first place. That is the work of justice.
And so I came just to suggest that we need a national multifaith, multiracial movement to end the scourge of mass incarceration, the insatiable beast whose massive tentacles place Black children in choke holds and brown babies in cages on both sides of the border.

But here's the problem: How do you build an effective social movement, particularly among church folk, when the primary subjects of its advocacy are those stigmatized by the pejorative label “illegals,” in the case of our Latinx sisters and brothers – subjected to draconian tactics of immigration enforcement, whether they're citizens or not? How do you win public sympathy and support for convicted felons? It is one thing to stand up for Rosa Parks, who Martin Luther King, Jr. called “one of the most respected people in the Negro community.” It is quite another to fight for the basic human dignity of persons whose entire humanity has been supplanted by a legal and moral stigma. And in many instances, they may well bear real culpability for their condition.

Indeed, this is part of the conundrum posed by racial bias in the criminal justice system. In a world where ordinary Black people must still navigate every day the racial politics of respectability, bearing the burden of being in the words of that old folk saying, “a credit to the race.” That's what they said during my dad's times: "Be a credit to the race.” I sometimes wonder if people think Donald Trump is a credit.

But there's a sense even in the Black community that these folk have not kept their side of the deal. If many outside of the African American community view these young Black men who track through the courtrooms of every major American city every single day with fear and contempt, many within their own families and churches harbor feelings of disappointment, anger, and ambivalence. They are the ultimate outsiders: stigmatized for life as both Black and criminal, two words that have long been interchangeable in the Western moral imagination.

400 years after the arrival of more than 20 enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia, the Black body remains a central text in the narrative of a complicated story called America. For all who would understand who we Americans are and how we have arrived, the Black body is a central reading. There is no American wealth without reference to Black people, yet the Black body is viewed essentially as a problem. Sitting at the center of what Gunnar Myrdal characterized in 1944 as an American dilemma. 400 years later, formerly enslaved Black bodies and branded Black bodies and lynched Black bodies and raped Black bodies and segregated Black bodies are now stopped, frisked, groped, searched, handcuffed, incarcerated, paroled, probated, released, but never emancipated Black bodies.

Like many, I have witnessed the human cost of this story and stigma as a pastor, and I have witnessed it personally in my own family. I was struck that 60 days or so after I announced my candidacy for the United States Senate – as we found ourselves 30 days after my announcement in the throes of a pandemic, COVID-19 – that weeks after that, we would be confronted again with the reemergence of another pandemic: COVID 1619. The lynching of George Floyd, out of which a multiracial coalition of conscience poured out into American streets – for once, we could not turn away. Sometime thereafter, there was another tragedy. A young man named Rayshard Brooks was killed by Atlanta police. He'd fallen asleep in the parking lot of Wendy's. They'd had a conversation, he and the officers, for nearly an hour where he decided to run. He was in Georgia's parole and probation system, which is longer than almost any in the country.

Some say, "Well, why did he run? Maybe he would be alive." Well, here's the dilemma for Black parents. Rayshard Brooks ran, and he's dead. George Floyd did not run, and he's dead. So what do we tell our children?
I eulogized Rayshard Brooks, and then I got up in the wee hours of the next morning, before sunrise, to drive down to south Georgia to pick up my brother. He was standing outside of the prison with a sack carrying all of his belongings. Here I was running for the United States Senate. I used to sleep on the top bunk; he slept on the bottom bunk. There he was standing there on the sidewalk with all of his belongings, standing outside, could get in my car for the first time in 22 years. He was convicted in a drug sting. First-time offender, a situation in which no one was killed, no one was physically hurt – wait for it: no drugs even hit the street. Crime scenario created by the state. For that, he was sentenced to life in federal prison without the possibility of parole. And the only reason he was coming out that day, 22 years later, was because of COVID-19. Today, three years later, he's outside, but still under control.

But no group is more stigmatized than those persons on death row. By the time I met Troy Davis and became involved with his case, both as pastor to him and his family and as a public advocate for the sparing of his life, he had been on death row for nearly 20 years, convicted in 1991 for the 1989 slaying of Savannah, Georgia police officer Mark Allen MacPhail. 2008, we held the first of several rallies for him at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Davis's case had already gained national and international attention, and brought together unlikely allies in the struggle to save his life. There was so much doubt surrounding this case that on separate occasions, Davis's execution was stayed within minutes of his death.

One fall afternoon, I sat in a pastoral visit at his cell as he reflected on his life, its meaning, and his hope that somehow his story might be a bridge to a better future and a larger good. We talked. We prayed. We sat silently. We said goodbye. Two days later, I stood in a prison yard with his family and hundreds of others, one fall night, September 21st, 2011, as Troy Davis was stretched out and strapped to a gurney, bearing an eerie resemblance to a crucifix, and executed in my name, as a citizen of the state of Georgia, by lethal injection.

In the years that I have continued to fight for Davis and others like him – for the soul and for the soul of a nation scarred by the scandal of mass incarceration and the lives of young Black men like Trayvon Martin, who was tragically endangered and murdered by the stigma of blackness as criminality – I have often reminded myself that I preach each week in memory of a death row inmate, convicted on trumped up charges at the behest of religious authorities, and executed by the state without the benefit of due process.

The cross, the Roman empire's method of execution reserved for subversives, is a symbol of stigma and shame. Yet the early followers of Jesus embraced the scandal of the cross, calling it the power of God. To tell that story is to tell the story of stigmatized human beings. To embrace the cross is to bear witness to the truth and power of God: subverting human assumptions about truth and power, pointing beyond the tragic limits of a given moment toward the promise of the resurrection. It is to see what an imprisoned exile of a persecuted community saw, as he captured in scripture the vision and hope of a new heaven and a new earth.

And so, this is why Ebenezer Baptist Church has been trying to find a way to faithfully and effectively bear witness to God's justice. A few years ago, we organized a national multiracial, multifaith conference focused on the collective work of dismantling mass incarceration by catalyzing the resources of people of faith and moral courage in a movement that operates at the local, state, and national level. We are now at work, and we have four major objectives. One: to train and equip pastors, rabbis, and imams, and other faith leaders and their teams, with practical tools for addressing their ministries to mass incarceration as a social justice issue. Two: to identify and coalesce around a strategic legislative agenda – I can now help with that – at the local, state, and national levels. Three: to organize an interfaith network of partners focused on abolishing mass incarceration. And four: to lay the groundwork for the development of a new media strategy for reframing the public understanding of the prison industrial complex, and its implications for public safety, equality, and quality of life.
We who are people of faith, we who preach every Sunday in memory of that death row inmate, are uniquely situated to utilize our institutional power and the grand symbols of our tradition to address stigma the way Jesus did.

Much of our work has been centered around expungements. In 2016, we came together with other county officials to organize and host our very first expungement clinic, a one-stop shop in the church's banquet hall that cleared the arrest records of hundreds of citizens who had been arrested but never convicted. Yet, like millions of Americans who have arrest records, they were either barred or limited in their employment options, rejected in their applications for housing, apartments, and other features of a prosperous and dignified life. We continue these expungement events, and they have been emancipation moments for people looking for a second chance.

I remember the very first one, and I remember the joy I felt as I walked into our sanctuary one Saturday morning, and realized that everyone gathered that day in church had a record. But then I thought to myself that in a real sense, that's true every Sunday. Everybody in church has a record. None of us wants to be forever judged by our worst moment. And each of us has some record that cries out for grace and redemption.

And sometime after the first event, I was sitting in the chair at the barbershop. Believe it or not, true story: I was sitting in the chair at the barbershop, and my barber was finishing shaping up my goatee. And I was rushing to get out of the chair to my next appointment when another patron walked up to me. He said, "Rev, that was a great event y'all had." I said, "What event?" He said, "The expungement event." I politely said, "Thank you," and I was trying to get to my next appointment. He said, "Rev, wait. You don't understand. You cleared my record." I stood there and looked at him. He was middle-aged man, well-dressed, well-spoken, respectable. I had to examine my own assumptions. You cleared my record. Something about a bad check 20 years ago, never convicted. He said, "You cleared my record, and as a result, I've got a better job, my income has gone up, and my life is better." I congratulated him. I shook his hand.

And I was headed for the door when he said, "Rev, wait. A young couple in my family had a baby that they did not have the means to raise. Family member. The baby was headed to foster care. But because I came to church, somebody cleared my record. I was able to do what I would not have been able to do. I was able to adopt my own family member." The trajectory of two generations changed by one stroke of grace. I'm glad, but I'm also sad and I'm mad, because he had never been convicted of anything. He had an arrest record. He was free. Yet for 20 years, he had been bound by the massive tentacles of our prison industrial complex. While helping people like him, it is that fundamental problem that we seek to address in a nation where nearly 30% of adults has a record in America.

So now, we are working with others to address this. People of faith and moral courage should lead the charge. It is the fear-based logic of the carceral state that is killing people, Black and white citizens. We're all armed to the hilt, afraid of one another. We've seen in recent days, it's dangerous. Ring the wrong doorbell. Go in the wrong driveway. That is why people of faith must lead this charge. And we must say to a failed, fear-based system, "Let my people go." That is what God told Moses to tell Pharaoh: "Let my people go, that they may worship me." Liberate them from human bondage so that they might blossom and live lives of human flourishing, lives that give glory to God, rather than to human systems.

Moses had a speech impediment, yet God picked him. Moses had a record, yet God picked him. Or maybe God picked him because he had a record. God has a record of using people with a record. Moses had a record. He slew an Egyptian. He killed a man. God had more in store for him. Joseph had a record. Long before a Central Park case and a ruthless prosecutor, long before Donald Trump's op-ed – “throw
them in the jail" – there was Potiphar's wife. Joseph was thrown in prison, but he held on to his dreams. The three Hebrew boys had a record, and they were sentenced to death for an act of civil disobedience. Daniel was charged, convicted, and thrown in the lion's den. John was imprisoned on an island called Patmos, the Rikers Island of that day. And there he saw a new heaven and a new earth.

Jesus had a record. Not surprising, given his start. Of course he had a record. Look at the neighborhood he was born in. Born in a barrio called Bethlehem, smuggled as an undocumented immigrant into Egypt, raised in a ghetto called Nazareth. But he came saying, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind, to preach liberty to those in captivity."

They brought him up on trumped up charges, and they convicted him without the benefit of due process. They marched him up Golgotha's Hill and executed him on a Roman cross, buried him in a borrowed tomb. But he was so powerful that he turned the scandal of the cross into an enduring symbol of victory over evil and injustice. And his movement was so contagious that he got off the cross and got in our hearts.

He is my redeemer and liberator. And in his name and in the name of all that is good and just and righteous and true, we who are people of faith must stand together once again, redeem the soul of America, and say to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."