

CRIBB<S>NOTE – MARCH 22, 2009

Have you noticed how many people are being criminalized in our society? In the neighborhood where I grew up, children walked to school during the week and played in the streets on Saturdays. Adults talked over fences and helped each other do different kinds of jobs around their homes.

My grandmother, Bessie Gordon, organized a community beautification campaign that planted trees which continue to stand and line our streets. Our neighborhood was a safe haven. For the most part, it remains a community where people look out for each other, but there have been some changes. Many of my neighbors have been criminalized.

There used to be a time when neighbors provided temporary shelter and supplied food and cooking ingredients to tide each other over until they had enough money to go to the store. Then, we depended on our neighbors to check in to make sure everybody was alright. Now, as more people are being criminalized, it is more difficult to knock on doors just to see how our neighbors are getting along.

Once upon a time, if someone got sick, the doctor made house calls. Dr. George Sealey used to come to our home in the middle of night with his black bag in hand ready to determine what was ailing us. More than once, he entered our bedrooms and ministered his medical care to bring us back to health.

It was not unusual in our home for the telephone to ring at weird hours. After the call, we could hear my father and mother whispering. Within minutes they would be up, out of bed, dressed, and heading out the door in response to someone in trouble. It happened so often, it almost felt routine. My grandmother remained behind to take care of my two sisters and me. When my grandmother was away working as a domestic in a house far across town, my live-in cousin, Odessa, would attend to us children. With the criminalization of people becoming so prevalent, such calls occur more often across the country.

For example, people with severe mental illness are often treated like criminals rather than patients. In fact, the largest psychiatric unit in Los Angeles County is housed in the county jail.

According to a Los Angeles Times article on November 20, 2001, “The Los Angeles County Jail spends \$10 million per year on psychiatric medications.” Instead of providing mental health institutions to treat severely mentally ill patients, “America’s jails and prisons are now surrogate psychiatric hospitals for thousands of individuals with the severest brain diseases.” (*Criminalization of the Severely Mentally Ill*. Arlington, VA: Treatment Advocacy Center)

Impoverished immigrants who arrive in the United States are viewed as suspects upon entry and handled as criminals during their stay. Persons without legal documentation are hunted, labeled, and subjected to the criminal justice system. They are separated from their families and deported back to their countries. Instead of receiving the welcoming hand of hospitality as posted on the Statue of Liberty, criminalized immigrants are caught up raids at work places and corralled into holding pens.

Criminalization of the poor is not limited to immigrants. Once self-sufficient citizens who lose their jobs and ability to pay their bills are cast among the lot of ‘criminals’ as they slip into the homeless population.

Denizens of urban streets, they too get swept up in police actions that are mandated by merchants who want “undesirable elements” away from their businesses. Sections of downtown are transformed into upscale habitats that forcibly remove homeless people out of single-resident rooms in shabby hotels.

Stories about criminalizing America’s most vulnerable people overrun nearly every sector of our society. We in the church are placed among the criminalized as an alternative presence to retain their humanity. We are called to be a ‘healing witness’ to those whose lives have been displaced and rearranged.

We must stop the criminalization of our brothers and sisters during this period of great stress and profound needs. We must help our country find a better way to address prevailing conditions that lead to the deterioration of persons, families and communities.