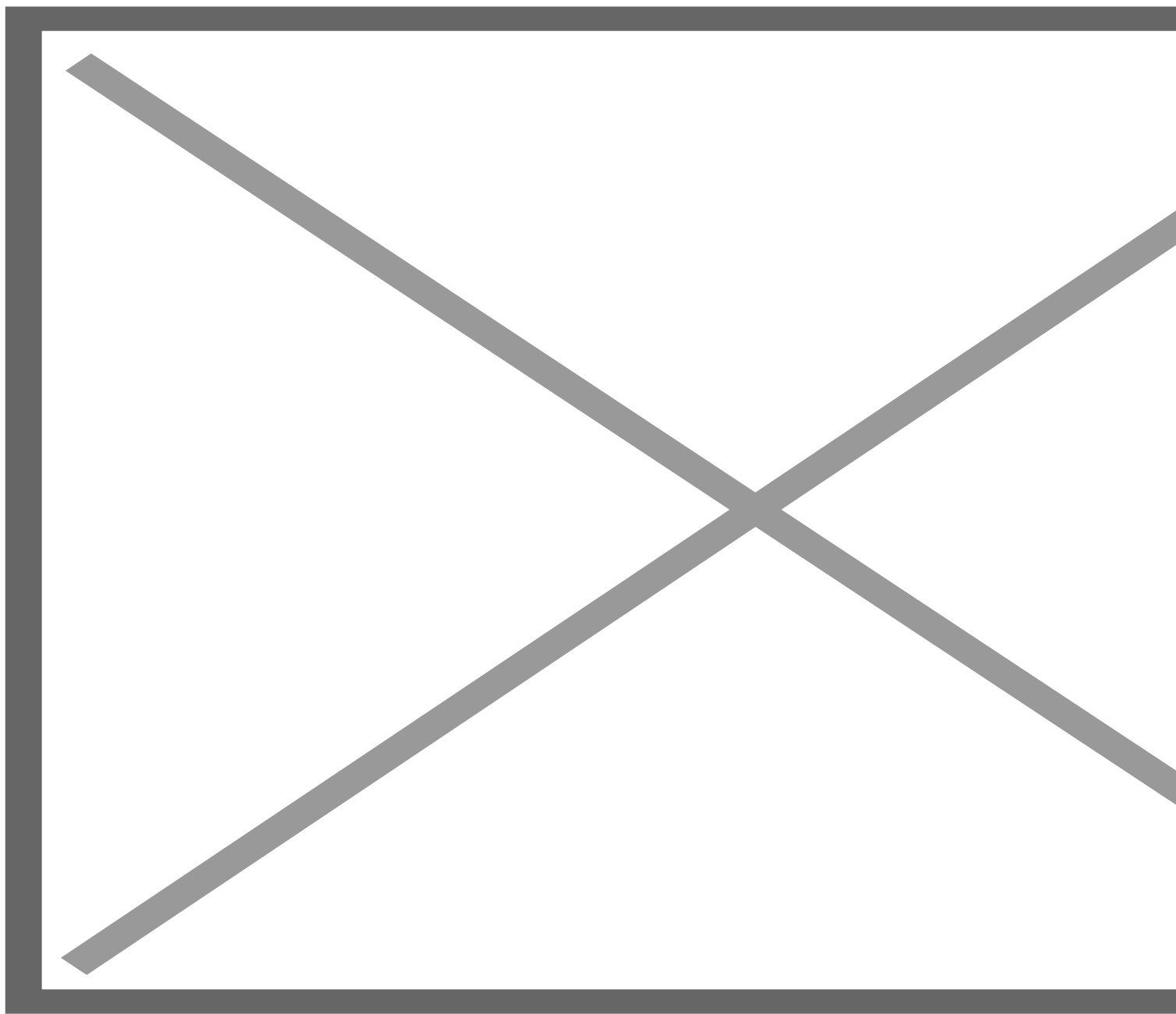


A better prayer for prisons

I love the Book of Common Prayer. I have some problems with Prayer #37.

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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I spent my first 18 years in the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches and the next 30 wandering from denomination to denomination. In college I developed a romantic fixation on Catholicism and Orthodoxy, as

disappointed evangelicals tend to do in college. I am denominationally postmodern.

But the Episcopal Church is where I've spent the most years of my adult life. Nothing accidental about that. The denomination seems to serve as a sort of liturgical and intellectual center of gravity for the mainline, whether or not it always wants to or deserves to. It has a lot of old money and fancy buildings. It serves as a bridge (not the only one) to Christianities older than the Reformation. And it has a great prayer book.

A denomination's primary prayer book shouldn't be updated at the drop of a hat; I'd aim for once or twice a century, tops. When it comes to the emotional furniture people have sat on their entire lives, you want to wait to tamper with it until the legs start giving out. And I take it that churches have a responsibility—it's not our main responsibility, but it's one of them—to counterprogram the dominant media environments around them. Giving people old, carefully chosen words to speak and read is one way to do this. So, as a non-Episcopalian who will probably darken those doors again at some point, I hope the current Book of Common Prayer is still in effect when I do. It's a full year younger than I am—it dates to 1979—and I am still more or less functional.

But whenever the Episcopalians do get around to revising, I want to make some suggestions regarding Prayer #37, "For Prisons and Correctional Institutions."

First of all, just call it "For Prisons"—avoid the euphemism. Prisons are places where people are held captive, sometimes because they arguably need to be but often not. Prisons are good at that job. They are not great at any other job, and certainly they are not good at "correcting." They tend to do that job secondarily and grudgingly, on a budget that legislators keep cutting.

The prayer runs in full:

"Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal: Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment. Remember all prisoners, and bring the guilty to repentance and amendment of life according to your will, and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release; forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice. Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate; and save them from becoming brutal or callous. And since what we do for those in prison, O Lord, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask for your mercy's sake. Amen."

No complaints about the first clause. The second clause, after the colon, makes me worry a little—we want Christ to visit every place, from the gym to the waste dump to the comic book store, with his "pity and judgment," but we don't lead off every prayer that way. Why are we assuming from the get-go that prisons need more pity, and more judgment, than do the fancy restaurants where representatives of the private-prison industry lobby our elected officials, or the wealthy and desperate suburbs where those lobbyists' children search for meaning in the corrupt world their parents have created for them?

The problem really sets in with the next sentence. It's not that there aren't many guilty people in prison; it's that we're taking it for granted that guiltiness is the first phenomenon that prison should make us think about. Prisons are good at sequestering people, but courts aren't always great at separating the guilty from the innocent. Where private prisons exist—as I write this, a rapidly growing number of immigration detainees sit in a private facility just three hours from me—their whole *raison d'être* is to make money. All prisons serve, meanwhile, as a form of security theater, as a thing to threaten people with in order to coerce information, and as an alternative social safety net for demographic groups our society has decided to abandon.

Prison also does the necessary job of preventing the occasional Charles Manson from moving about freely. But the point of a system is what it does, as Stafford Beer said, and our system does a lot of other things too. Our religion worships a God who faced death row and was first theorized in epistles by a man who spent years in captivity. Our prayers for prisons should start from a certain realism about what these places really do.

I think the US prison system exists in part to satisfy a deep national hunger to sacrifice somebody. This hunger expresses itself in many obvious, ugly, public ways throughout our society: the way we talk about the poor, the humiliation rituals of reality TV and tabloid journalism, the ill-concealed hunger for war that many of our defense and security intellectuals harbor, the folk belief that bullying improves children's character, the contempt often shown toward victims of abuse, our unexamined attachment to economic austerity as a way to fix economic problems. I think there's something in human nature that doesn't feel safe if we aren't passing the occasional child through the fire to Moloch.

If I had to take a stab at it myself, a first draft of a different prayer for prisons might run something like this: Lord Jesus Christ, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal; help us to see you in the truly and falsely convicted alike. Remind us of the mercy you show us, that we may be freer in our mercies to those who sin against us. Remember the victims of crime, and divert our thoughts from revenge to healing, for the harmed and for the guilty. Help us to remember our guilt and maintain our repentance, so that we may better lead others through guilt to repentance. Where we confuse justice with power or profit, confute us, scatter us, and thwart us at every turn. Lead us, with those who harm us, into humble reconciliation with you and with each other.