



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re so happy to have you with us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Julio Medina, who earned a degree from New York Theological Seminary while serving time in prison. Julio’s journey is an inspiring story of what it means to be redeemed.

Lillian Daniel: We’ll also welcome back Christine Chakoian, Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest, Illinois. She’ll have a reflection on what it means to be the family of God.

Lydia Talbot: We’re going to introduce you to Julio Medina with excerpts from a gripping new documentary called “Hard Road Home.” It’s about Exodus Transitional Community, a ministry Julio Medina founded in New York City. It assists formerly incarcerated men and women as they integrate back into the community. “Hard Road Home” is directed by Macky Alston and will soon be broadcast on the PBS “Independent Lens” series. The producers have graciously given us permission to show you a preview. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Julio Medina: As I tell everybody all the time, that is the final goal of this place, making sure nobody goes back. If somebody’s going back, we’re failing. I know there’s another way. There’s this, I know, but those are the ones. I mean, our hands are full and all of that other stuff. We’re underfunded and going etc., etc., but we cannot allow one person to go unattended.

We know first hand what it takes to be successful. That is our greatest strength because we all came from prison. Alright? We all know the statistics. Right? Ten people get out. Four will go back within the first six months. I mean, I want to end on this note: I want one of those four...when we stop one of those four from going back, we’re good, you know!

I remember when I was in East End Correctional Facility and my niece came to visit me. And my niece tells me how much I’m going to like her boyfriend. And I’m like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.” And she tells me again before she’s leaving the visiting room, “No. You’re really going to like him.” And I’m like, “OK.” So I’m thinking the guy is in college or whatever.

That's why I'm going to like him. And when I call home that evening, my sister tells me, "You know why she kept asking you why you're going to like her boyfriend?" I said, "No." She said, "Because he's one of the biggest drug dealers in New York." And for me, that was a...it was time to change, man." If that's the image that I left, if that's all they saw me as, it was time to change, man. Everyday of my life, man, I fight to change that image.

[Hi there. What's going on, you all? What? What? What? What's going on? How are you? Come here, man. Come here little man. What's up? Say hi, Noah.]

I have a newborn son. His name is Noah and Noah has changed my life. I did this work and I'm kind of unconscious. I just go, you know. And now it's changing.

[And now, the next president of the United States, Noah Medina! And the people go wild. And they're cheering and they say, "Noah! Noah! Noah!"]

[How are you, man? Are you all right? How's school, man? It's going OK. What's up with you? What's up with your grades, man? How are you doing in school?]

I look at Noah and I say, "Wow! This is me. This my creation. What happens with it? What's his life going to be like, you know?"

[Let's eat!]

I'm sure that's how my mother looked at me. She didn't say, "Wow! I can't wait for him to spend half his life in prison." She looked at me and cared for me and nurtured me. But I think there's something else that happens and we need to break the cycle.

If I died today, I only can pray that people could see the vision of not only what I want Exodus to be, but I think what everyone else wants it to be. I think there's a piece of Exodus in the staff. I think there's a piece of Exodus in all of us.

[Let's do this. Alright, Mr. Medina. We want to make sure this brother is all right!]

Because it's clear, the mandate is clear: people are redemptive. So if something would happen to me, I just hope Exodus continues somehow, some way.

INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: Our thanks again to the producers of "Hard Road Home" for providing those excerpts. For more information, please visit our web site at 30goodminutes.org. And now, with great pleasure, let me introduce you to Julio Medina. Welcome, Julio.

MESSAGE

Julio Medina: Welcome and thank you.

I want to take the opportunity today to talk to you about an issue that many people in this country have looked at as an issue of intolerance. And that issue is crime. Crime in America.

Today there are over 2 million people locked up. How do I know? I was one of those people. You see, a majority of my life I spent committing crimes. It wasn't something I'm proud of. It's not something that I sit here and say I should have been given a second chance, but it was the life that I lived. I won't and can't blame poverty. I don't blame any of those conditions. But I will say this: that we can stop this. We can make the public safer.

How do I know? During my 12 years of incarceration I saw a lot of things. I saw a lot of violence. I was in probably some of the harshest prisons in New York state, Sing Sing being one of them. But there is one thing that I always remember and that's the humanity that I saw in so many of the other men that were incarcerated with me. It wasn't a fake humanity. It's wasn't a fake kind of redemptive spirit that they showed. I mean, hearing a grown man hollering, crying at the top of his lungs for a second chance when those cell doors slam shut. Listening to the stories of how much they missed their children, of how sorry they are, of how they wished they could apologize to the victims.

Listening to that everyday for 12 years allowed me to say, "Julio, there is something here and God had me there for a reason." I didn't know what that reason was and maybe 12 years was too long to keep me there, but I saw something. And I saw something in men that said I have to do something. I have to do something to help them change and I think there is something that I could do. For me it wasn't that change, the transformation wasn't something that happened one evening in the cell and the Lord came to me. It was none of that stuff. I was a tough guy and I just wanted to remain tough. Ignorance sometimes breeds that type of mentality. But it was something else. It was this silent voice that always told me, "You have to do something different with your life." And I think for me, the men that I saw inside was an opportunity, the vehicle, for me to help begin that change.

Everyday for 12 years I didn't know if I would be released or if I wouldn't be released. I was sentenced to life in prison and in New York life does mean life. But God had a different plan. I'll never forget the incident that took place that for me was probably one of the changing moments. Not only my niece and my family visiting and talking about how they needed me to be part of that family, to be the man of the family, but watching the violence on the inside. And I remember one day going into class. I was in the master's degree program at New York Theological Seminary. In prison you basically don't want to get any blood on you when there is gang fights, when there are those other things, because you don't want to be questioned. Usually I would side-step a lot of that stuff. You just try to mind your business and keep going. But this one time I could not step over the blood. Two men were fighting. I saw one stabbed. Correction officers came to break it up. Any other moment I'd just keep walking past. It's none of my business. But this time I could walk over the blood. The blood symbolized the blood of not only that man, but what I thought at that moment was humanity's blood. From that point forward, I vowed never, ever to allow any injustice that I see to happen. And from that point forward that's what I did.

After 12 years, two parole boards, and one denial that when I went up to the parole board mentioned that I am a vulture, that's all I'll ever be is a vulture who preys off communities through my previous drug dealings. It was a harsh, harsh thing to hear, to say that's all I will ever be. To determine a man's future that way was really hard. But I went back to my cell. No crying. You can't show tears in prison. They'll think you're a little soft. But there was one thing that I

did do when I went to chapel services that following Sunday. I was working with a young gang leader. And in the chapel services, most of the time you just see people go there to kind of hang out. The front of the pews are where people get a little more serious. And in the back of the pews is where everyone hangs out. And this gentleman was hanging out and he was telling me, “Yeah. Well, look what happened to you. You’re doing all this good work and you’re still not released.” But as I watched him each Sunday, I saw him get closer to the front of the pew. Then I saw him clapping his hands a little and beginning to learn some of the songs. For me it was a sign that my work wasn’t done in prison yet. So whatever the parole board did or whatever names they wanted to call me, that wasn’t who I was. It was just still more work to do.

Eventually I was released and during that release I realized that this was the toughest part ever in my life that I had to face. I saw so many men come back to prison once released. When they were inside I never heard them say, “Julio, I can’t wait to come back to prison!” Their main thing was, “Julio, I can’t wait to be a good father. Believe it or not, I can’t wait to pay taxes.” They wanted to have a job. They wanted to do these things. When I was released, I realized why so many were coming back. I thought I was prepared. I mean, I went to New York Theological Seminary, I had a master’s degree. I thought all these things were great. It took me about three months to find a job. That was for me the light of Exodus Transitional Community because it was at that moment I said to myself, now I know why there’s over two million people in this country who that are incarcerated. Now I know why over 60 percent will be back in three years, with close to 35 to 40 percent back within the first six months. Because as a community we haven’t extended our arms. We haven’t stopped to welcome the prisoner. We haven’t stopped to say, ok, this is a crime that was committed in the past, does this person wear this scarlet letter for the rest of his life? For me it became the opportunity to create Exodus Transitional Community.

What Exodus is, is a non-for-profit, faith based organization that works with women and men being released from prison. We are in East Harlem. We service, thus far, over 5,000 people. Statistics have proved that we have reduced the rate of recidivism—meaning the rate of people going back to prison—by half of the National Bureau of Justice statistics. So we are doing some effective work and we’re doing it because we know, the staff knows. The majority of the staff has been incarcerated. We look at the problems so differently. We realize that it’s an opportunity for so many of the men and women that are getting out to stay out. But they need a place to come to talk about that. Exodus was that place.

Let me just end on this note. If I can just tell you that the community doesn’t exist in this tightly knit church that kind of keeps it’s “members only” signs on Sundays. And I don’t mean to be offensive by that. We have to extend the parameters of community. We have to allow the stranger to walk in and really embrace him. We have to allow the prisoner a place at the table where they feel welcome. If we can do that, I think each one of us can help reduce recidivism. And more importantly, try to understand that this is not a criminal you are embracing or an ex-felon, but it’s just a sister or brother that you have yet to meet. I want to thank you and I hope you do something to help.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you’d like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Julio Medina, we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our

website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Julio Medina.

Julio Medina, could you ever have imagined at Sing Sing and the other maximum security prisons where you served a 12 year sentence for drugs, could you ever have imagined at the beginning of that journey the transformation that would take place in your life?

Julio Medina: No. No. Never.

Lydia Talbot: I mean you are changed.

Julio Medina: Thank you. Never in a million years. I've said, if it was just me I would have found a short cut a long time ago! I know it's not me doing this and doing the work. It's definitely from another source.

Lillian Daniel: Julio, tell us a little bit more about who you were before this transformation took place. What was it that landed you in prison in the first place?

Julio Medina: I was convicted of leading a drug gang in New York state. We were prosecuted by the organized crime task force in New York. And I was the leader of that. It's hard because I look back at it and there is so much change from the ignorance and thinking that this is the only way to beat poverty.

Lillian Daniel: Yet now, you are a leader of an entirely different kind.

Julio Medina: Yeah.

Lillian Daniel: A spiritual leader, a leader in liberation.

Julio Medina: Amen. Thank you. Thank you.

Lydia Talbot: And the ministry. It's a ministry for you, isn't it?

Julio Medina: Yes, it is.

Lydia Talbot: What was that about? I mean, you don't hear of many convicts in prison studying a theological curriculum. What was it that you decided—and it was a decision, an intentional decision—to earn your master's degree from New York Theological Seminary in prison?

Julio Medina: Yes. You feel that there is so much more to do. And don't get me wrong, the men inside, especially the older guys, were like, "You know something? You're kind of bright. Why are you wasting your life doing these things?" And I'm like, "Whatever." But I started listening to them, and in particular to the Rev. Dr. Lonnie McLeod, and I ended up enrolling in the master's degree program. In that master's degree program, it really provided the blueprint, that even with the skills that I had in the past, I can do ministry in my community. I know the community, I know the ghetto, I know what it's like to live in there. And I can talk to people and

tell people, “Well, wait a minute. There are other ways that we can live and there are other ways that we can live our lives.” The seminary provided that blueprint for me to transform that.

Lillian Daniel: How did that work? I’m sure everybody is wondering. Did you go out to go to classes? How were you able to be in seminary while you were in prison?

Julio Medina: I wish! Actually, Sing Sing has a program where they have professors come into Sing Sing. It’s a one year intensive course. I always say, for me, it brought the Bible closer. It made it practical. It wasn’t some remote deity that you couldn’t reach. For me God was present. They didn’t say it would be when we get out. We started doing work on the inside. We did gang intervention work. We had peace rallies inside, where kids came—the men’s sons and daughters— and put hand prints on the walls where the most violent areas of the prison were. We stopped the violence in Sing Sing for 90 days. I think it was from being able to come together and say there are so many creative things that we can do as opposed to being labeled criminal. I think the seminary provided that space to do that.

Lydia Talbot: Did you ever lose hope? When your worst fears were being realized, did you ever lose hope?

Julio Medina: You know, if you lose hope in prison, it’s over for you. I think hope sometimes diminishes, sometimes the light seems a little further away than what it is, but I couldn’t lose hope. Not for me, not for my family at those times, not for nieces and nephews. I just had to remain hopeful.

Lydia Talbot: Because faith and hope are inseparable companions, aren’t they?

Julio Medina: Yes, they are. Yes.

Lydia Talbot: On the spiritual side of your journey, you talk in terms of bondage, wilderness, and the Promised Land. Martin Luther King said, “I’ve seen it. I may not get there, but I’ve seen the Promised Land.” Are you there?

Julio Medina: No. I’m in the wilderness. And sometimes in bondage when I go back into Sing Sing now and see the many men who are still there, who should be home but are still there. My bondage is kind of tied to theirs and it’s hard for me to leave there and watch them. I go out to a family and all of these other things and they remain locked in a cage.

Lillian Daniel: As a pastor, I’ve visited the local prison in my community and when I go there I was shocked to see that it was a building that I drove by all the time, next to the place where you do your property taxes. I realized it was sort of invisible. And it seems like this world that you’re exposing us to in some ways is invisible, if we don’t want to see it. What is the most important thing you want to tell people if they have a loved one or someone in their community who is coming out of prison? What’s the faithful response?

Julio Medina: I think it’s to embrace them. Let’s not be afraid of the prisoner, the ex-prisoner. Embrace them. It’s so important. You can stop that life from going back. You can create a new

life if you just stop to say, “You are welcomed here and you are a part of this community. If there is anything we can do, we are here for you.” That means so much to someone getting out.

Lydia Talbot: Congressman Danny Davis has done so much about criminal justice.

Julio Medina: Yes.

Lydia Talbot: “When mercy seasons justice.” But in the few seconds we have left, if you were to complete this sentence: “As a felon you cannot do...” What kinds of things?

Julio Medina: You cannot work. The one critical area that makes you feel like a human, that allows you to provide for your family. There are so many laws and restrictions that prevent people from just doing basic work. Allow people to work. Give people that second chance.

Lydia Talbot: We have fifteen seconds. In the video we saw your beautiful baby boy, Noah. And now you have a new little girl, a newborn, Julia.

Julio Medina: Yes! Julia is a new addition. Again the blessings continue to flow.

Lydia Talbot: And joy for the future. Thank you so much.

Julio Medina: Thank you.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Lydia Talbot: And now, Christine Chakoian, Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest, Illinois, brings us a final thought on community.

REFLECTION

Christine Chakoian: My friend Jim Lowery remembers how he learned to be part of a community. When he was a young man growing up in the South, every Saturday night before he went out on a date, his father took him aside and said, “Son, remember who you are.” Though his dad was warning him not to dishonor the family name, he was doing much more than that: it was a reminder to Jim that he was an important member of the family, his family who loved him and cared about his well being. The same is true for each of us. We are beloved members of God’s family—all of us—children of a God who loves us and cares about us more than we will ever know. And if we ever forget, we have our spiritual communities, our “brothers and sisters” in God’s household, to remember for us, to remind us who we are, to remind us of our home in God’s heart, where we’ll always belong.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Chris, and our thanks again to Julio Medina, and you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good

Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.