**Reflection for Monday,**

**June 12, 2023**



In May of 2013, I was finishing a semester of teaching at the University of Montana. My mother had flown out to keep me company on the drive home, and all our belongings we packed and ready to go. We went out to lunch and return to find the house subtly disarranged. It took me a few minutes to realize that someone had broken in and stolen my laptop and some of our bags.

The police officer who arrived after my call was not very sympathetic and told me to, please, make it quick because it had been a long day for him. Feeling totally disconcerted, we climbed into the car and drove away. My eyeglasses, address book, and jewelry were among the things stolen.

About a month after this, a Missoula detective called to tell me that the thieves—two young women—had been apprehended in Seattle. They got caught shoplifting from a Target and when the police searched their car, they found several of my belongings, including my laptop. The women claimed that they had purchased these items from someone else, so eventually they were convicted on the lesser charge of buying goods they knew to be stolen. I later found a dated photo that they had uploaded onto my laptop that showed they had stolen the stuff directly from my apartment. The detective said it was too late to address that, “But there will still be justice,” she said, “They will go to prison. They will pay their debt to society.”

“Debt to society” is an idiom that confuses me. The two women who broke into my place had a history of drug possession charges and were apparently addicted to meth. I felt uncomfortable about them going to prison, though I also felt uncomfortable and sad about people coming into my private space and taking whatever they wanted. Nothing in the way this situation played out made me feel that anyone cared about my experience. The emphasis was on punishing the women. Substance abuse treatment didn’t figure into it.

What would restorative justice look like here? This is a subject that I feel Christians need to consider. That was complicated for me to say even in the moment. I would have wanted to communicate to women that my lost address book represented many years of friends and family. That the laptop they stole was full of my poems and essays. But amid the loss and hassle I experienced, I wish they knew that I didn’t want them to go to prison and that I hoped they would get clean and sober.

Where are they now, those two women? I’m pretty sure that prison didn’t do much to rehabilitate them. Now they have felony convictions that will make it harder for them to get jobs and housing. My prayer is that there were people along the way that saw them as more than criminals, who offered love and resource instead of punishment. That, to me, would be the gospel way.

In faith,

Elizabeth