

Voices of the arrested

By [Laura Everett](#)

April 27, 2016

I don't want to do this, but I will. I have a gun.

I'm sorry I took those things. I lost my job.

Give me a break. I'm strung out on heroin.

These are the prayers of the people.

Recently, the *Boston Globe* [culled the Boston Police Department transcripts](#) from 2010–2014 to catalog words spoken at or around the time of a person's arrest. Columnist Yvonne Abraham and data graphics reporter Gabriel Florit undertook the task of making visible what is often unseen: the interaction between police officers and the people they arrest.

The story, titled “Arresting Words,” ran in the Sunday paper. In the online edition, hovering over each phrase highlights the arresting words. Patterns emerge.

Give me, the arrested command, again and again. *Sorry* is repeated, too. *Just* is used over and over, as in the extemporaneous prayers I've heard in church so many times. The arresting words form a litany of suffering and violence.

Give me your bag. I'm sorry Miss, I just need to eat.

It's my fault; I'm sorry but I'm human.

Give me the money. I'm not trying to hurt anyone. I have kids.

There is a Christian tradition of meditating on Jesus' words around his arrest, most notably in the form of Stations of the Cross or the Seven Last Words of Christ. In the U.S., those committed to “staying woke” to the death-dealing effects of racism have turned the arresting words of [Eric Garner](#) (“I can't breathe”) and [Sandra Bland](#) (“Why did I get arrested?”) into prophetic calls for systemic change. And though the Department of Justice investigation did not find evidence that Michael Brown used

this language, the arresting words and gesture of “Hands up, Don’t Shoot” has become a rallying cry for those weary of police violence in communities of color.

We hear Jesus say from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” In Boston, the arrested said, “I don’t have to tell you anything. This is the third time I’ve been stopped in two days.”

We hear Jesus say from the cross, “Here is your son” and “Here is your mother.” In Boston, the arrested said, “There are too many things to mend. I miss my mama.”

I believe the city is full of scripture, words that guide us closer to the one full of infinite compassion and perfect justice for the innocent and the guilty. Yet the arresting words are not just about others, but also about me; they condemn my complicity in a system that criminalizes poverty and addiction.

I’ve prayed with these words over the past few weeks, as part of learning to pray for the whole of my city. Meditating on these arresting words challenges me to pray for the person so broken that they’d say to a child, “Pick a bullet for you and me and mommy.”

The arresting words also suggest a Christian discipline of seeing what is unseen and hearing what goes unheard, as the God who knows even the number of hairs on our head must surely see and hear. They challenge us to see beyond the overwhelming numbers of arrests to the particular humanity of a fellow child of God, so battered down as to say, “I just want to die. My mind is shutting down on me.”

Put all the arresting words together and, as Abraham and Florit write,

they show what ails great swaths of the city: Mental illness, domestic violence, poverty, addiction, pig-headedness, hatred—the cracks in Boston’s handsome edifice, through which some of us are lost.

The book of Revelation offers a vision of heaven that is decidedly urban, a holy city. We cannot attain that holy city or our reconciled humanity until we learn to see the arrested and to hear the words of those who are slipping through the cracks.