

The Death Penalty – A Pastoral Response from followers of Christ

We live in a broken, hurting world and when someone chooses to inflict violence and kill others, that brokenness becomes evident and obvious. The 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing is a real reminder that our world is far from the society that we yearn to live in. Recently Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was formally convicted of that crime and given the sentence of death for the harm he caused, and the lives lost because of what he and his brother did. The brokenness of the world is clear and real, and yet we, as Christians, believe that it is not right or appropriate to sentence Tsarnaev, or anyone else, to death.

First it is important to be honest about the pain and the hurt that so many are feeling and will continue to feel after such horrible violence. When such evil occurs, when a loved one is murdered, when one's feeling of safety is threatened, and when a part of your life is taken away, the pain and the grief cannot be imagined. Many are angry and are full of rage and these emotions are appropriate in response to such violence. Something was lost that can never be regained. Any time violence at such a level occurs anger and rage mix in with the pain and the grief and these are appropriate and real feelings to have. Speaking through our faith in Jesus Christ, we believe that God is with all of us in our pain, our grief, our anger, and our rage. We believe that God stays with us as we curse and cry, offers us comfort, and walks with us through what can feel like a very lonesome valley. As Christians, we believe that God understands our pain; we see the pain Jesus endured on the cross and know that God understands. God is with us in our hurt and anger and grief.

It is important to name the pain and the anger and to recognize that those feelings can lead us to a place where we call for revenge under the guise of justice. We have lost something or someone and want to see the person responsible for such actions to suffer and pay for the evil they have done against us. Yes, people should be held accountable for their actions and it may feel like a life sentence is too short. Yet as Christians, we believe that when it comes to the death penalty we are called to higher ground. We believe that through Christ, God calls us to draw the line at taking a life in retribution for a life being taken.

In Jesus' teachings we find such lessons as, "you have heard it said "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,... but I say unto you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (Matthew 5:38, 44) And we are called to remember the apostle Paul telling us to, "...never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Romans 12:19) Our scriptures reminded us that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that we are implored to live out such love towards all people.

We hold to the belief that all people are created in the image of God and thus have a potential to live into God's goodness. Living into the love of God means in part working to help others live into their goodness regardless of what an individual may have previously done. As Christians we believe that all people can be reconciled to God through the person and the work of Jesus Christ and that there needs to always be space for this reconciliation happen. When we end a life, we remove all possibility for that reconciliation to occur. When we sentence someone to death we are saying that the individual is beyond all hope of reconciliation, and is beyond

God's love. That is something that we can never say with full assurance or finality. We believe that the death penalty is wrong because we believe that God's love is available for all, is offered to all, and the invitation to accept God's love and forgiveness needs to be made to all again and again.

We live in a broken world. It is a world where we face the tragic reality that people make evil choices and commit acts of atrocities. Yet we believe that it is also a world that holds a great potential for good, for love, and for grace. As followers of Christ we aspire to an attitude of reconciliation in response to the reaction of vengeance. When we execute our criminals we are contributing to the brokenness of the world. It is our hope that we all can look towards and move towards that higher ground.