

Dead Man Walking – Part 1
(Genesis 9:5-6 and 2 Samuel 11:1-15)

What we believe about God should govern our behavior in the world. What we believe about God must, therefore, influence the way we confront issues in our world. Today, in the United States, we are executing people more frequently than at any other time in our history. I am indebted to Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, for his observation that, “We cannot possibly think as Christians that God has nothing to say to us about this issue.”¹

Please pray with me. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Creator God, who gives us the task of discerning your will for our lives. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed and guide us in this task. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Is it possible that God doesn't care or have an opinion about what is happening? I don't think so. As Christians it's our theological task to discern the way in which God would have us respond to this and other issues. To do this, we must look to scripture, the tradition of the church, our experience of God in the world, and the gift of reasoning.

¹ Adam Hamilton, *Confronting the Controversies: A Christian Looks at the Tough Issues* (Copyright © 2001 by Abington Press, Nashville, TN), page 49.

It's not my purpose to tell you what to think or how to respond. It is my purpose, however, to engage you and encourage you to wrestle with this issue as I have done and to understand how it affects us. Regardless of what we believe, executions are being carried out – as we speak – by elected officials on our behalf.

As we take up this issue, it's important that we understand the position of our United Methodist Church. It can be found in the *Book of Discipline*, under *Social Principles*. In part, paragraph 164 reads:

The mistreatment or torture of persons by governments for any purpose violates Christian teaching and must be condemned and/or opposed by Christians and churches wherever and whenever it occurs. For the same reason, we oppose capital punishment and urge its elimination from all criminal codes.

The Case for the Death Penalty

With that piece of information on the pulpit, let's look at some of the compelling reasons that favor the death penalty. The Old Testament is the primary source of biblical authority for those who would make a case for the death penalty. While there are many references, the one we heard this morning from Genesis pre-dates even the Law of Moses.

We go all the way back to the time of Noah to find the authority for dealing with murder. For the first time, God gives humankind permission to kill other animals – for food. But we are specifically forbidden to take human life.

Created by God – in the image of God – human life is deemed sacred, just as is God sacred. Human life is so sacred that God demands accountability: “Who so ever sheds the blood of a human being; by a human being shall his blood be shed.” The purpose of this ancient law was to establish the concept of retributive justice or retribution – better known as “an eye for an eye” justice.

As the legal code evolved from the time of the Great Flood to the Exodus, it became the Law of Moses. Mosaic Law is found in various forms in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Mosaic Law evolved around the special needs of a nomadic community as the Hebrews wandered in the desert. Six of the Ten Commandments address those needs as God provides the Israelites then and us today with simple rules for living in community with one another.

In addition to serving the purpose of retribution, the death penalty had a more practical application. It was effective at maintaining order in this nomadic society that had no criminal justice system, no police force, and no prisons! Charges were heard by a priest or, in later times, a judge. Once a death sentence was pronounced, it was carried out by one who acted on behalf of the victim, or by members of the community. Stoning was the usual form of execution.

Since the death penalty was the primary means for maintaining social order, it was invoked for offenses other

than just murder. In all there were eleven offenses that were punishable by death. Some of those offenses included false prophesy, worshiping foreign gods, misrepresentation by a bride of her virginity, kidnapping, disrespecting ones parents, working on the Sabbath, and several forms of sexual activity outside the marriage bond, including adultery, and rape.

Imagine the order that must have existed if you could be put to death for “dissing” mom and dad, or for going to work instead of church. Let’s think about this one. If we were to actually enforce the Mosaic Law today we would need a much larger sanctuary and many more cemetery plots here in West Chicago.

And then there is the case of King David and Bathsheba. David was also subject to Mosaic Law, but apparently there were different standards in those days: one for the common people and another for people in power. At the end of the reading we heard this morning the narrator says, “But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.” We will read more of the story of David and Bathsheba next week, but looking to the end of the story, David was spared by the Lord and did not die for murdering Uriah. Is it possible that God would allow David to escape the boundaries of Mosaic Law and responsible behavior in his community?

From this brief overview of the biblical authority in the Old Testament, let’s move to the present day. There are five primary reasons used in support of the death penalty today. They are: (1) retribution; (2) deterrence; (3) safety; (4) healing or closure; and (5) economics.

Retribution is probably the most compelling of the five. I know from my

perspective it's often difficult to want mercy for infamous killers like Jeffery Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. And retribution becomes attractive when we or someone close to us becomes a victim. It is a part of our human condition to want our perpetrators to suffer as they have caused our suffering.

Proponents of the death penalty have long held that the threat of having a death sentence carried out will cause the potential criminal to consider the consequences of his or her actions. This is called deterrence. "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time" – as Barretta, the character played by Robert Blake in that popular 1980's television show, used to say. It is interesting that the actor Robert Blake to whom we give credit for that saying, eventually came to be in the precarious position of being on trial for murder. As I recall, Blake was acquitted and whether or not he did the crime, he didn't have to do the time.

Public safety is another reason for favoring the death penalty. As in the case of the nomadic Hebrews wandering in the desert, one way to make sure a murderer didn't kill again was to kill him before he had an opportunity to repeat the evil deed.

And murder is a crime that finds victims other than those who are killed. The surviving family and friends are victims and the death penalty can bring closure for some as their ordeal seems

to come to and end with the murderer's own death.

Another argument in favor of the death penalty is the cost of the alternative. Proponents believe the cost of maintaining capital criminals in maximum security prisons is not an economically viable solution – a burden to us as tax payers.

To summarize the case for the death penalty it can be said that the primary biblical authority comes from the Old Testament and the Laws of Moses. These laws are consistent with the use of the death penalty in other cultures that are rooted in the Near and Middle East. In ancient times the death penalty was effective at maintaining order in a nomadic society that had no police force or prisons. Today it serves the purposes of retributive justice; providing a deterrent for would-be murderers; protecting society from repeat offenders; bringing healing to those who have been victimized, and saving the tax dollars.

What Do You Think?

Next week we will look at the case against capital punishment. Not surprisingly, the case against is biblically rooted in the New Testament rather than the Old Testament. During the coming week I would like us to spend some time reflecting on the death penalty. Take time to engage in dialog with a family member, a friend, or a colleague as you consider the case for the death penalty.

Reflect on these questions:

1. Do you support capital punishment?
2. Do you feel that there are certain circumstances where capital punishment should be mandatory? If so, what are those circumstances?

3. If you are in favor of the death penalty, which of the five reasons (retribution, deterrence, safety, healing or closure, and economics) are important to your belief? Say more about your beliefs.
4. Do feel that the grieving family members of a murder victim can receive closure upon the execution of the perpetrator? If so, why.
5. Reflect on the story of King David and Bathsheba which was read this morning in worship. What should have been David's punishment for the murder of Uriah?