

## Marti Hunt's Reflection for Christ the King Sunday

I welcome this opportunity to talk with you today, Christ the King Sunday, about Bishop Hirschfeld's call for a Preach In and my own work as a death penalty repeal activist.

I have been on the Board of Directors of the NH Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty since the spring of 2008 and have been one of the two diocesan representatives to the Coalition since my appointment by Bishop Robinson in 2010. The Reverend Jason Wells, the rector of Grace Episcopal Church in East Concord is the other person who represents the diocese within the Coalition. The diocese is an organizational affiliate of the NH Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

In April Jason and I met with Bishop Hirschfeld to let him know about the 2014 Death Penalty Repeal Campaign that was ramping up and to discuss ways that the diocese and Episcopalians might become involved. Bishop Rob suggested the idea of having clergy preach about the death penalty today when the lectionary readings focus on Jesus' execution by the state. Due to our Bishop's efforts six other denominations are participating in the Preach-In. Some other faith communities are participating although on an individual basis. In addition Bishop Hirschfeld and five other Christian faith leaders recently signed a joint op-ed piece in opposition to the death penalty.

The Episcopal Church through its General Conventions has been opposed to the death penalty since 1958. When I spoke with Bishop Walmsley at our recent diocesan convention, I was fascinated to learn that he had just started work at the national church office as Secretary of Christian Citizenship in 1958 and helped write and shepherd this initial resolution through the Convention process. The resolution passed.

And the resolution has been affirmed in subsequent years and as early as 1979 called on dioceses and members of the church to work actively to abolish the death penalty in their states.

Although I believe that the death penalty is a terribly flawed public policy and I am happy to speak with you about that, my underlying opposition is based on my religious understandings. I have three main understandings that are relevant for me: the value of each human life to God, the possibility of repentance, redemption and reconciliation, and the call to forgiveness.

The 1958 resolution and subsequent resolutions state that the Episcopal Church opposes the death penalty "on the theological basis that the life of an individual is of infinite worth in the sight of Almighty God: and the taking of such a human life falls within the providence of Almighty god and not with the right of Man." The

Episcopal Church refuses to give God's power over life and death to the state, even the life of a person who has committed a murderous act.

I also believe that God always holds open the door of repentance and redemption. This is illustrated in many of the Biblical stories: Moses' killing of the Egyptian, David's killing of Uriah, and Saul's killing of the early followers of Jesus are examples where terrible acts are not the end of the story for individuals. I am particularly struck by the early Cain and Abel story because we never know if Cain repents. Cain deliberately kills Abel. God severely punishes Cain exiling him, but God does not kill him. He even marks him with a sign, so that no one else will kill him. There is no indication in God's initial exchange with Cain that Cain is remorseful. In fact he is pretty defiant. Yet, God holds open the possibility of a change of heart, the possibility of repentance.

I also have an understanding that we are all called to forgive those who hurt and harm us even though it may be difficult. In fact I think this is captured in Jesus' statement to Peter that he must forgive 70X7 times. Forgiveness is a process that goes on and on and probably needs to be approached anew each morning. I feel called to remember the expectation that I will forgive every time I say the words of the Lord's own prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Our Bishop Desmond Tutu wrote No Future Without Forgiveness about his experiences on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Dominique Green who was executed by lethal injection in Huntsville Texas on October 26, 2004 read this book. Green and Bishop Tutu began corresponding and they eventually met. This impacted me because in March of 2009, I happened to switch on the television during a memorial service for Green broadcast from Riverside Church in NY City. Bishop Tutu, then a frail man and a spiritual giant, spoke and helped me understand how the death penalty impacts on my life. He began his remarks talking about how the United States sustained him during the apartheid years, but how deeply disappointed he is that the United States continues to engage in capital murder. He said, "Don't do this to yourselves. Don't do this to yourselves." He must have said that four times and then said, "It brutalizes you."

At the time I instantly knew that Bishop Tutu had named the way I feel about the death penalty. I use energy pushing down and trying to ignore that the United States is the only country in the Western Hemisphere that continues to utilize capital murder; that over 3,000 men and women are on death row, that seven people have been executed since October 1st. Four of these in Florida, the state with the highest exoneration rate in the country. That five more people are scheduled to die in December and more in January and on and on. The death penalty is brutal and brutalizing.

Sometimes six years seems too long to have been working on this issue, but my six years is nothing when I think of the people I have met: activists that have been

working on ending the death penalty for over twenty years and litigators who have spent their whole lives working with capital cases and death row inmates. The death penalty is a very bipartisan, I actually prefer trans-partisan, issue in New Hampshire. There are people from all political perspectives who want New Hampshire's death penalty statute repealed. I hope that in 2014 NH becomes the nineteenth state to repeal the death penalty and that New England becomes the first geographic region of the country without the death penalty.

I want to close with some words from our Bishop Douglas Theuner. Recently, I was rereading the Monitor article of his consecration at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Manchester. The headline read, "A Vocal Bishop, The Reverend Theuner Plans to Speak out on the Issues." In the article, Bishop Theuner said,

"Christianity is a radical revolutionary approach to life even after 2,000 years, and we need to do a better job of making people aware of that." He then said, "We can do this by stating a moral perspective on contemporary issues."

Almost thirty years later I am challenged by this statement to further that revolution as I work for death penalty repeal. I welcome the opportunity for continued conversation. Thank you for this opportunity to speak today.