

Melting the Iceberg of Violence

By David Chandler -- May 2003 Pastor's Column

The Bible prescribes capital punishment for a long list of offenses including cursing one's parent, disobeying a priest, touching a sacred object, working on the Sabbath, blaspheming the name of God, adultery, and murder. Most people would see capital punishment as an excessive, even barbaric, response to most of the crimes on this list, but when it comes to murder, we as a society cling to the primitive ethic of retribution: eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life.

Retribution is not about protecting society: that is accomplished once the criminal is imprisoned. Rather, it is a way of collectively venting our anger. When we have been wronged we have an urge to strike back and make the offender suffer. When someone is murdered we feel we owe it to the family of the victim to avenge the death of their loved one. But vengeance cannot reverse the original act or heal the anguish. Instead it arouses and legitimizes our own murderous impulses. Vengeance does violence to the soul and perpetuates violence in society.

When Jesus is asked whether a woman taken in adultery should be stoned to death in accordance with the Mosaic law, he responds simply, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone..." He does not reject the Law of Moses as the standard for retributive justice. Rather, he rejects retribution entirely. The accusers are as flawed as the accused, so only mercy is appropriate. For Jesus the concern shifts from retribution to restoration and healing.

Where our society parts ways with Jesus is in seeing murderers as monsters. He sees them instead, no matter how horrible their crimes, as prodigal children of a loving Father who awaits their return with open arms. The monster image alienates us from the person behind the crime. We see monsters as twisted, evil, and, most importantly, unlike ourselves. But criminals are in fact people like ourselves in whom God dwells. They may have grave weaknesses and failings, but they are the weaknesses and failings of humanity. If we deny our human bond with the criminal we implicitly deny our own capacity for evil and thereby indulge in sinful pride.

Most of the nations of the world have come to realize that capital punishment does not serve the best interests of society. It is an irreversible penalty meted out by a fallible process that is not, and can never be, applied equitably and without error. It works more harshly against the poor, the dark skinned, and the damaged than against the sometimes greater evils of the rich and powerful. It denies the sacredness of human life, it precludes the opportunity for redemption, and it perpetuates the cycle of violence.

Murder is just the tip of the iceberg of a violent society. The narrow focus of capital punishment diverts our attention from the systemic evils that permeate our society and

implicate us all. Jesus points the way to true healing and restoration: he prescribes mercy for the offender and self-examination for the accusers. He forgives the heinous violence of the few and calls us instead to melt the entire iceberg of violence. Following Jesus requires each of us to look within and let violence melt from our hearts.

Note: The Visalia Friends Meeting (Quakers) does not have clergy, so various members of the meeting will be contributing to this column. For the position of the Friends Committee on National Legislation on capital punishment see http://www.fcnl.org/issues/cr/dp_redir.htm.

(This article was to appear in the August 4, 2001 issue of the Visalia Times Delta. It was rejected, however, on the grounds that it was a "political" rather than a "religious" statement. We, of course, strongly disagreed with this characterization and representatives from the meeting met with the Religion Page editor over the issue. A slightly shortened version (edited for length, not content) was resubmitted for the Spring 2003 cycle and will be printed on May 17, 2003.)