

LIFE IN THE BALANCE



In the United States, justice is symbolized by a blindfolded woman holding a sword in one hand and a balance in the other. She is meant to represent the fair, effective and unbiased administration of justice. Unfortunately, justice systems are often blind in a less positive sense – blinded by prejudice and discrimination in ways that perpetuate cycles of violence and suffering.

DO NOT KILL FOR ME!

Justice blinded by prejudice cannot understand a Florida daughter who pleads to save the life of the man who murdered her father. “Not in my name,” cried SueZann Bosler to the prosecutor. Her father believed the death penalty was a sin. She wanted justice through healing, not more violence.

In two different trials, the prosecutor convinced a jury that the young man who stabbed Rev. Billy Bosler to death should be executed “as an example to the community”. The judge in both trials told SueZann that her father’s opinion about the death penalty was irrelevant and that the plight of his killer, James Bernard Campbell, was not her concern.

Convinced it was her concern, SueZann began a public campaign against the death penalty. She learned that James is a typical death-row-bound prisoner. He is black, poor and mentally impaired. SueZann discovered that the death penalty serves a political purpose, creating the illusion that something is being done to deter crime. Those in favour of the death penalty falsely claim that it is less costly than a life sentence and that it provides closure to the victims and survivors of violent crimes.

SueZann’s battle for restorative justice was long and painful. Due to unconstitutional proceedings in the first two trials, a third trial was held. SueZann was subpoenaed to testify about the day her father was murdered. The new judge cautioned SueZann to stick to the facts and to refrain from stating her opinion. He threatened her with contempt and a

jail sentence if she did not follow his instructions.

SueZann, who had been accused of not loving her father because she did not want to accept the ultimate punishment for his killer, told a Miami reporter that if the prosecutor was simply doing his job, so was she. She was trying to honour her father’s life by saving his killer!

So in court when the prosecutor asked SueZann to state her name, address and what she did for a living, she responded saying, “I am a hairdresser and I work to abolish the death penalty.”

The third jury did not sentence James Bernard Campbell to death, but to life in prison. At the end of the trial, the judge finally acknowledged SueZann’s right to forgive James Bernard Campbell for the murder of her father.

RESTORE US TO YOURSELF, O LORD, THAT WE MAY BE RESTORED (LAMENTATIONS 5.21)

Healing and reconciliation define the ministry of Jesus Christ, exemplified by love, compassion and restorative justice. Consider Jesus’ response when the crowd wanted to stone to death the adulterous woman (Jn 8.7), his command to love our enemies (Lk 6.27) and our obligation to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph 4.32).

Restorative justice seeks healing through restoration. Read Paul’s letters to the Corinthians (2 Cor 5.18-19) and the Galatians (6.1-2), describing ministries of reconciliation and remembering the alienated and abandoned. Our faith does not call us to condemn harshly, but to repair and restore relationships. Revenge has no place.

When we recall the fifth commandment, “you shall not murder”, and God’s own response to Cain after he killed Abel, we can appreciate God’s greatness. In Deuteronomy, “an eye for an eye” and “a life for a life” are intended to set limits to restitution. God executes justice with equity, so that those in need receive justice, love and other necessities (Deut 10.17).



When something bad happens, different people have different needs. What were SueZann's needs? Did James, her father's killer, have needs? What were the needs of the community?

Restorative justice challenges systems of criminal justice because it asks different questions and uses different methods. Criminal justice asks what laws have been broken, who is guilty and what is the punishment. Restorative justice asks what harm has occurred, who is hurting and how can healing be experienced. Restorative justice is concerned with the victims, the offenders and the community. It aims to restore relationships broken by violence. It insists that all human beings have dignity and worth and yearn for peace.

Calling for a moratorium on the death penalty and developing restorative justice ministries is one way Reformed churches are seeking to heal communities and restore human rights. Life is in the balance.

QUESTIONS

1. HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND JESUS' COMMAND TO FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER? ARE WE EVER PERMITTED TO IGNORE JESUS' COMMANDMENT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER, EVEN OUR ENEMIES?
2. DO YOU AGREE THAT THE DEATH PENALTY DOES NOT RESTORE RELATIONSHIPS, NEITHER WITH GOD NOR WITH ONE ANOTHER? IS THE DEATH PENALTY ALWAYS WRONG?
3. WHAT CAN WE DO WHEN AN OUTRAGEOUS ACT OF VIOLENCE OCCURS? WHAT IS OUR OBLIGATION,

AS FELLOW SINNERS, AS MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH? WHAT ARE THE MINISTRIES OF RECONCILIATION AND HEALING IN YOUR CHURCH?

4. HOW CAN MINISTRIES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN YOUR CONTEXT PREVENT HARM AND HURT, WHILE HELPING TO CREATE A CULTURE OF HEALING?

PRAYER

Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored. We thank you for your greatness and for our faith that informs our lives. Help us to lift up the values and principles of restorative justice that create a culture of healing, reconciliation and peace! Guide us as we stand with and minister to those who suffer with unmet needs: the victims and survivors of violent crimes, accused offenders and our communities. Provide us with strength and courage to fight institutional racism, personal prejudices and harsh condemnations void of mercy and forgiveness. We pray for an end to violence and terror, and for state-sanctioned killing to stop. We send each other forth in peace and in love to work for restorative justice – a justice that heals. Amen.

AUTHOR

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Following decades of campaigning to abolish the death penalty worldwide

- 111 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice
- 84 countries retain and use the death penalty

Firm in the belief that every human life be accorded dignity and convinced that where the death penalty is advocated, the redemptive and reconciling love of God is violated, WARC's 22nd General Council (Seoul, 1989) called for the universal abolition of the death penalty.

MORE INFORMATION:

- Restorative justice efforts in the US: www.RestorativeJusticeCenter.org
- International and Interfaith Clergy Coalition to End Executions: www.ClergyCoalition.org
- Amnesty International campaign to abolish the death penalty: www.amnesty.org