5-1-1998

Try to Relate

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Why “do we kill people who kill people...?”

I will never forget the fall day in 1996 when I walked into a classroom and saw red flash before my eyes. In front of me sat an innocent woman expressing her opinion in the form of a t-shirt that read “Do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong?”

Though she could not have known it, I sat behind her shaking in rage, bitter that people find it so easy to endorse trite slogans about something that affects me so deeply.

Three months earlier, on June 16, 1996 (Father’s Day), my cousin Shannon Bigger had been stripped naked, her mouth gagged, her hands tied to her bed with phone cord, stabbed five times, her neck slashed at least six times. Looking into her coffin at her mouth drooping from where the blood had flowed, I remember thinking that anyone who could do that to another human being, didn’t deserve to be treated like a person, but like the beast that they had chosen to emulate.

While the individual who killed my cousin chose to evade capital punishment by pleading guilty, it started me thinking about the death penalty in a way I had not before. I’ve tried to separate my personal feelings from rational thought, and found that impossible. I’ve asked people hard questions hoping to find answers for myself, and instead have more questions.

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The reality is that I greatly value human life and abhor our society’s lack of respect for life. Strongly opposed to abortion and euthanasia, my idealism wants to draw a line and not cross it. Only God can give and take life, and we can’t live with the consequences of playing God.

But in reality, I can’t so easily draw a line with this issue. I believe there is a difference between the innocent and the guilty, a point at which humanity is lost and where we must treat the predator as the beast he/she has behaved like. While I know that all of us have a great capacity for evil, I can’t accept that brutal murderers who would desecrate lives can expect to be treated as humans, can expect to have their lives valued. In fact, the death penalty demonstrates respect for life, in not allowing the perpetrators to have further opportunities to desecrate life.

Hating expressed all that, I acknowledge that the death penalty is simply an extension of a hugely imperfect justice system. It takes too long to enact; the appeals process is lengthy and expensive. And by the time the penalty is finally accomplished, the guilty has already had a number of opportunities to murder again.

Prison crime is huge, while the victims tend to be other victimizers, there is always the possibility of a guard or someone in for a lesser crime, being the casualty.

But these flaws, and the excuse that we have killed those not guilty of the crime(s) they have been convicted of, is really a smokescreen. Human error is a possibility. But the length and arduousness of our legal system is an attempt to prevent such mistakes.

Probably more aggravating to most of us is error where sentences too lax for the crime committed often result in further crimes. Lawrence Singleton shouldn’t have been released from prison nine years after having Mary Vincent’s arms off with an axe, but he was and proceeded to kill again.

Christians who point to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 as cause against the death penalty overlook a few factors. It was Jesus who said: “You have heard that it was said ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:38-39). But the same Jesus (in the same sermon) also told us that “if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you...and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). Have you noticed the whole Christian community jumping on the bandwagon to follow that one?