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Why “do we kill people who kill people….?"

by Rachelle Bigger

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.

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.

Having 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, and 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 hacking 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?
The Sermon on the Mount was spoken to those who had followed Christ to hear his words of instruction to them. These words were not spoken to societies composed largely of those who make no attempt or claim to follow Christ. Indeed the New Testament is a clear directive from God to individuals. The Old Testament is no less God's word and deals much more with civil societies. Though Christians can rejoice that they have been delivered from the penalty of God's law (eternal damnation), we still must attempt to live in a society that is tainted and imperfect. Laws are necessary, as are penalties.

Numbers 35:30 states that: “Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not sufficient testimony against a person for the death penalty” (NKJV). Scripture not only talks about the death penalty, but puts limits on it. The book of Numbers gives clear legal stipulations on the difference between murder and manslaughter. Those who committed manslaughter, while not being allowed back into society, could escape to cities of refuge and start a new life for themselves. Nowhere does Jesus contradict the law regarding murderers that was established in the Old Testament. Instead he gives us (who are Christians) very difficult tasks. He tells us to “love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:44-45 NKJV).

This is not so easy at times. In fact, without Jesus, I am convinced that it is impossible. I am personally still working through how it is possible even as a person of faith. But while God is calling me to love a person named Antonio who inflicted horrible pain on myself and my family, I am quite sure that He doesn’t want Antonio to ever have the chance to murder again. No one has ever suggested that because we are Christians, my family should forgive the crime and work to put Antonio back on the streets. Indeed we have a responsibility as citizens to ensure that he doesn’t have that chance.

Interestingly, when the death penalty was a possibility in this case, I was actually opposed to it. I didn’t know what I believed about the death penalty and more importantly, I didn’t want the additional trauma of having someone else who was part of my life (as he sickeningly became from the time he murdered my cousin) to die traumatically. I just wanted the whole thing to be over. I didn’t want to feel anymore pain; I wanted the quickest solution. I was relieved when he was sentenced to life imprisonment without possibility of parole. I mistakenly thought I would be able to forget about him; no waiting while he sat on death row and appealed over and over again.

I have had to face that it will never be over. He will be appealing his sentence this summer and though I could alienate myself from news of this, it wouldn’t stop me from thinking about it. It wouldn’t stop the fear and the loss and the empty spot at the Thanksgiving table. I am angry because I can’t stop myself from thinking about him whenever I remember Shannon. And while I am still not convinced the death penalty has anything to do with healing for the families of victims, I know that I don’t want any other family to have to go through what mine has experienced. Society has a responsibility to work for that and to maintain the sanctity of life. I have come to believe the death penalty at times is a valid part of that process.

I have often been asked the question if I would push the button, give the injection or whatever it takes to enact the death penalty. I acknowledge this would be unpleasant and difficult. Though the thought makes me ill, in recognition of the potential that lives might be saved, and the statement that the death penalty makes about the consequences of murder, I would probably be willing. Indeed it is rather hypocritical to back the death penalty without being accountable for the enforcement of it.

At the same time, I believe we should return to methods similar to the firing squad method. Taking life was never supposed to belong to
humans; it damages the human psyche and in an ideal world it would not be necessary. Not knowing who actually fired the fatal bullet and who was just firing blanks is a protective device that prevents the weight of such a difficult responsibility from being shouldered by an individual. If society is protecting its young and weak, then civilization should shoulder responsibility collectively.

The death penalty will not bring back past victims. It should never be a matter of personal vengeance. Relatives of victims who gnash their teeth and wait for relief when the murderer is put to death will probably never find the peace for which they are looking. We instead must work to prevent the loss of future daughters, sons, wives, husbands, grandchildren, and cousins. The death penalty must only be a means of preventing further victims and of upholding respect for life.

Interestingly, I find myself at ease with those victims of violence who find themselves opposed to the death penalty. Indeed at moments I identify with them. Members of my own family actually became opposed to the death penalty when Antonio entered our lives. Correctly or incorrectly, knowing him gave a sense of responsibility for his evangelization. I understand this and on a personal level, admire it. And though I have discovered that I ultimately disagree with such conclusions, I can accept their positions.

But I would be surprised if anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one to violent crime would ever wear a t-shirt to remind themselves and others of their pain. Why? Not because the issue isn’t valid; but because the question seems to intrinsically place importance on the victimizer rather than the victim. Read the question again: Do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong? It’s kind of difficult to replace that middle “people” with the face of someone you love and not find the very question offensive, isn’t it?

[For my uncle Darold Bigger, who has been an example of honest faith to me and my family, especially since the loss of Shannon.]