

A Gospel Perspective on the Death Penalty

Reflections on the Lenten Gospel Readings 2016

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Forward

In November 2016, Nebraskans will be asked to make a decision about whether to bring back the death penalty. This is a subject laden with emotions, which often results in heated debates and arguments. It also touches on and is informed by deep religious beliefs and values.

Pastors may be hesitant to speak directly about the issue from the pulpit. However, parishioners will be asking for guidance to help them with their decision. They will be glad to hear words from their spiritual leaders and teachers that provide context and insight for their own thinking.

The season of Lent offers an opportunity to reflect on this important issue. The message of the suffering and execution of Jesus Christ places our own conversations about capital punishment in an especially poignant context. I do not ask that pastors preach every sermon on the issue. I know I would not. I do, however, appreciate Fr. Thompson's work of considering the Gospel readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for Lent 2016 in light of his understanding of Christ's ministry and redemptive self-offering.

I hope you will find his reflections helpful, and that they will prompt you to your own further study, contemplation and prayer as you lead your congregation. I would be glad to hear your thoughts, to learn of your experiences, and to know what further information, resources and conversation will be useful as you lead the conversation in your community.

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Jesus opens with a warning about our own piety. Self-righteousness is always a temptation, and our attitudes regarding the death penalty are no exception, whatever "side" we adopt in the disagreement. We can assume God's role to avenge the victim, and we can also assume that - because we hold an attitude of understanding and perhaps even forgiveness - that we are better Christians than those who seek vengeance. Although we might assume that one of these perspectives is more in keeping with the Christian proclamation than the other, we ultimately must all remember that God is judge and that we must leave judgment in God's hands. This principle applies both to those who have committed a crime and to those who must make an earthly evaluation about the crime and its consequences. Humility is called for all around, and nothing permits it to be set aside.

Jesus' final words about storing treasure in heaven apply more strongly to those who would assume an earthly judgment of death on a convicted criminal. Assuming that the person is guilty, what is the proper response of Christians to such a reality? I think of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith who, as he is being stoned to death, asks God not to hold the stoning against the perpetrators. Somewhat in contrast, Zechariah asks God to avenge his stoning in a similar situation. "Somewhat" because Zechariah's prayer is not that earthly representatives will avenge his death, but that God will do so, with the implication that God will do so as God sees fit. Zechariah's prayer opens interpretative possibilities that align with Stephen's prayer to God that his stoning not be held against the perpetrators. Is this the same as there being no consequences in the earthly realm? Perhaps. Less radically, consequences can still be assigned in this earthly realm, for example, life in prison. But to repeat the crime of taking life in response to a life taken is arguably not in keeping with Stephen or Zechariah's prayers. Such a decision should be left in God's hands, not ours, as difficult as doing so might sometimes be to us. Life imprisonment is far more in keeping with our responsibilities as human beings accountable to God for our lives and for the lives of one another as entrusted to us. By living according to such priorities, we store treasure in heaven. By seeking retribution by taking life seeks treasure on earth, and ultimately it cannot be satisfying.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and

'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Heaven knows we all are famished for justice. We don't have to look far before we see an example of what is, to our eyes, injustice in action. And so just as Jesus is famished for food because he has willingly fasted for a period of time, we passionately want justice because of an imposed fast. But as this story expresses, such a situation is rife with temptation to sin on behalf of what we think of as good deeds. To consume what we conceive as justice when it comes from the wrong source is to live unfaithfully, to stuff ourselves with food that only leaves us less healthy in the long run.

In a similar way, the second temptation is about authority – power. Does the devil speak a lie when he says that he has all authority in the kingdoms of the earth? Or does it already belong to Jesus and he is being tempted to exercise it independently of God? Clearly Jesus is being pulled to serve in a way that glories in his own power without reference to God. Yes, we have the power to put one another to death, but are we to use it as an expression of our service to God, or are we called to act without reference to God? Is putting someone to death simply glorifying in the authority that we have rather than using it to serve the interests and priorities of God?

The final temptation is about protection. The death penalty is sometimes employed as a protection of innocent people – in other words, ourselves, which itself is debatable. But more critically, we must also ask if we are putting God to the test, not truly trusting God to rectify injustice where we cannot. Putting someone to death does, in one sense, protect everyone else in a definitive fashion that life imprisonment does not; however, the action protects only our bodies. Does it far more deeply imperil our souls, our spirits – and therefore our entire selves?

The final line of this gospel is also telling, with the devil leaving Jesus "until an opportune time." We must ask if this controversy over the death penalty is not an opportunity for evil to move into state actions in a way that we can now prevent.

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Some of the Pharisees come to warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Killing here is presented as undesirable – for Jesus, who one day nonetheless will die/must die. When we think of those who die at the hand of the state (as Jesus himself did), a couple of possibilities arise. One is that their death is a kind of proclamation to the rest of us. Jesus' death is both tragic and good. Is that true of those who die at the hands of the state? It could be that their deaths are prophesying something to us about the reality in which we live, and we must ask if that reality is of God. Logically, this line of thinking also suggests that this prophecy and some of their deaths might very well be of God – as a way to tell us to stop. The death of the innocent would fall especially into this category. Jesus himself, of course, was innocent; a dimension of the tragic part of his death was that he was innocent and was nonetheless put to death. Herod lusts after Jesus' blood. Similarly, the desire to have someone die because he or she has put someone else to death without the state's blessing is a kind of blood lust not known to the spirit of Christ.

Luke 13:1-9

There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Who is the worse sinner? Who deserves death over someone else? Who deserves death over you? Jesus' proclamation reminds us that we all are guilty and not in a place to judge one another. And yet we do so all the time, or at least the state does. Do we Christians have any business judging one another, let alone judging that someone else deserves death, let alone participating in that execution? Or are we instead called to look at our own sin and amend our own lives accordingly?

The parable Jesus tells reminds us of mercy – God's mercy and the mercy to which all of us are called. How are we to know what good fruit can be borne by a convicted criminal who is cared for and loved in the future? Conversions in prison do occur; we can be cynical about them, but if we give up hope in the promises of God, we have given up not only on others but on ourselves as well. We should instead be nurturing the soil and praying for growth – not cutting off possibilities for future growth.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Once again, the mercy of God astounds those closest to it. I'm reminded of the many people over the years who have chosen to forgive the killer of their family members. The mercy involved in doing so astounds even those of us who believe in it and try to walk according to a merciful path. We know how deep the pain and how profound the loss, and how wide the mercy that can embrace all of that pain as well as the one who takes the life of a beloved family member.

But that is the point. The guilty are enfolded in the love of God in a way that is difficult for us to comprehend. And yet they are. Our proclamation is neither about vengeance nor even about "just deserts" as some would conceive of them. It is about love, a love that embraces within it even the one who hates, as God embraces all. Is ending the life of such a one – a beloved child of God – a proclamation of the gospel? Or does the gospel instead call for us to widen the breadth of our own hearts to include even those who will not enter them – on the chance that one finally will come home – and find there a banquet prepared for himself? A banquet to which even we are invited.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

At the heart of Judas' criticism is deception about his motivation. Deception is a big part of life in prison. I met few guilty prisoners during a jail chaplaincy I once held. And no doubt intentional deception was at times part of the motivation of some prisoners. However, I vividly remember one young man who was convicted of armed robbery and was headed to prison from the local jail. He was honest about his involvement in the crime as well as honest about his fear of going to prison. At the time of his robbery, that deterrent had no affect on his actions. He was motivated by much stronger desires and more immediate urges than the long-term consequences of his actions.

For most of us, our inner motivations rarely dwell fully on the surface of our hearts. It's hard enough for us to know our own motivations, let alone for others to know them – although it's difficult to see that in day to day conversation. I often hear people attributing motivation to others, when really they have little idea of what goes on in the heart of someone else.

We are complex creatures with inner worlds that are known fully only to God. To assume motivation about criminals, or deterrents to crime, or an impetus for change, is probably to assume more than we can know. What Jesus calls us to do is, in this complexity of realities, to love the one before us and over whom we have some responsibility of care. We can only ask if ending a life by the death penalty is an expression of the love of God for that life, as well as our own.