

The Bible and the Moratorium

By Rev. Jack McKinney

It might be an odd thing for a minister to declare, but the Bible has some bad ideas. Human slavery was the ultimate bad idea, but you can find plenty of support for it in the Scriptures. Treating women like cattle remains a bad idea, but it still happens and people can find places in the Bible to rationalize such stupid behavior.

Sometimes, though, ancient biblical wisdom is so good that it continues to be applicable today. Take, for instance, the concept of "cities of refuge" found in the first books of the Bible.

If someone was killed, and it was unclear whether the death was a homicide or accident, the alleged perpetrator could flee to a city of refuge until the circumstances of the death were determined. Why go to all this trouble? In the ancient world the family of the victim was given the right to avenge the blood of their loved one. If they took such revenge, and killed someone who was actually innocent, another tragedy occurred. Three thousand years ago our spiritual ancestors were so disturbed by the possibility of innocent people being killed in the name of justice that they went to extraordinary lengths to prevent that from happening.

North Carolina needs its own version of a city of refuge right now. Only, the mandatory timeout we need is not to keep a family from avenging a death inappropriately. We need to stop ourselves from continuing to execute prisoners when so many questions have arisen about the capital punishment system in our state.

By now most of us have heard the ugly details. The innocent people that have been discovered on death row; the fact that two-thirds of death penalty cases are overturned on appeal; prosecutorial misconduct; racial inequities (a defendant charged with killing a white person is 3.5 times more likely to receive the death penalty; 76 percent of the people executed by the state have been African American; jurors often dismissed because of their race); economic factors - 98 percent of those charged with capital crimes cannot afford an attorney; the lack of adequate defense attorneys for capital cases.

The truth is that whether a person receives the death penalty in North Carolina is very much dependent on the county in which the alleged crime was committed, what the defendant's race is, what the victim's race is, how much money the defendant has, and the experience level of the defense counsel that is assigned to the case.

That is why I, and many other citizens of North Carolina, believe it is imperative that we enact a moratorium on executions in our state. A pattern of injustice has taken root in our system and we must stop executing people while that is the case. In a society based on the rule of law, and the equal protection of the law, the way capital punishment is carried out is a continuing travesty.

Legislators who think this is not an urgent issue need to remember the ancient wisdom of the Bible. Leaders in that time were so concerned that mistakes would be made in their death penalty system that they went to great lengths to prevent those mistakes. The cities of refuge sent a message that they not only were concerned about punishing the guilty, they were also concerned with justice. A moratorium on the death penalty would send the same message today.

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Link: <http://www.pfadp.org/mckinney.htm>