



Abolish the Death Penalty

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I will never forget the night when I sat in the damp and cold dungeon known as Missouri's death row. My chair was not electric, but plastic. I was not inside a cell but sitting outside of a metal cage. Inside the cage, curled up in a fetal position was my cousin Paul. The clock was ticking down the minutes to his execution by lethal injection. We only had a few minutes to talk. As both Paul's spiritual advisor and cousin, I offered him these parting words, "Paul, you are a child of God. I love you and God loves you."

Paul's execution took place 18 years ago, yet I will never forget the horror of witnessing state-sanctioned murder. I cannot unsee what I saw, and I cannot dismember what I remember. I am in treatment today for post-traumatic stress disorder, in part, because of the personal violence I experienced being in such proximity to the well-oiled killing machine that is the American capital punishment complex.

Now we all are witnesses to this killing machine running on full speed, seemingly fueled by an unquenchable lust for the unattainable power of the gods, as the federal government begins to execute the largest number of God's children on federal death row in recent history of any U.S. administration. As a mother, as a wife, as a Christian minister, and as the family member of a person who died by lethal injection, I testify to the soul violence that capital punishment inflicts on a nation. Whether you are the chaplain offering the last rites, or the nurse offering an anti-anxiety sedative to the death-row inmate, or the prison guard stationed at the doorway of the execution chamber, this multi-million-dollar endeavor is a misguided use of human and financial resources. But much worse than that, the death penalty is an abuse of God's grace and mercy entrusted to us.

The death penalty targets the people most in need of God's grace and mercy. Nearly all those who end up on death row in the U.S. come from lives of poverty, racial injustice, adverse childhood experiences, mental health conditions, and generations of trauma. Take time to read the stories of those recently executed

by this administration and those slated for execution in the first weeks of 2021—a total of 13 people, including Brandon Bernard. Brandon was an 18-year-old when sentenced to death, and in his early 40s when he died on December 10 by modern-day lynching.

The death penalty should be abolished worldwide. As a survivor of execution loss, I weep for the loss of my cousin's life, a life created in God's image. I weep for all whose lives are ended through corrupt calculations of this heartless killing machine. May God and our elected leaders hear our cries for just mercy as we seek to be a people of justice, peace, and love. May the new year grant opportunities for radical change that turns our execution chambers into rehabilitation chambers, our lethal injection needles into vaccine needles, and our death rows into rows where new life can be born.

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