

Sister Helen Prejean- Dead Man Walking

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Ever since Susan, Heike and I decided on a summer sermon series, I knew I would preach about Sister Helen Prejean. I met her and loved her, I read her book and was inspired by it, and I really wanted to make sure women were represented on the list of Today's Saints. But yesterday, I finally sat down and watched the movie Dead Man Walking for the first time, after I had already written this sermon. This was probably a mistake because after my viewing, I was so riled up and inspired that I wanted to write a completely different sermon! Instead, I'm just going to talk to you a bit about what I experienced from the movie, and then I'll go on with regularly scheduled programming. Has anyone seen the movie Dead Man Walking- with Susan Serandon and Sean Penn? It's based on Sister Helen Prejean's memoir of the same name, about the time she spent as spiritual advisor to several death row inmates.

Thankfully I read the book first, because the first hour and a half of the movie did not do a good job of portraying Helen as a strong, articulate, outspoken advocate against the death penalty. I felt the movie portrayed her as weak and confused and did not successfully show her arguments of why the death penalty is wrong. But then, at the end of the movie, as you are watching brutal images of the execution of Pat Sonnier juxtaposed with brutal images of the crimes he committed, all of a sudden her argument is shown loud and clear.

Throughout the movie, you don't really like Pat Sonnier- the death row inmate Helen was helping. You hate the crimes he committed and do not condone them and want him punished. He is a criminal, he killed 2 teenagers. He admits his guilt. He also does not really seem like a good person. He is prone to outbursts of anger; he is a racist and not incredibly likable.

But at the same time, you see him smile, and laugh, and cry, and share his thoughts and feelings with Helen. You see he has a mom and brothers. You see pictures and are reminded that he was once a cute little baby, a young innocent child. Helen was never advocating that he go free, but at least in prison, he could be alive and live a fairly decent life. Helen was shocked that the government, with all of our tax dollars, was committing such a cold and calculating murder of a human being, no matter what he had done.

The scene that really got to me was Helen's last embrace with Pat. She held him tight, and then let him go....to be killed. She tried everything she could to get appeals to change the sentencing. But they were all denied. So she had to hand him over to be killed. It just seemed so wrong to me and I know it felt incredibly wrong to Helen. When you would do everything to save someone, when you are actively against murder and killing, when you really value human life and work to prevent the early end of life, handing over a man to be killed is the epitome of everything you stand against.

I've always been against the death penalty- but mostly because I know there are innocent people on death row that just didn't have the money to hire a good enough lawyer to fight their case. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. My friend worked for the Innocence Project at our college, Northwestern University. She would tell me about her times visiting with death row inmates, and finding hard concrete evidence that proves they did not commit the crime, and she and her classmates fought hard to bring this evidence before the courts. Because of legal technicalities, it was incredibly difficult to get these people freed. Since humans are not perfect- juries are not perfect, criminal investigators are not perfect, lawyers and judges are not perfect, and innocent people were being killed, I could never support the death penalty. But the portrayal of Helen and Pat changed me, and got me from point A to point B. Now I can firmly say that I do not support the death penalty, even for the worst criminals. This was a VERY difficult shift for me to make. Reading the book, that was the one thing I couldn't understand. Helen was working with criminals who were proven 100% to be guilty of horrendous crimes. Why would she spend all this time and energy fighting for the bad guy? And I was having a hard time trying to write a sermon about it, because I just didn't get it. But seeing it on screen, seeing the humanity of the criminal, seeing a human being killed purposefully and not against the law, I got it. I understood Helen and her lifetime fight against the death penalty.

So that's what I gleaned from the movie. Now let me tell you a bit more about Helen and her ministry. I met Helen last year at a conference in Madison, Wisconsin where she was the keynote speaker. She is 74 years old now, but she is just as feisty as she describes herself in her younger years. She is also incredibly kind and compassionate. I had a great conversation with her after her talk and I really connected with her. She is a great woman, passionate about life and love.

Helen was born and raised in Louisiana, became a nun in 1957 when she was 18 years old. She joined the Sisters of St Joseph of Medaille in New Orleans. The sisters took a vow to stand on the side of the poor. They sought to harness religious faith for social justice. Helen originally resisted this vow. She had always believed that what counted when it came to faith was a personal relationship with God, inner peace, kindness to

others, and heaven when this life is done. She didn't want to struggle with politics and economics. She chose to be a nun, not a social worker. She believed that some things in life, like the gap between rich and poor, were fixed and unchangeable. She saw the world as a big giant mess - social problems meshed with other problems. For example, in trying to improve housing for poor people—all kinds of other things get in the way -- bureaucracy, waste in government programs, racism, banking policies, unemployment—it's a mess, too messy to be caught up in. Not worth the time and energy. Helen had often heard, and mostly believed, that “if you work for social change, you're political, but if you acquiesce and go along with the status quo, you're above politics.

Helen says her enlightenment came in 1980 when she met Sister Marie Augusta Meal, who said to claim to be apolitical or neutral in the face of injustices would be, in actuality, to uphold the status quo- a very political position to take and on the side of the oppressors. Sister Marie said that Jesus' challenge to the non-poor was to relinquish their affluence and share their resources with the dispossessed. Helen realized her spiritual life had been too ethereal, too disconnected from the world. So she started working at the St. Thomas housing development in New Orleans. She learned that being kind in an unjust system is not enough. And while so much of what she saw in St. Thomas was more like a war zone than a neighborhood, she did experiences glimpses of hope for the community; A teenage boy who worked in a drugstore after school to help his single working mother buy clothes for his younger sisters, a 22 year old man who after a short stint in jail comes to the Adult Learning Center for fifth grade reading lessons, a young woman whose mother works two jobs so she can attend college, an ex-convict organizing a boys' club; hope that things might change.

Soon after, she was asked by a friend to be a pen pal with a death row inmate- a white Cajun man from St. Martinville named Elmo Patrick Sonnier. They began exchanging letters and she became his spiritual advisor. He expressed gratitude and appreciation for her care, he said he was glad to have someone to communicate with because he had been so lonely. Helen at first feels guilty befriending a killer, seeing his humanity and questioning the death penalty, while two young teenagers are dead because of him. She wrote, “But Jesus Christ refused to meet hate with hate, violence with violence. I cannot believe in a God who metes out hurt for hurt, pain for pain, torture for torture. If I were to be murdered, I would not want my murderer executed. Especially by the government, which can't be trusted to control its own bureaucrats or collect taxes equitably or fill a pothole, much less decide which of its citizens to kill.”

She eventually went to Death Row to meet Pat. She was horrified by this place where people wait to be killed. “This is the United States of America and these are government officials in charge and there's a law

sanctioning and upholding what is going on here, so it all must be legitimate and just, or so one compartment of my brain tells me, the part that studied civics in high school, the part that wants to trust that my country would never violate the human rights of its citizens. She writes, “If we believe that murder is wrong and not admissible for society, then it has to be wrong for everyone, not just individuals but governments as well.” And she gives several arguments against the death penalty. For example, you will never find a rich person on death row, because expensive legal counsel knows how to play the system. Capital punishment is a poor man’s punishment. Executions signal to society that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with human problems. Execution of a prisoner costs more than life imprisonment (in the 1990s a Florida execution cost 3.18 million but a life sentence only cost \$516,000). She also gives several Christian reasons; Jesus’ message to forgive, not seek revenge, mercy is stronger and more God-like than vengeance, God is a God of compassion and love, not retribution. However, she has met several Christians who, no matter what their personal beliefs, still do their job to execute criminals.

Helen writes about a conversation she had with a Police Captain – the death house fell under his jurisdiction.

He said, “What’s a nun doing in a place like this-- Shouldn’t you be teaching children? Do you know what this man has done, the kids he killed?”

Helen replied, “What he did was evil. I don’t condone it. I just don’t see much sense in doing the same to him.”

He said, “You know the Bible says an eye for an eye”

Helen replied, “And you know that Jesus called us to go beyond that kind of vengeance, not to pay back an eye for an eye, not to return hate for hate.”

Helen also had very deep conversations with the Head of the Department of Corrections- Mr. Phelps. He told Helen that he believed nothing was accomplished after the execution. He dis not believe that executions prevent crime. He said he also believed that the nature of the criminal justice system and death sentencing is arbitrary.

Helen said to him, “You don’t seem to believe that the death penalty is morally right, but here you are lining up the witnesses, designing the protocol. Do you experience any conflict of conscience between your personal religious beliefs and what your job calls you to? If Jesus Christ lived on earth today, would he supervise this process?”

Phelps replied- “I didn’t make the law, I’m just following the law, just part of my job. When I am called on to speak in public, I never speak from my personal convictions.”

Helen told him, “Amnesty International defines torture as an extreme physical and mental assault on a person who has been rendered defenseless. Isn’t that what you are doing to death row inmates? Torture?”

Phelps replied, “People these days want revenge, and that’s what revenge is, eye for an eye, pain for pain, torture for torture.”

Helen spoke to Prison warden, Frank Blackburn, saying, “You’re a Christian, a minister in your church, a man who professes to follow the way of life that Jesus taught. Yet you are the one who, with a nod of your head, signals the executioner to kill a man. Do you really believe that Jesus, who taught us not to return hate for hate and evil for evil would participate in these executions?”

Blackburn replied, “I don’t experience any contradiction with my Christianity. Never thought about it too much, really. Executions are the law, and Christians are supposed to observe the law, and that’s that.”

Helen is consistently shocked and disturbed by the severance of personal values from public duty. She continually met people who personally did not support the death penalty but nevertheless allowed it to be carried out.

She reflects about how sad it is that the mandate and example of Jesus, so clearly urging compassion and nonviolence, has so quickly become set aside and ignored in public life. And this is crazy, considering for the first five centuries after Jesus’s death, Christians believed so strongly the strict moral teaching of Jesus that forbade killing that Emperor Julian did not want to give official office to Christians because they systematically refused to pronounce death sentences. Even the US Catholic Bishops Statement on Capital Punishment strongly condemns the death penalty because of the unfair and discriminatory manner in which it is imposed, it continues

the cycle of violence, and it disregards the unique worth and dignity of humanity. BUT it still upholds the “right” of the state to kill.

I don't want to get too much more into the pros and cons of the Death Penalty- though this is what Sister Helen has worked for her entire life. She deeply believes in the dignity and worth and humanity of every single person on Earth. What I really want us to learn from Helen is to not separate our Christian morals and value from our worldly duties. To not sacrifice what we believe when we make decisions at work, or at home, or with our families and friends. How money is spent, how workers are paid and treated, what investments we make, we products we buy, what choices we make, how we treat people.

I know I am going to try to be better about this. Sister Helen has really inspired me to not check my faith at the door of my daily life. Just like my change in view about the death penalty, this is hard, so difficult. But we can do it. I will start by telling you three ways that I vow to put my faith in action.

1. Practice patience with all people, even when I frustrated. Patience while waiting in line, patience with customer service reps who can't help me, practice while being put on hold.
2. Be more conscious about buying ethical products, that have been made ethically and people have been paid ethically for their work.
3. Smile at strangers. I was in Wisconsin a few weeks ago visiting my friends and family, and we were walking around my friend's new neighbors. Every single person we passed said hi, how are you, have a great day, and SMILED, and look us in the eye! My fiancé Tim turned to me and said, “Wow, that would never happen in Massachusetts.” And when we got back here, and we went for a walk, and I noticed the difference immediately. People do not look at you, do not smile, and do not speak to you. But now I will. I vow to bring some of my Wisconsin heritage to Massachusetts.

None of these things will be easy to do, but I will try, with God's help. And I hope you will too.... I hope you can be inspired by Sister Helen, and put your faith into action.

Amen.