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The Right to Life A Sermon on the Death Penalty

by Bishop Ray Chamberlain

Fifty years ago the Methodists said a bold yes to the right to life and a resounding no to the death penalty. In 1956 and every year since we have said

yes to life
yes to humanizing our criminal justice laws
yes to a higher ethic
yes to a Christian moral value
yes to the sanctity of human life
yes to the belief that all persons are created in the image of God which gives them worth beyond their behavior.

Fifty years ago we said no to capital punishment because it is morally indefensible to deliberately destroy life.

We said

no to the death penalty which is sheer retribution
no to the state's devaluing human life to the ultimate extreme
no to the United States' reserving for itself the right to kill juveniles
no to the inhumane practice of the state continuing the cycle of violence by killing the one who kills.

We said then and we say now: There is a better way.

I recently visited South Africa. The appalling atrocities of Apartheid still wound that country. But Nelson Mandela and others in drafting the Bill of Rights said No to the death penalty retribution and Yes to the right to life, and joined most nations of the world in prohibiting capital punishment. As a denomination we are not in support of — or against — a particular ideology or political perspective. Our position is not simply being against capital punishment, but rather, it is a bold, clear declaration of the sanctity of life and the right to life. Our conviction is that taking human life violates our deepest belief in God as Creator and Redeemer of humankind. We do not believe that a humane way exists for the state to take human life. Yes, we decry the evil of murder; we shudder at its hideous violence. But when the state responds to this evil with vengeance, we believe it increases the credibility of violence as legitimate, which weakens the very fabric of our common humanity. We believe that our response as a society to the atrocity of the murderer is to say:

We will not echo your behavior.
We will not act with ultimate retribution by killing as you have done.
We will not violate the sanctity of human life as you have done.
We will not repeat your atrocity.

Rather

We will break the cycle of violence.
We will lift a vision of a better way.
We will honor life as the indisputable gift of God.
We will embrace the God of Redemption.

This is not weak-kneed sentimentality or some fanciful utopian ideal. It is a courageous, strong, bold commitment to the highest morality and the right to life. It is rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus. There was a time in our history when we discounted and devalued persons whom we labeled as slaves. That labeling allowed us to dehumanize these persons and to do with them as we desired—they were slaves—not persons of sacred and ultimate worth.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, helped society to see these were more than slaves — they were human beings created in the image of God, and society had no right to treat them as anything less. Today, we seem to think that if we can label persons as criminals and murderers, then we can then treat them inhumanely. But we believe that even murderers, evil and debased as they may be, are created in the image of God who gave them life, and the state has no right to take that life from them. So, we United Methodists continue to declare today what we said fifty years ago: “We oppose capital punishment and urge its elimination from all criminal codes” (164 A, 2004 Book of Resolutions). Today we pledge again our commitment to eradicate once and for all the death penalty. We have stirred to life again the network, United Methodists Against the Death Penalty, which will provide strategies and encouragement in the work for abolition of capital punishment.

As bishops of the church, we call on all clergy, lay officials, our congregations and various boards and agencies to educate, preach, teach and lead our country to a higher morality, where we choose the right to life over the wrong of the death penalty. For the sake of God and all humanity, let a new morality of the sanctity of all human life spread from sea to shining sea.

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