

**Sermon Series: “Front-page faith”—Lord of Life Lutheran—Westfield, IN—1/27/2002**

**Title: “Punishment that fits the Crime”(Capital Punishment)**

**Text: Numbers 35: 9-12; Romans 13: 1-5; Matt. 27: 22-25**

**Introduction: Ills.: The Timothy McVeigh execution June 11, 2001 (crime: Apr 1995; trial: May 28–June 13, 1997)**

**Theme:** “Thou Shalt Not Murder” is bantered about by both sides in the argument over capital punishment; yet, as we live under both God’s justice and mercy, our approach to this weighty issue takes on a whole, new “world view.”

### ***Facts about Capital Punishment to frame the discussion***

- The phrase capital punishment has two possible sources for its word origin
  1. “capital” coming from the word the Greek word for “head” and a reference to its removal as ancient form
  2. “capital” as “highest” in referring to particularly heinous crimes which a society deems to deserve ultimate penalty
- The practice of capital punishment in our country
  1. In U.S., about 13,000 people legally executed since colonial times By 1930's up to 150 people were executed yearly.
  2. The U.S. Supreme Court banned in 1972. In 1976, the Supreme Court authorized its resumption. Each state decides whether to have the death penalty or not. As of the end of 1997, only 12 states do not have the death penalty.
  3. From 1976, when executions were resumed, and the end of 1997, there were 432 executions in the US. About 30 to 60 prisoners are currently executed annually, most by lethal injection. Another 3,500 wait on death rows.
  4. Public approval of the death penalty is currently about 70%.
- Much debate over whether capital punishment should be practiced hinges on three issues:
  1. **Civility** of a nation versus the **Deterrent** factor in violent crimes (Many homicides crimes of passion)
  2. Does the prohibition to “murder” apply to the government?
  3. The plight of those unjustly accused of murder and wrongfully sentenced to death

### ***What God says about murder and capital punishment***

- God speaks very plainly about murder and his judgment against it
  1. Murder is a sin against the Creator (**destroying what we have no right to do**)
  2. *“One who sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” Gn9:6*
  3. Violence is a consequence of murder (**law as a curb to sinful behavior**)
  4. *“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” Mat26:52*
- God conveyed his authority to governments to take life in limited instances of one maliciously took another’s life
  1. **PRINT AND READ NUMBERS 11: 9-21**
  2. God wanted no vigilantism
  3. God wanted to punish the “intentional murder” (*lie in way; pick up object*) and malicious destruction of life
  4. God designs order and stability for our communities and world through our governmental justice systems
  5. **PRINT AND READ ROMANS 13: 1-5**
- God wants justice and mercy to be the limiters of our use of capital punishment
  1. **PRINT AND READ NUMBERS 11: 22-34**
  2. Wanton violence and murder pollute a “land” and its people
  3. Mercy shown when unintentional actions ended life
    - a. City’s of refuge (sanctuary from vigilantism, place to sort out facts, justice served, consequence for killer)

b. Sin is still sin but that is why there is forgiveness

c. **Ills.: Forgiveness Personified**

***Jesus' death puts a new perspective on capital punishment from a mercy and justice viewpoint***

- If capital punishment was totally against God's will than Jesus's death for us would mean nothing
  1. Jesus was put to death by a form of capital punishment (**PRINT AND READ MATTHEW 27: 22-25**)
  2. Jesus death was a substitute for an eternal capital punishment which all of us were facing
    - a. *"In fact, the law requires that . . . without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." Heb 9:22*
    - b. *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 6: 23*
- Jesus' death by capital punishment can redeem the person and the process
  1. ***The pardon still stands*** for the one who has committed a capital crime
  2. **Ills.: Pardon must Be Received**
  3. ***The resurrection still is the last word*** for someone who through miscarriage of justice is put to death wrongfully

**Forgiveness Personified**

The parents of Matthew Shepard, murdered in Wyoming in 1998, rejoiced over the guilty verdict reached by a Laramie jury in November 1999. The judge told a packed courtroom that the jury's verdict "showed true courage" and sent a message that violence is not the solution to differing views. Courtroom observers were not prepared for what Dennis and Judy Shepard did next. After waiting 13 months for a guilty verdict for their son's killers, Matthew Shepard's parents asked the judge to spare the lives of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson by giving them life sentences rather than the death penalty. According to attorney Cal Rerucha, who prosecuted the case, "They (the Shepards) could look into the eyes of the man who took their son and give him mercy."

**Pardon Must Be Accepted**

During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, George Wilson, a postal clerk, robbed a federal payroll from a train and in the process killed a guard. The court convicted him and sentenced him to hang. Because of public sentiment against capital punishment, however, a movement began to secure a presidential pardon for Wilson (first offense), and eventually Jackson intervened with a pardon. Amazingly, Wilson refused it. Since this had never happened before, the Supreme Court was asked to rule on whether someone could indeed refuse a presidential pardon. Chief Justice John Marshall handed down the court's decision: "A pardon is a parchment whose only value must be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from that which the receiver gives to it. George Wilson has refused to accept the pardon. We cannot conceive why he would do so, but he has. Therefore, George Wilson must die." George Wilson, as punishment for his crime, was hanged. Pardon, declared the Supreme Court, must not only be granted, it must be accepted.

## Numbers 35:9-34

<sup>9</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses: <sup>10</sup>"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, <sup>11</sup>select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. <sup>12</sup>They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly. <sup>13</sup>These six towns you give will be your cities of refuge. <sup>14</sup>Give three on this side of the Jordan and three in Canaan as cities of refuge. <sup>15</sup>These six towns will be a place of refuge for Israelites, aliens and any other people living among them, so that anyone who has killed another accidentally can flee there. <sup>16</sup>" 'If a man strikes someone with an iron object so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. <sup>17</sup>Or if anyone has a stone in his hand that could kill, and he strikes someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. <sup>18</sup>Or if anyone has a wooden object in his hand that could kill, and he hits someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. <sup>19</sup>The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. <sup>20</sup>If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies <sup>21</sup>or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him. <sup>22</sup>" 'But if without hostility someone suddenly shoves another or throws something at him unintentionally <sup>23</sup>or, without seeing him, drops a stone on him that could kill him, and he dies, then since he was not his enemy and he did not intend to harm him, <sup>24</sup>the assembly must judge between him and the avenger of blood according to these regulations. <sup>25</sup>The assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the avenger of blood and send him back to the city of refuge to which he fled. He must stay there until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil. <sup>26</sup>" 'But if the accused ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which he has fled <sup>27</sup>and the avenger of blood finds him outside the city, the avenger of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder. <sup>28</sup>The accused must stay in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may he return to his own property. <sup>29</sup>" 'These are to be legal requirements for you throughout the generations to come, wherever you live. <sup>30</sup>" 'Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. <sup>31</sup>" 'Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. He must surely be put to death. <sup>32</sup>" 'Do not accept a ransom for anyone who has fled to a city of refuge and so allow him to go back and live on his own land before the death of the high priest. <sup>33</sup>" 'Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. <sup>34</sup>' 'Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites.' "

## Romans 13:1-5

<sup>1</sup>Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup>Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

## Matthew 27:22-25

<sup>22</sup>"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" <sup>23</sup>"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" <sup>24</sup>When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" <sup>25</sup>All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"