

6th Sunday after Epiphany 12 February 2023 Trinity
By Rev. Kate Stevens

Here we are with Jesus on the mountain continuing to preach to the disciples his most famous sermon. This time he speaks of murder and the other lesser crimes. We can all agree that one who commits murder deserves judgment – Jesus doesn't say what judgment but judgment for sure. But he suggests, as he continues to turn the most obvious laws slightly upside down. Also, if you are angry with another, you are liable for judgment. or insult another, or name call another, still you are liable for judgment.

I think this is Jesus way to open people's minds and hearts – to pull them away from rigid interpretation of the law. It's his way to challenge the purity codes and the naming of sins. It's easy to look at someone who kills and point the finger at them. But getting angry, or insulting or name calling - - -well, we all do that. Are we too liable for judgment? Jesus says yes. It's another way for Jesus to say, take the log out of your eye before dealing with the splinter in your neighbor's eye, or who is willing to say they are sinless and throw the first stone. Jesus doesn't let the disciples – or us – get away with murder - in any form.

Let us pray: 'May the words of my mouth . . .

Today, I want to share a more contemporary story, a story that also includes murder and judgment. A story that for me began about 14 years ago. The story for the hero began long before that.

Early in the year of 2009, I contacted a place called the Death Row Support project. This organization, begun by the church of the Brethren, connects interested people with a prisoner on death row, with the idea that they would be penpals. I began to write to Johnnie Valerio. Johnnie was convicted of murder in 1986, at the age of 21 and was on death row for over 30 years.

Johnnie didn't have an exceptionally hard childhood but when his parents separated when he was 12 he went to live with his father who worked full time. His mother stopped seeing him and so he had lots of

time alone as a teenager and as often happens, he got into trouble – small at first, shoplifting, other crimes of theft. . And then in October of 1986 Johnnie was charge with murder and found guilty, and at the age of 23 he was placed on death row in Ely, Nevada. ever heard of it? It's, as they say, in the middle of nowhere.

Johnnie's life during those 30years was lived primarily in a 9x12 foot cell, eating all three meals a day by himself in the cell. Every 3 out of 4 days he got 2 hours out of the cell for showers, for exercise, for phone calls, for conversation. The 4th day he spent all 24 hours in the cell.

I've been writing to Johnnie ever since. We enjoyed writing to one another and it was a good way to get to know each other. He was very forthcoming about his early life as well as his life on death row. And he took special interest in my life too. After writing for 2 years, I flew out to Salt Lake City, rented a car and drove over 4 hours to Ely, Nevada. I was able to visit with him two days in a row, about 5 hours each day. We sat across from one another with a table between us. I was allowed to bring nothing with me – and believe me they checked - except \$40 in quarters to spend in the vending machines so that we could have lunch together.

I met a fine man that day in the Ely State Prison visiting room. He is sensitive, bright, calm and accepting. He has a great sense of humor and in many ways if he weren't on death row, you might think of him as a fairly enlightened being.

You see, I take 8 day long silent retreats as an important part of my spiritual practice but Johnnie, like the desert fathers or monks, is on his own spiritual, mostly silent, retreat year after year. His journey in some ways is like ours. We get one day at a time. His life is what it is and he recognizes that and then he makes the very best of it.

As Sr. Joan Chittister says, (from our Call to worship)

“everything is a potential blessing

It only depends on how we view it and what we do with it”

I don't think I heard Johnnie call his life a blessing in that first visit, but I didn't hear him complain either. He has had to learn a lot and grow

a lot. If he hadn't evolved – grown up – I'm not sure he'd be alive now. Death Row is not an easy place to survive. But he did it - one day at a time.

He learned to live with others he wouldn't choose to be near. He's learned to accept and accept with calm – all the humiliations he is put through, and he has learned the hardest of lessons, to accept himself and do all he could to live a good life.

When I mention Johnnie to others, often the first thing people ask is “what did he do?” You know what? I didn't know myself for many years. I do now but we are good friends, almost family, now. . I know that when I meet someone for the first time, I don't ask what's the worst thing you ever did. ? Johnnie will forever be known – by many people – by the worst thing he ever did.

What I do know is that Johnnie is not the same person who entered prison 35 years ago. He is a new, reformed man; he has grown and matured– emotionally, spiritually and intellectually.

Johnnie's death sentence was over turned in 2002 because of a technicality at court but they kept him on death row waiting for a court date for over 15 years before they re-sentenced him. . . . to

Life or death

I place before you life and death, blessing and curse,

I was there in Las Vegas for his re-sentencing hearing. A jury of his peers was given the right to do what probably only God should be able to do – to choose for him to live or die. Life and death were placed before him and the jury sentenced him to life – in prison – for the rest of his days. But I had learned even before going to this hearing that the jury can't give Johnnie life or death, the judge can't give him life or death, only Johnnie can make that choice.

And Johnnie Valerio has chosen life. He chose life even on death row. He has chosen blessing over curse. His life once centered around himself, he said. Now it's not about me, it's about others, it's about God.

I have now visited Johnnie probably 9 or 10 times. He was moved out of Ely, thank God for that and now lived at the Northern Nevada Correctional center in Carson City, Nevada.

As I have listened to Johnnie over the years, I hear him talk about his relationships on the tier with other inmates and staff, and I realized that he had his own prison ministry, sharing and caring for others who were suffering more. He works very hard on not judging, on being honest, on living the golden rule, mostly **on being patient and calm**. The quality of his life is important to him. He practices a life of non-violence in a very violent setting, He practices taking care of his body and living a life of prayer. He was in 2 fights his whole time in prison and those in the first 2 years there. Since then, Johnnie has had not one write-up - not for 30 plus years. Practicing non-violence on death row and in prison is a deep practice.

Johnnie could choose life even if they send him back to death row. There are those outside who have chosen death even in the midst of what we call life. And I don't just mean suicide. Because we are all imprisoned to the extent we feel imprisoned and we are all free to the extent that we choose freedom.

When God says in Deuteronomy, I place before you life and death, blessing and curse, please know, the choice is ours.

I learned that from Johnnie Valerio prisoner #26214 **Amen**

Can I tell you the epilogue to this story? they have chosen life and blessing
Amen, again

