Executing Hope

The 2024 Writings

December 28, 2024

It’s the end of 2024. Remember. The images that flood the mind can be overwhelming. It is impossible to know what’s coming. Who am I? Mucus and saliva drizzling down the front of a mask. One solitary tear of regret falling to the floor. Eyes of onlookers gawking at death. Marchers collectively chanting for an end to genocide. Tastes of wine and bread mixed with hopes of changing the world. It is in images that I remember who I am… or at least who I was created to be. The words draw images and the images draw words. I guess this is why I write…and sometimes paint.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

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February 2, 2024: "Parable of the Banquet" Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

February 23, 2024: The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree on Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

February 25, 2024: * Kansas City Star / I watched as Alabama suffocated a man to death. No, Kris Kobach, it didn’t ‘work well’ | Opinion

February 26, 2024: Don't Turn Your Head: Aaron Bushnell Burned for You

March 1, 2023: OK Execution: Michael Smith & Intellectual Disability

March 14, 2024: The Good Samaritan & Prodigal Son: Parables from Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

March 20, 2024: The Parable of the Sower: Parables from Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

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March 22, 2024: The Last Words of Christ from the Execution Chamber (1): “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” -Luke 23:34

March 26, 2024: Execution Echoes: Reflections on the Seven Last Words of Christ (Entire Book)

March 28, 2024: *NEWSWEEK. President Biden Should Follow Through on Ending the Death Penalty | Opinion

April 1, 2024: McAlester, Michael Smith & Jesus

April 26, 2024: Pending Execution: Commentary on The Book of Jonah (David Hosier and Jeff Hood / 1 of 4)

April 29, 2024: Pending Execution: Commentary from the Book of Jonah (Complete)

May 1, 2024: The Narrative of David Hosier: A Claim of Innocence

May 11, 2024: Missouri Executioners: A Warning of Justice to Come

May 15, 2024: Emmanuel Littlejohn: The Official Narrative of an Injustice

May 17, 2024: DAVID HOSIER is DYING / Who's "Backing the Blue" Now?

May 21, 2024: Letter to Louisianans Considering Nitrogen Executions

May 31, 2024: Preparing for the Next US Execution: David Hosier June 11

June 9, 2024: Nightmare: On the Impending Execution of David Hosier

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June 24, 2024: What Difference Does it Make if Ramiro Gonzales Prays?

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July 20, 2024: *MCALESTER NEWS “Eye for an Eye, Tooth for a Tooth”

July 23, 2024: Officer Sean Grayson Deserves Death, Grace Will Be More Painful.

August 6, 2024: Trepidation in Oklahoma: On Clemency & Emmanuel Littlejohn

August 21, 2024: *MCALESTER NEWS-CAPITAL Clemency for Littlejohn! : A Letter to Governor Kevin Stitt

September 18, 2024: *The State I am called to be a spiritual advisor for inmates but haunted by their executions | Opinion

October 9, 2024: Beyond the Headlines: The Search for the Real Steven Nelson

October 21, 2024: The Execution of Casey McWhorter/The Only Eyewitness Account

October 23, 2024: The Only Eyewitness to The Execution of Emmanuel Littlejohn

November 2, 2024: We know. We are. : Meditation Practices from Death Row

November 9, 2024: Inhale. Exhale.: Breathing Exercises from Death Row

November 11, 2024: First Baptist Church of Arlington Protest/Press Conference for Steven Nelson (Friday 11/11 @ 10am)

December 12, 2024: Why in the hell isn’t Gary Wayne Sutton home for Christmas?

December 16, 2024: Rev. Clint Dobson, Steven Nelson & Consequences of Vengeance

December 23, 2024: Biden Commutes 37 of 40 Federal Death Row Sentences: WTF?

January 1, 2024

Stop Nitrogen Hypoxia: Meet Us in Alabama!

In a little over three weeks, the State of Alabama intends to strap a mask on the face of Kenny Smith as tight as possible to create an airtight. Then, prison officials will step back, allow nitrogen to flow into the mask and wait for Smith to be declared dead. If

successful, this new execution procedure known as “nitrogen hypoxia” will become the latest option in a long line of procedures dubbed more humane than the last. Think about it, in the late 1800s…the electric chair was considered merciful compared to hanging, in the 1980s…lethal injection was hailed as a simple medical procedure compared to electrocution and now… nitrogen hypoxia is being sold as something that just makes the condemned drift away from this life on a cloud. In each of these moments, innovation was sold as progress. Of course, anyone with any sort of understanding of what true progress is…realizes that killing is never progress. Executions are as morally fraught then as it is now…no matter what method is used to carry it out.

Presently, I am fighting to save the life of Kenny Smith with a broad coalition of partners. We all believe that Smith's is a life that's worth saving. But we're not unaware of the fact that if Kenny Smith is killed by nitrogen hypoxia…a great many will be killed after him by the same method.

The arrival of this moment is due at least in part to the vast successes of the abolition movement.

Lethal injections are harder to carry out than they ever have been before. Drugs have become nearly impossible to acquire. Litigation has created roadblocks to easy implementation. Campaigns to abolish the death penalty has created more scrutiny than ever

before. It's as if all this success has led to the need for a much easier means of execution.

Enter nitrogen hypoxia…

If you decided you needed a cylinder of nitrogen gas, there are places that could get it by the end of the day. The nitrogen hypoxia protocol is far simpler than the lethal injection protocol. There is no need for needles, searching for veins or a whole host of possibly complicating factors. The training required to successfully perform such an execution is less specialized. If you can strap someone down and put a mask over their face then you can perform the execution procedure. It has even been reported that the method is also much cheaper…which would make

sense…since nitrogen hypoxia requires so much less to make it work. I could go on…but the point is that states are going to sprint to this new method of execution if it lives up to the ease that is being promised.

So what is the abolitionist to do?

Most seem to just want to do nothing…except sit back and watch to see if it works…until it directly comes to their state. Such thinking is deeply misguided. Because, by the time nitrogen hypoxia gets to your state it will be too late. The floodgates of a new wave of executions will be upon you. Now…Kenny Smith…is the moment to take our stand.

I am asking you to join us in the fight to save the life of Kenny Smith. For Kenny of course. But also, for the people sitting on death rows around the country who could be next.

Will you meet us in Alabama?

Sign the petition to say, “NO TO NITROGEN HYPOXIA!”

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/say-no-to-the-gas-chamber

January 2, 2024

Parable of the Rock from Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Death Row Spiritual Advisor

Bart Johnson, Prisoner on Alabama's Death Row

Matthew 7:24-29

Parable of the Rock from Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

The ones that build their house on the rock. That's who we're supposed to want to be right? Not the sinking sand that won't hold the house. But…what is the rock? Throughout its history, the church has taught that the rock is Jesus and we are supposed to put our house…or our lives…on the rock. Such might be true… but the problem is that church answers are rarely applicable to the outside world…the experiences of real human beings…the experiences of us. Sure, Jesus is the rock. But what does that mean? Perhaps, it's more helpful to think about the perfect ideals that Jesus represents…for our purposes in this writing…think love and justice. Thinking about building your house on

these rocks changes the way we think about the passage.

What does it mean to build your house on the rock of love? When we give our lives to love…to the rock…we are doing more than simply moving our partial love around when it suites us…we are consciously making a decision to love without limit from wherever we are. Love on the rock is timeless and unshakeable. The rock is about us learning to give love in ways that are unshakeable. Building our house on the rock of love means that we have decided to not be moved by the emotions and feelings of the day….we have decided to be a rock in the lives of all that we encounter. We have decided to love as Jesus loves…selflessly and endlessly. We have decided to love our neighbor as we love

ourselves. That is what it means to be the rock…for our house to be located on the rock.

What does it mean to build your house on the rock of justice? The work of justice is full of people who take up causes for a minute…yet never build their house on justice itself…a permanent place to carry out the work of justice. Those who plant themselves firmly in justice do not keep rebuilding their house. They demand justice for all that they encounter. They stand for justice no matter how dark the hour. They are not easily swayed by what is happening around them…for they have built their house on the rock of justice…they will not be moved by circumstances no matter how insurmountable they are. When we decide to fight for justice for others as just as hard as we seek justice for

ourselves…that is what it means to be firmly planted on the rock of justice.

The rock is so much more than otherworldly fantasies that feel out of reach. Jesus is present with us. We can know the rock. We can know love. We can know justice. Whatever you want to call the rock…we can know it. There is no greater venture in life than to find the rock…your rock…the place where you firmly build your house. If you build anywhere else…anywhere but the rock…you will find that you are building your house on sinking sand.

January 3, 2024

Walk Away: On Moral Embarrassment, Alabama & Kenny Smith

Earlier today I came across the following headline,

“The Alabama Supreme Court has officially given the order to carry out the nation’s first nitrogen hypoxia execution.”

The article contained the following announcement,

“Starting at 12 a.m. on the 25th, the Alabama Department of Corrections will have 30 hours to execute Smith with nitrogen gas. The order expires at 6 a.m. on Jan. 26. If successful, Smith will be the nation’s first execution by nitrogen hypoxia.”

When the Pharisees caught a woman in adultery, they sent out a similar order. I can just imagine,

“Religious leaders officially give out order for woman caught in adultery to be stoned!”

The article might have given a place,

“The Temple courts…”

There are assumptions contained in both announcements.

The Alabama Supreme Court thinks that it has the moral authority to set the time and place of the murder of someone. The religious leaders in Jesus’ day did too.

The Alabama Supreme Court thinks that it has the moral authority to set the method to kill someone. The religious leaders of Jesus' day did too.

If this execution goes forward, Kenneth Smith will be drug into Alabama's execution chamber as a guilty man. No one disputes that he committed a horrible crime. The Pharisees dragged the adulterous woman to her execution as someone who was guilty. No one disputed it.

When the rocks were about to start flying, Jesus defiantly declared, "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone." I have no doubt that Jesus is saying the same thing to all who think they have the moral

authority to kill Kenneth Smith, “Let you who are without sin cast the first nitrogen hypoxia.”

After hearing the convicting words of Jesus, one by one the religious leaders walked away in embarrassment. In the coming weeks, as I and many others campaign to remind people that Kenneth Smith is a person both made in the image of God and deeply loved by God. I hope that all officials involved with this horrific moment in Alabama will have the same moral embarrassment that the religious leaders did. I hope they will consider the magnitude of their own sins…and simply walk away.

January 4, 2024

The United Nations, Kenny Smith & Alabama: Nuanced

The United Nations (a panel of their experts) issued a press release today entitled, “United States: UN experts alarmed at prospect of first-ever untested execution by nitrogen hypoxia in Alabama.” In it, various international experts call for Kenneth (Kenny) Smith’s

execution in Alabama to be stayed…citing their concern that the method of nitrogen hypoxia could possibly result in a “painful and humiliating” death. Of course, they’re right. There is no doubt in my mind that Alabama doesn’t know what’s going to happen when their protocol is carried out. How could they? The execution method of nitrogen hypoxia has never been tried before. As Kenny’s spiritual advisor, I have a tremendous amount at stake in this conversation. If the method goes wrong or is botched, I could also be in danger. Which is what brings me to a somewhat nuanced view of the usefulness of the statement that the United Nations put out.

For decades, the United Nations has released statements such as this about executions in the United

States. For decades, such statements have been ignored. As a child of the South (even educated in Alabama), I know a little bit about the pride that runs deep in the Southern consciousness. Across a broad spectrum of identities, Southerners are known for not taking kindly to unsolicited outside advice. This is why I often question the thinking that the United Nations is going to be one of the vehicles to stop one of these executions. If anything, it seems like most Southerners are going to respond in the opposite direction…i.e. a press release from the (sometimes derided) United Nations is going to make Southern politicians and judges want to proceed with the execution even more. Southern politicians love thumbing their noses at outside experts. I'm not advocating for the closed

thinking of my fellow Southerners…I'm just saying that such thinking is what it is… and I have found these statements/releases less than helpful in our efforts to persuade Southern politicians and judges to stop an execution.

While I am thankful for the words of the United Nation's experts and the efforts that many experts familiar with the case have put forward to secure this statement (and it is certainly helpful in some quarters), I want to make sure that people advocating for Kenny realize the possible consequences of relying solely (or even primarily) on such a release for their advocacy. Southern politicians and judges need to hear from Southerners if we are ever going to be able to stop this or any other execution. Presently, we must concentrate

on mobilizing people and getting our message out in Alabama.

Kenny (and everyone else threatened by this nitrogen hypoxia method) deserves all the energy you have.

January 4, 2024

A Vision, Dumpsters and Kenneth Smith in Alabama

Deep in prayer this evening, I sought God's guidance. I was transported to another place. There, I saw dumpsters full of people. Each dumpster was labeled in particular ways. The labels didn't seem to matter as

much as the dumpsters full of people. As I stood there, I kept seeing people thrown away in different dumpsters. Each time, a label was affixed to the person, and they were placed in the dumpster that corresponded to their label. As I tried to ascertain what was going on, I realized that society was declaring that these people don't matter based on the label that was affixed to them. I began to cry at the inhumanity of it all. Then, I saw a person that I had pretended didn't matter…that I had ignored…in a dumpster of my own creation. Quickly, I realized that all are guilty of creating dumpsters where we throw people away. Indeed, it quickly becomes horrifically apparent that modernity is defined by one thing…our dumpsters full of people we have discarded. I called out to God, "We must save

these people from this fate!" Without saying a word, God pointed to a dumpster full of the vilest people one could imagine. I recognized some of them from my work on various death rows. Others I'd known from the news. Still others from crimes that had been committed against people that I love. After a few seconds, God demanded of me, "Are you ready to empty that dumpster? Are you ready to bring them back?" It took me a second. Some of the people that I saw had hurt so many people. In my hesitation, I heard God say, "If you leave them in there, you will be leaving part of yourself, your children and your children's children in there as well." I didn't understand. "What you have done to the least of these you have done to me," God reminded me. Then, I realized that the presence of God

that had been guiding me was in the dumpster of people I was hesitant to release. I realized that I was the impediment for people seeing the hand of God in the land of the living…because I was responsible for leaving God…and a variety of others in the dumpster. My heart was overwhelmed. The presence of God became as real as I have ever encountered. "No more dumpsters," God said, "No more dumpsters."

On January 25, the State of Alabama intends to kill Kenneth (Kenny) Smith. Kenny matters because we all matter. If Kenny doesn't matter, then none of us matters. If our society is ever to become healthy, our mindset has to change from subtraction to addition. Indeed, the path of God is always…and has always

been...about pulling people out of the dumpster instead of putting people in.

January 7, 2024

Wineskins bust.: Parables from Death Row: Hood & Johnson

Bart Johnson, Prisoner on Alabama's Death Row

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Death Row Spiritual Advisor

Wineskins bust. You can't put new wine in old wineskins. Such information seems meaningless unless

you care about wineskins. Then again, the parables of Jesus always seem meaningless until we figure out a way to give them meaning…until we find a way to make them meaningful…meaningful to our moment. Some parables age better than others. The wineskins seem a little dense because most of us don't even know what a wineskin is. Wine comes in a bottle. Right? So how do these parables even have meaning? Why should they matter? Shouldn't these old parables be meaningless amidst new understandings? Simply be unable to fit into our moment? Again, we have got to find a way to make them matter…or…all the stories…all the parables…are a bust.

Maybe the point is for the story to bust. Think about it. Why do we spend so much time trying to make

stories or lessons fit into our containers? The Gospel should be busting out. Right? If the Gospel fits into a container…then it's not the Gospel. So, what's all this foolishness about wineskins? Even in the freest of circumstances, you have got to have a container in order to drink wine. Then again, there is a difference between when the wine flows freely and the wine is rationed. If the wine is flowing freely, then the container can't hold it…because we keep drinking it. Perhaps banquets always bust containers…always bust wineskins?

Old wineskins allow the wine to flow more freely… because we have to drink it to keep it from busting out.

New wineskins allow the wine to sit and ferment...

because wine tastes better the longer it sits.

It's all so confusing.

Old or new? Maybe we just need to throw out the wineskins altogether? Seems like it’s more expedient to just drink wine where we find it. Does there have to be wineskins? Containers can be so constricting.

January 9, 2024

God Died in Alabama…Suffocated By Nitrogen Hypoxia.

God died in Alabama. The death wasn't natural. The manner was a homicide. God suffocated. Never to be heard from again. Maybe not viscerally. How could one

murder God? Sometimes our minds are imprisoned by the constraints of imagination.

The death of God happened when morality slowly expired in the hearts and minds of Alabamians. When the populace became convinced that Jesus' admonition to "Love your neighbor as you Love yourself" was a silly admonition for those who don't understand the complexities of society. I mean Love is such a strong word. Besides, who is one's neighbor? The only neighbors that most Alabamians know are the neighbors who look just like them. Such a lack of awareness is deadly when it comes to God. We are talking about a God who thrives on Love for all. Societies are judged from the bottom up not the top down. Under such a measurement, all begins at the

bottom. So where does the death of all lead? If God Loves all…then to not Love all is to not Love God. Without Love God becomes nothing more than a figment of the imagination of a populace. Something that they think they know something about…but truly have no knowledge of whatsoever. God breathes Love in and exhales Love out. Without Love, God has no breath. God is suffocated. God dies. Indeed, God died in Alabama when it left what should have been its' first Love…the God whose name is Love.

Suffocation. The suffocation of Love. Such suffocation is obviously at the forefront of the minds of Alabamians right now. In fact, the State is trying very hard to become the first State to execute someone using the method of suffocation…calling it nitrogen hypoxia.

Kenny Smith was convicted of a heinous murder over 30 years ago and now Alabamians are determined to suffocate him. Why? Love is dead in the hearts of Alabamians…and all manner of lunacy has become common. Can you imagine the Love of God ever leading someone to suffocate someone else? Love doesn't do such things.

Alabamians have killed God. Love is gone. Love suffocated. Love was executed via nitrogen hypoxia.

January 11, 2024

Dr. Joseph Antognini : A Campaign Against Dr. Death

Early this morning, I sent the letter below to the Medical Board of California regarding Dr. Joseph Antognini. If you are as appalled as I am that a medical professional (in clear violation of the admonition to "do no harm") is out here getting paid (thousands upon thousands of

dollars) by state governments to defend their execution protocols, I urge you to do the same. There is ample evidence below (included in my complaint below contacts) to include in your complaint. The Medical Board of California can be reached in the following ways:

Central Complaint Unit

Toll-Free: 1-800-633-2322

Phone: (916) 263-2382

Email: Complaint@mbc.ca.gov

+Dr. Antognini also serves as an Emeritus Professor of Anesthesiology at UC, Davis Health. It is also appropriate to send complaints to his bosses, who can be reached at:

Dr. David Lubarsky, UC, Davis Health CEO

vclubarsky@ucdavis.edu

Dr. Coleen Clancy, UC, Davis Health Associate Vice Chancellor (call 530-754-0254)

ceclancy@ucdavis.edu

Dr. Susan Murin, Dean, UC, Davis Medical School (call 916-734-4110)

sxmurin@ucdavis.edu

1/11/2024

Medical Board of California:

With regards to capital punishment in the United States, Sacramento, California anesthesiologist and University

of California, Davis Health Emeritus Medical Professor Dr. Joseph Antognini might be the unrivaled, Dr. Death. For years, Dr. Antognini has repeatedly testified in proceeding after proceeding that the various manifestations of execution methods used by states are perfectly safe and relatively painless. Of course, such testimony is a general violation of the Hippocratic Oath's generally understood mandate to, "do no harm." But, even further than that, it is a clear violation of the guidelines of The American Medical Association's Code of Medical Ethics and The American Board of Anesthesiology, Inc's guidelines regarding capital punishment:

Opinion 9.7.3 on Capital Punishment in The American Medical Association's Code of Medical Ethics clearly states,

An individual's opinion on capital punishment is the personal moral decision of the individual. However, as a member of a profession dedicated to preserving life when there is hope of doing so, a physician must not participate in a legally authorized execution.

The opinion goes on to define participation as falling into "one or more of the following categories." Though there are a variety of categories listed, those relevant to Dr. Joseph Antognini include:

(b) Would assist, supervise, or contribute to the ability of another individual to directly cause the death of the condemned.

(c) Could automatically cause an execution to be carried out on a condemned prisoner.

(h) Attending or observing an execution as a physician.

(i) Rendering of technical advice regarding execution.

The opinion goes to include a variety of “actions that do not constitute physician participation in execution.” None of these actions excuse the grave ethical offenses of Dr. Joseph Antognini.

(source https://code-medical-ethics.ama-assn.org/ethics-opinions/capital-punishment)

The American Board of Anesthesiology, Inc. has guidelines with regard to the ethical practice of anesthesiology. The most pertinent line of their guidelines is simple,

The American Board of Anesthesiology, Inc., like the American Medical Association, believes strongly that physicians should not be involved in capital punishment.

As an Anesthesiologist, Dr. Joseph Antognini has absolutely no business participating in the promotion or maintenance of the capital punishment process.

(source https://www.theaba.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Capital_Punishment.pdf)

As a result, Dr. Joseph Antognini's actions are also a clear violation of various manifestations of the California Medical Board's standard of patient care that require professional conduct as deemed professional by the current norms of the profession.

Through his affiliation with the University of California, Davis Health, Dr. Antognini has repeatedly used his stature to make a significant amount of money. If his fees haven't changed since 2020, Dr. Antognini makes $400 an hour, $2,000 for a deposition, $4,000 per day in court and $2,000 per travel day (Isaac Arnsdorf,

ProPublica, 2020, https://www.propublica.org/article/inside-trump-and-barrs-last-minute-killing-spree).

A declared Roman Catholic, Dr. Antognini claims to have no moral qualms with bolstering various state's ability to make sure the killing continues. I can assure you that the Pope won't be testifying for any state trying to execute people anytime soon.

Dr. Joseph Antognini is willing to set aside both professional standards and his proclaimed faith if the price is right.

Just a few weeks ago, I encountered Dr. Antognini at a hearing for the new nitrogen hypoxia protocol in

Alabama. There is an absurdity to his testimony and actions that day that I want to share. But before I do, here is an assortment of quotes from articles about Dr. Antognini's unprofessional and unprincipled efforts…to get paid…while making sure the death penalty continues.

In 2018, Dr. Joseph Antognini testified for the State of Missouri against Russell Bucklew's efforts to be executed by nitrogen gas:

"Dr. Joseph Antognini testified it (nitrogen hypoxia) might actually cause more suffering than a phenobarbital injection. He also wrote the mask might leak and potentially endanger the execution team."

-Pat Pratt, Columbia Daily Tribune

https://www.columbiatribune.com/story/news/crime/2018/08/17/hawley-responds-to-execution-appeal/11024161007/

In 2019, Dr. Joseph Antognini testified for the State of Arkansas and their efforts to continue executing prisoners by their lethal injection protocol:

“Dr. Joseph Antognini, an anesthesiologist with the University of California-Davis Medical Center, was then called to testify. He said that he has handled about 10,000 cases of anesthesia over the years. In the past,

Antognini said he used midazolam to induce patients for general anesthesia, but no longer uses the drug for that purpose because newer and better drugs have been released.

He testified that the dose used by Arkansas would keep an inmate unable to feel pain.

‘It’s my opinion that the drug midazolam at 500 milligrams administered intravenously would render an inmate insensate, unconscious and insensate to a noxouis stimuli or unable to perceive pain that might occur or arise from other drugs or stimuli,’ Antognini said.

Most of the times Antognini has used midazolam, he said, has been in low doses as a sedative to calm patients before surgery."

-Michael Hibblen, KUAR

https://www.ualrpublicradio.org/local-regional-news/2019-04-29/expert-witnesses-for-the-state-contradict-previous-testimony-in-lethal-injection-trial

In 2020, Dr. Joseph Antognini testified for the United States Federal Government's efforts to continue their execution spree:

“BOP’s second expert witness was a medical doctor: retired California anesthesiologist Joseph F. Antognini. Antognini has said he personally opposes the death penalty as a Catholic. But he also said he believes states have a right to his advice, comparing it to criminal defendants’ right to a lawyer.

Antognini has not addressed how he squares his testimony supporting executions with his Hippocratic oath. He did raise ethical considerations when he was asked to compare lethal injection to poison gas (a comparison between methods, like the one Lindsley made). ‘Recommending one method of execution over another, I guess that’s an ethical issue for me,’ he said in a deposition.

Antognini’s rare position as a doctor vouching for lethal injection has made him a valuable witness in capital cases, including a Missouri case that later reached the Supreme Court. Antognini charges $400 an hour, $2,000 for a deposition, $4,000 per day in court and $2,000 per travel day.”

-Isaac Arnsdorf, ProPublica, 2020

https://www.propublica.org/article/inside-trump-and-barrs-last-minute-killing-spree

In 2022, Dr. Joseph Antognini testified on behalf of the State of Oklahoma and their efforts to keep killing people by lethal injection (he even described attending an execution):

“An anesthesiologist and professor at the University of California, Davis, Dr. Joseph Antognini is perhaps best known for lending his expertise to President Donald Trump’s Justice Department during its federal execution spree (2020-2021), arguing that executing two people with Covid-19 would not heighten their risk of suffering. More recently, he attended the execution of Donald Grant.”

“The Food and Drug Administration label for midazolam noted that it could be used ‘intravenously for the induction of general anesthesia before the administration of other anesthetic agents.’ Despite this language, Antognini pointed to the FDA label as

evidence that midazolam could be used on its own to anesthetize a person for lethal injection."

"Nevertheless, Antognini testified that Grant's execution had gone smoothly."

-Liliana Segura, The Intercept, 2022
https://theintercept.com/2022/07/10/lethal-injection-oklahoma-trial-midazolam/

Missouri. Arkansas. The Federal Government. Oklahoma. Amongst various others unnamed. Now, Alabama…and the State of Alabama's attempt to use the untested method of nitrogen hypoxia.

In 2018 (Missouri), Dr. Joseph Antognini argued against nitrogen hypoxia as a method of execution by arguing that it could endanger the execution team (which in this case would include me as Kenny Smith's spiritual advisor in Alabama). Just a few weeks ago, I heard Dr. Antognini talk about how safe the protocol for Alabama's nitrogen hypoxia execution would be. I couldn't believe my ears. I was sitting there listening to a doctor (and self-proclaimed follower of Jesus…) seem to not only devalue the life of someone facing execution but also everybody else in the room who will be there with them. It seems there isn't much that this man won't change his mind about if the price is right.

Incredulous, I walked out into the hallway to take a breath. The doors swung open, and I listened to one of the chief figures on the Alabama Attorney General's team excitedly talk to Dr. Joseph Antognini about how great his testimony was. Then, I heard her ask Dr. Antognini if he would like to meet the Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Corrections. He responded with glee. I'd never seen a professional act like this. You would think he would at least keep this kind of behavior private.

It seems that money will cause people to do strange things...including turning their back on both their profession and their God.

In clear violation of a plethora of professional medical standards, Dr. Joseph Antognini has given paid professional medical testimony for numerous states to advance their execution protocols (including witnessing and analyzing an execution for the State of Oklahoma). These gross violations of his professional responsibilities should lead to the immediate revocation of his license to practice medicine in the State of California, the revocation of his affiliation with the University of California, Davis and the revocation of his membership in all relevant professional societies.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

January 20, 2024

The Simple Prayer of Kenneth Smith

Life is strange. The more we think we know the less we realize there is to know. Maybe better said, sometimes life is simple. The explosion of attention surrounding nitrogen hypoxia would make it easy to forget that there is a human in the midst of it all. Tonight, I was

talking to Kenny Smith about everything he was/is going through. The pain of it all kept bubbling up. He is not doing well at all. Nausea. Vomiting. Nightmares. Chills. Panic attacks. It would have been easy to stay there caring for him. Trying to make sense of it all. But that's not what Kenny wanted. Of course, all those things are real… more real than real for him…but he wanted to talk about other things that he was feeling… things beyond belief. So, I stopped trying to solve the symptoms and sat with him as he concentrated on the disease…the incestuous nature of evil. Of course, there is no greater evil for him than what the Alabama Department of Corrections has perpetuated and seeks to perpetuate on him. Repeatedly, he talked about transcending the world…all that has held him back…

beating evil for the final time. It was a reminder that we do not battle against flesh and blood…we battle against manifestations of evil that are unseen…even beyond those that we see perpetuating them. Kenny tries desperately to see beyond what is…what is in this moment…to see what is to come. This is a talent that most don't have. Most simply sit and drown in the horrors of the moment. Not Kenny. He sits and dreams about a destination far beyond this earthly plain. That's the only way out. The only way beyond the sickness, fear and evil that currently afflicts him. Perhaps, the execution will be stopped. Perhaps, the execution will take place. No matter which path Kenny is forced to walk down…he has assured me that he will be ok. I believe him now more than I ever have. As I sat

pondering it all…the things that were being said and the things that were being left unsaid…I was taken aback when Kenny interrupted to pray…seemingly out of nowhere. Of course, he prayed for a healthy number of people and things…but I was particularly surprised when he thanked God for being with me on this journey. The simple words served as a strong reminder. No matter what, God is with us. It's that simple. Perhaps, there is little else to know beyond that.

January 20, 2024

Jeff Hood Safety Demand Letter

(Execution of Kenneth Smith)

LAW OFFICE OF GREGORY W GARDNER, PLLC

_____

GREGORY W GARDNER

P.O. Box 2366

Boulder, Colorado 80306

gardnerlegal@gmail.com

January 15, 2024

Sent Via Electronic Mail & U.S. Postal Service

John Q. Hamm

Commissioner

Alabama Department of Corrections

301 South Ripley Street (Physical Address)

P.O. Box 301501 (Mailing Address)

Montgomery, Alabama 36130-1501

Electronic Mail Care of General Counsel Mary-Coleman

Roberts:

marycoleman.roberts@doc.alabama.gov

Terry Raybon

Warden

Holman Correctional Facility

866 Ross Road (Physical Location)

Holman 3700 (Mailing Address)

Atmore, Alabama 36503-3700

terry.raybon@doc.alabama.gov

RE: Dr. Jeff Hood’s Demands Surrounding Kenneth

Eugene Smith’s January

25 Execution

Gentlemen:

I am writing to make demands on behalf of the Rev. Dr.

Jeff Hood, Mr. Kenneth

Eugene Smith’s spiritual advisor, related to Mr. Smith’s

upcoming January 25 execution

by nitrogen hypoxia. Nitrogen hypoxia is a novel

execution method. Use of this deadly

gas, unlike lethal injection, poses a high risk of exposure

to all bystanders. As such, its

use requires special safeguards to protect all bystanders

and observers, including Dr.

Hood.

At a minimum, Dr. Hood demands the following

preparations:

• The presence of operational oxygen monitoring

meters in the execution chamber;

• The presence of a Correctional Facility employee in the

execution chamber

trained in maintaining the meters and interpreting the

meter readings;

• Training Dr. Hood how to ascertain if the oxygen

monitor meters are activated;

• Training Dr. Hood on how to determine if he is

experiencing symptoms of

nitrogen exposure;

• Training Dr. Hood regarding the quickest and safest

exit route from the execution

chamber;

• Having oxygen supply sources available so that they

can be quickly reached;

• Training Dr. Hood on how to quickly reach these

oxygen supply sources;

• Granting Dr. Hood permission to place a telephone

call to his attorney (the

undersigned attorney Gregory W. Gardner);

• Securing the presence of independent paramedics

directly outside the execution

chamber; and

• Securing the presence of independent ambulances at the closest possible exit to the execution chamber.

In addition to these safeguards, Dr. Hood demands that you preserve all evidence involving Mr. Smith's execution. This evidence includes physical evidence, multimedia evidence, statements of participants, readings of instruments, other documents, and any other evidence.

Given the time restraints of Mr. Smith's January 25 execution date, kindly send all correspondence to my email address: gardnerlegal@gmail.com.

Sincerely,
/s Gregory W. Gardner

January 21, 2024

***AL.COM**

Guest opinion: Rage and the Alabama execution of Kenneth Smith by the new method of nitrogen hypoxia

This is a guest opinion column

In March of 1988, Elizabeth Sennett was brutally murdered by two hitmen hired by her husband, Charles Sennett. One of those hitmen was Kenneth Smith. These facts are not in dispute. Nor should they be. What was done to Elizabeth Sennett should never be forgotten… ever. However, we remember evil so as not to perpetuate it…not as a means of manufacturing rage. In the State of Alabama, a great many want to see Kenneth Smith executed. The present self-serving platitudes of politicians illustrate as much. There are even those who say they would execute Smith themselves. Such people illustrate why rage is something we travel through, not to. Indeed, these

people most often know nothing about the case or anything that surrounds it. They just want a reason to rage. Manufactured rage causes us to do really stupid things.

Presently, I serve as Kenneth Smith's spiritual advisor. Of course, Smith is shortly scheduled to be executed by the novel method of nitrogen hypoxia. Let there be no doubt, I am opposed to the death penalty. I find it barbaric. I know Smith. I could fill pages with reasons why you shouldn't execute him. I could tell you that it is evil to kill people. I could tell you that the jury didn't sentence Smith to death. I could tell you about the proud father and grandfather that he has become. I could tell you about the worship services he helps lead. Unfortunately, the State of Alabama has repeatedly

ignored such arguments and I have no doubt that my arguments would meet the same demise. Such reflex is part of maintaining manufactured rage. Dismiss everything reasonable to keep trying to meet evil with evil…while calling it something other than evil.

Nitrogen hypoxia is an untested unproven form of execution. Never has nitrogen intentionally forced into the lungs of the condemned through a mask until there is no oxygen left. Kenneth Smith is basically going to be suffocated to death. Since no one has ever been executed by nitrogen hypoxia before, we simply don’t know the extent of the evil that might be unleashed. I am convinced that a great many like the cruel and unusual nature of it all. Of course, they haven’t had to have the conversations that our family has.

Throughout history, spiritual advisors have accompanied the condemned to their executions. In recent years, the United States Supreme Court has repeatedly protected such a right. Since I serve in this role with Kenneth Smith, I will be there with him in the chamber. In a waiver I was forced to sign, the State of Alabama has basically admitted that while they know the nitrogen poses a risk to me in the chamber…they're just not sure how big of a risk. How many times have you heard government tell us to trust them…only to be given over to dreadful consequences? Like you, I don't trust government in the slightest. Can you imagine allowing government to have this level of control on your life? Manufactured rage seems to grow dumber with time. An experimental form of execution that could kill

everybody in the room in the event of a leak? Come on…

Can you imagine if ministers throughout the State of Alabama were forced to sign a waiver… To preach next Sunday? To offer communion? To lead the choir? To pray? To counsel? There are few greater forms of tyranny that I can think of than government forcing ministers to sign waivers to live out their callings. Yet here we are. The State that claims to fight tyranny the most, being amongst the chief perpetuator of it. Manufactured rage strikes again.

Trust is not manufactured. It is earned. So, if the State of Alabama wants me to trust it in this process then send Governor Kay Ivey into the chamber with me. If the nitrogen leaks, the Governor and I can go see Jesus

together. Indeed, I've heard that she too is a person of strong faith. I hope that hers like mine rests on more than just government.

Presently, I only know to follow my faith. If I am to give my life, so be it. God has called me to stand with those that nobody else will. The risks be damned.

Honestly, I still can't believe this conversation is even necessary. Don't people know that murder is wrong? Don't people want to stop killing each other? Don't people want to figure out ways to save lives rather than destroying them? Don't people think that suffocating another person is at least a little problematic? Don't people even try to love their enemies anymore? Don't people…? The questions seem endless.

Manufacturing rage is a foolish task with no moral destination. The bizarre risks and consequences of nitrogen hypoxia prove it. Surely, Elizabeth Sennett deserves more than all of this.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is the spiritual advisor for Alabama Death Row inmate Kenneth Eugene Smith. Hood recently settled a lawsuit with the state of Alabama that Hood says will allow him to anoint Kenneth Smith’s with oil and share the Holy Eucharist with him and place his hands on Smith’s feet while praying and reading scripture during the execution.

January 23, 2024

Tyranny of Uncertainty:

Kenneth Smith, Nitrogen

Hypoxia & I

There is no tyranny greater than the tyranny of uncertainty. When you can hold all possibilities…you are able to hold all fears…and when you hold all fears

you are able to hold all control. In recent months, the State of Alabama has refused to share even the simplest of evidence of safety precautions that they have in place for the first nitrogen hypoxia execution. We know about as much about the execution of Kenny Smith as we did when it was first announced that the State was going to pursue this new form of nitrogen hypoxia. Uncertainty reigns.

When I agreed to be Kenny Smith's spiritual advisor, I did so because I didn't want him to be alone in the darkest hour of his life. As such an hour approaches, my motivation remains Kenny. Though this is a very dangerous method of execution, I keep my focus on Kenny.

Danger. We know that the nitrogen will flow into the mask. We know that there will be nitrogen that comes out of the mask. We know that nitrogen can fill up a room. We know that when nitrogen fills up a room, it is deadly. A human being cannot breathe pure nitrogen without repercussions. We need oxygen. This is truth.

Truth is the only thing that can give us breath. Right now, through their secrecy, their redacted protocol and their refusal to engage the simplest of information…the state of Alabama is denying me oxygen. I need oxygen to breathe. The oxygen that I metaphorically need to function…truth.

We have put out several safety demands…to which the State of Alabama has not responded. They are not

willing to engage the simplest safety measures. The State of Alabama has not responded to the truth that experts have shared over and over. I guess this should make sense…since they are so comfortable taking the life of a human being in this manner…suffocation. If they are prepared to kill someone in such a way…what would it mean to kill someone else? It seems that it would mean very little.

I'm not afraid to give my life. I am more afraid of not giving my life for what I believe. But there is a tyranny of uncertainty that the State of Alabama maintains that has certainly given my family and I pause. How could it not? They should be ashamed of themselves… ashamed. A few nights ago, my son Phillip came to me with tears in his eyes and wanted to make sure that I'd

be ok. Of course, I told him that I would. He asked how I could be sure. The only reply that I could muster was, “I don’t know.” The State of Alabama hasn’t given me a better answer.

The tyranny of uncertainty that the State of Alabama has created has given tremendous stress to people that I deeply love. Once again, they should be ashamed. But of course, they won’t be. Those who are this comfortable being murderers have no shame.

February 2, 2024

"Parable of the Banquet" Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Death Row Spiritual Advisor

Bart Johnson, Prisoner on Alabama's Death Row

Luke 14:16-24

Jesus told a story. The story was not just a story. Then again, stories rarely are just stories. There is always something more than the words at hand. The shape of words shape our lives…or at least the way we know them.

There was a man who prepared a banquet. Upon completing the preparations, the man instructed his servant to hand out the invitations. Instead of accepting his hospitality, all the people he invited made excuses. One said he had to tend to his field. One said he had to check on his oxen. One said he just got married. When the servant reported that no one had accepted the invitations, the man got mad and declared, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the

lame." The servant completed the task…but there was still more room. The man then said to invite all the people of the streets. The only people he demanded never get to come were those who declined his invitation in the first place.

The message of God always begins at the bottom. Jesus said, "What you have done to the least of these you have done to me." Our invitations to the top will always fall short. People who don't need anything. Or at least they think they don't. This is the problem with the most. There are always distractions from the feast. There are always things to do that are more important than the joy and fulfillment of the banquet. God has created a banquet. Will we proudly accept the invitation or ignorantly refuse? The answer to such a question

seems to rest in the status we are in when we receive the invitation. So, if we want to hear from God…we are wise to stay close to where God is…with the least of these.

The other pivotal part of this passage is that God extends the invitation. When God begins with the least, others are swept up in the overwhelming grace…the only ones who are left behind are the ones who are too proud to see the value of the invitation that they have. There is nothing more important than the feast…the banquet of love.

Truly, life is about looking out for invitations…or even better…just following the least.

February 23, 2024

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree on Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

Bart Johnson, Prisoner on Alabama's Death Row

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Death Row Spiritual Advisor

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

-Luke 13:6-9 (NRSV)

The parables of Jesus have a variety of meanings. Honestly, it seems that fluidity might be the point. Here we find a fig tree that holds an unbelievable amount of

significance. Indeed, it is the epicenter of all time and space. The fig tree is the fulcrum of both God's judgment and grace.

Time is of the essence. Jesus makes that crystal clear. While some might assume that this parable is about the end of time or time running out. Such an assumption neglects the grace of God that is already clear based on the ministry of Jesus. This is someone who has come that all might have life and have it in abundance. This is someone who is proclaiming a love for the world. Jesus is not known for closing doors…he is known for opening wide the doors for all. This parable is about the patience of God not the restriction of God.

Think about it, judgement comes multiple times to see if a person is bearing fruit. After three instances have passed, time is up. Then, Jesus (the great gardener) steps forward and saves the person. This parable is about the unbelievable love of God that is exhibited in the message of Jesus. Time will not run out. Love will not run out. Jesus will always be there asking for more time until all come to a fruit-bearing knowledge of love.

Why are we so determined to destroy that which God loves? The patience of God does not run out. Why is our patience so short? God is endless love. The sooner we learn that…the sooner we will be able to bear fruit.

February 25, 2024

***Kansas City Star**

I watched as Alabama

suffocated a man to death. No,

Kris Kobach, it didn’t ‘work

well’ | Opinion

Our common humanity will be either our common triumph or our common downfall. Right now, it is our lack of humanity that is making room for conversations about new execution methods. We are desperate to find ways to humanely kill those we condemn. There is no humane way to kill a person. We seem so determined to go backward. Last month in Alabama, we were promised humanity in the first nitrogen hypoxia execution. What we saw was everything but. As Kenneth Smith's spiritual advisor, I was in the chamber before, during and after the curtains were opened for his execution. Meaning, I watched him slowly suffocate to death. There is no one alive today who has been closer to a nitrogen hypoxia execution than I have. Having witnessed four previous executions and being a student

of history, I can assure you that the experimental barbarity that I witnessed has few comparisons. TOP VIDEOS Nitrogen hypoxia is not just an execution method — it is torture. And that is why I find it so curious (though not entirely surprising, based on his national reputation) that Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach is so certain that he wants to bring the same barbarity to your state. Kobach commented in a recent interview, “I have spoken directly with the attorney general of Alabama, and he confirmed that the hypoxia method worked extremely well.” Let me put the above quote in context. You have Kansas’ attorney general describing his desire to pursue an execution method that he has never actually seen carried out, based on the perspective of Alabama Attorney General Steve

Marshall, who has never actually seen the method carried out either. Because of Kansas' large beef industry, the juxtaposition reminds me of the old saying, "all hat and no cattle" — meaning somebody wears a big hat to hide the fact that he doesn't actually own any cattle. Both of these guys talk a very big game for something they've never even seen, much less had to carry out themselves. Runaway big government always rises and falls with such bluster. The reason I know that Kobach's quote is so absurd is that I did see the method carried out. I know that Marshall didn't tell the truth and — in the most generous possible way of stating it — Kobach is being led astray. The only way that one could say that what I saw went "well" is if the only measure of "well" means that Kenneth Smith is no

longer alive. If such a standard is a measurement, then we should start hanging people on a short rope and watch them squirm until they die in front of our courthouses. I'd like to think that our society has evolved beyond such lunacy. Then again, what I saw wasn't all that far off from that. Affixed with a gas mask that went from the top of his head to under his chin, Kenneth said goodbye. Then, the nitrogen started to flow. I watched as Kenneth's head turned redder and redder. His body began to pump adrenaline ferociously. It looked as if his head was going to explode — perhaps even his whole body. We were told that Kenneth would go unconscious in seconds. Then, seconds started to turn into minutes. Kenneth began to heave. Each time he rose, mucus, saliva and other fluids shot from his

mouth and out the front of the mask. The liquids began to drizzle down like a waterfall. His eyeballs were bulging out. Back and forth over and over, everything, everywhere moving all at once. Like a fish out of water being stepped on until they flop no more. There are times when the bluster of politicians is nothing more than that. There are other times where that bluster has real consequences. Morality is earned, not given. Nitrogen hypoxia is evil. When the Kansas Legislature begins to discuss the possible adoption of suffocation as an execution method, I encourage legislators to not take the bait of Kobach's declarations about its humaneness. If you'd seen what I saw, you'd know that he has absolutely, positively no idea what he is talking about.

Jeff Hood is a pastor, theologian and activist living and working in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Read more at:

https://www.kansascity.com/opinion/readers-opinion/guest-commentary/article285801376.html#storylink=cpy

February 26, 2024

Don't Turn Your Head: Aaron Bushnell Burned for You

Yesterday (February 25), a United States Airman named Aaron Bushnell posted the following message about the plight of the Palestinian people,

“Many of us like to ask ourselves, ‘What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?’ The answer is, you’re doing it. Right now.”

The post included a link to a livestream on Twitch.

Not long thereafter, Bushnell started the livestream as he walked toward the driveway of the Israeli embassy, declaring,

“I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I’m about to engage in an extreme act of protest. But compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the

hands of their colonizers, it’s not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”

Bushnell then doused himself with a flammable and reached for a lighter. In the background, you can hear people trying to help. We will never know if he heard them. After setting himself on fire, Bushnell repeatedly shouted,

“Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine!”

Bushnell collapsed to the ground in agony. One of the cruelest characteristics of people getting burned to death is that they often survive for a short time after. Early this morning (February 26), Bushnell died from his injuries.

Extreme acts of political protest are by definition… extreme. Most people would not even consider burning themselves to death. Let alone for a population thousands of miles across the globe that one does not have any familial ties to. Yet, love in its' purest form causes us to do extreme things. There seems to be little doubt that Aaron Bushnell loved the people of Palestine. In the cries of the people of Gaza, Bushnell saw something that most people in the United States simply don't or won't…a people worth dying for.

There will be those who think that Bushnell is insane. I don't. I follow a God that demands nothing less than giving our lives for others. Regardless of his religious

convictions, that is exactly what Bushnell did. There is no greater love.

So, don't look away. Stare into the flames of Aaron Bushnell. That is where love lies. That is where hope lies. That is where justice lies. For, there is no greater love.

Bushnell's call is not for us to all go out and burn ourselves to death. It is to burn with a love for the Palestinian people that pushes us to action…pushes us to end the genocide. Don't you dare turn your head from such a message. Indeed, Arron Bushnell burned for you.

#For over a decade, I've been a scholar of self-immolation. From writing articles and books to even appearing in a documentary, I've sought to understand what these extreme acts of protest mean. This moment is no different. I sit with Aaron Bushnell to understand what he was trying to say.

https://time.com/6821425/israel-embassy-air-force-protest-fire-self-immolation-aaron-bushnell-latest-updates/

March 1, 2023

OK Execution: Michael Smith & Intellectual Disability

Injustice in Oklahoma: A Pending Execution & The Intellectual Disabilities of Michael Smith

On April 4, 2024, Michael Smith is scheduled to be executed. Over the past year and a half, I have had the pleasure to serve as Smith's spiritual advisor. There are a variety of reasons and factors that contribute to my advocacy that his life be spared. The chief of which is that he has become someone I have come to love as a brother. Recognizing that such a human reason is not enough for most people, I next offer that Smith suffers from intellectual disabilities that make him ineligible for the death penalty. On June 20, 2002, the Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling ending the death penalty for individuals with intellectual disability. In Atkins v. Virginia, the Court held that it is a violation of the Eighth Amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment to execute death row inmates with

significant mental disabilities. Such diagnosis of Smith has nothing to do with my estimation (although I have experienced him as having significant delays), but rather numerous psychological evaluations that have yielded significantly low IQ scores. Darrin Pickens was actually taken off of death row in Oklahoma with the exact same scores. Smith's case (and the comparison to Pickens) was even cited in the Death Penalty Review Commission's bipartisan landmark report on Oklahoma's use of the death penalty (147-148).

Under Oklahoma's current statute, a capital defendant with multiple IQ scores—for example, 71 and 76—would appear to meet the threshold requirement of an IQ of 70 or below (considering the standard error of measurement). However, that same defendant would be

barred from litigating the issue of intellectual disability because, under the statute, any score of 76 or higher prevents a finding of intellectual disability. And the standard error of measurement is not considered for a score of 76 or above. In fact, this scenario arose in the case of Michael Dewayne Smith. Smith's case—considered by the OCCA after section 701.10b went into effect—involved IQ test scores of 71, 76, and 79. [Smith v. State, 245 P.3d 1233 (Okla. Crim. App. 2010)]

The OCCA, in rejecting Smith's claim that his attorney was ineffective for failing to raise the issue of intellectual disability in post-conviction proceedings, stated: "It is clear then, that with two I.Q. scores of 76 and 79, Smith's current claim fails under the express language of [section] 701.10b." [Id. at 1237.]

Given Smith's range of IQ scores, this definitive cutoff is arguably contrary to the U.S. Supreme Court's subsequent opinion in Hall v. Florida, in which the Court expressed its "agree[ment] with the medical experts that when a defendant's IQ test score falls within the test's acknowledged and inherent margin of error, the defendant must be able to present additional evidence of intellectual disability, including testimony regarding adaptive deficits." [See Hall, 134 S. Ct. at 2001].

Relatedly, the changes in Oklahoma's procedure have resulted in similarly-situated defendants being treated differently under the law, depending on the time the case was considered. For example, Darrin Pickens, who had an IQ score of 79 (as well as scores of 70, 71, and

76), was granted Atkins relief by the OCCA in 2005. [Pickens v. State, 126 P.3d 612 (Okla. Crim. App. 2005)].

After section 701.10b went into effect in 2006, Michael Dewayne Smith—who had IQ scores almost identical to Pickens'—was denied relief, because some of his IQ scores were considered too high under the requirements of the new statute. [Id.]

The injustice of such a situation is beyond disturbing. What is even more disturbing is that Michael Smith pleaded with his lawyer (Wyndi Thomas Hobbs, who now appears to serve as the Deputy Division Chief – of the Capital Post-Conviction at the Oklahoma Indigent Defense System) to pursue an intellectual disability claim before the Oklahoma law raising the standard

went into effect on July 1, 2006. The letter (see below) Hobbs sent to Smith on May 19, 2006 illustrates this very fact. Had Hobbs pursued such a claim, the Death Penalty Review Commission's analysis indicates that Smith's chances of success would have been high. But against Smith's wishes, she did not.

The State of Oklahoma is preparing to execute Michael Smith…who not only has a significant intellectual disability claim…but is someone who has the exact same scores as Darrin Pickens (who got off of death row) and someone whose lawyer (Wyndi Thomas Hobbs) failed to file the proper claim on his behalf in time to pursue what could have been (according to the Death Penalty Review Commission) a successful claim of intellectual disability. Justice demands so much more

than the treatment that Michael Smith has received.

The State of Oklahoma is preparing to execute someone who (at a minimum) is ineligible to be executed.

March 14, 2024

The Good Samaritan & Prodigal Son: Parables from Death Row:

Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Death Row Spiritual Advisor

Bart Johnson, Prisoner on Alabama's Death Row

The Good Samaritan

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and

when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

-Luke 10:30-37, NIV

We are all capable of tremendous good. We are also capable of just walking on by. The world is full of spaces of need. We get opportunities to serve every single day. Why do we more often than not simply walk on by? Why don't we embrace the good that we all

carry? The answer is found in our eyes. Do we have the ability to see…to see the pain in the other? Surely, you can't respond unless you first see.

Even when we see, we embrace excuses before we embrace the other. How often are we too busy? How often are we too tired? How often do we just not want to be burdened? Our disposition can never dictate our ability to respond to the needs of others. If we allow where we are to dictate what we do, we will never be able to completely see…we will always stumble on our own excuses.

Sometimes we do so much good that we are too busy to do the good that is needed right in front of our eyes. When we spend our time doing good and not

seeing needs…we fail at our primary task…presence. If you are doing too much to actually be, you are missing the ability to give the one thing you have to those in need…yourself. Do-gooding creates illusions about what is important. We can't be so busy chasing good that we miss what is right in front of us. We must be ready to see. Great change can only come through great readiness. Do we live prepared to help?

Of course, the robbers need our help too. Those in need in our midst are not always the most pleasant people to work with. That doesn't make our call to their needs any less. Those in need must all be our focus… not just those in need that make us comfortable. Where people are and what they have done is a

distraction from our responsibility to keep our eyes open to the needs around us.

Don’t be distracted. The juxtaposition of our vision must always be found in serving the needs of those we find abandoned along life’s road. Don’t miss your moment…God is found in such places.

The Prodigal Son

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there

squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was

going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and

be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

-Luke 15:11-32 NIV

Life has a multiplicity of meanings. Different perspectives flow from different people…and sometimes different perspectives even flow from the same person. Many would like for this parable to have one simple meaning. Of course, that's absurd. Meaning seems to be coming from every direction.

It's easy to not like the older son. Let's face it…he's unlikeable. He comes across as unbelievably entitled. In the midst of a complicated circumstance, he just sits back and judges everybody else. He's not the person

you'd want to hang out with on the weekend. Church folk seem to act similar. They sit back in all of their self-righteousness…judging everyone who doesn't live how they live. These folks make it difficult for people to be a part of most churches. The do-gooders often seem to be good at one thing…making sure that other people feel unwelcome. They would rather know it all than actually get to know other people.

The younger son threw everything away. We can all relate to this guy. We've all woken up at various points in life…desperate and confused. Most people think that people should just get what they've got coming to them…that is unless it's them. We have no generosity until we need generosity. Why do we function in such ways? We want God to abandon the squanderer…

unless we are the squanderer. God loves us how we would want to be loved. God loves us despite what we do. God is always there waiting on us to return.

Returns are not easy. One must have their heart broken once or twice. Regardless of what the story says, the prodigal didn't return because he was hungry for food…he returned because he was hungry for the embrace of his father. Hope seems to be what he was most hungry for. We can all understand the desire for such restoration…the desire for the open arms. The feast serves as a representation that the open arms offer a more extravagant welcome than we could ever imagine. God doesn't run out of blessings.

There also seems to be a critique of economic systems buried in there. The distant land is the epitome of greed. It destroys him. He returns of place sustenance or a place that has everything that he needs. Surely, we all want to exist in such a place. So why do we keep going to places of greed? We are so addicted.

Life is complicated. Love is too. Regardless, God always yearns for us to return to the feast.

March 20, 2024

The Parable of the Sower: Parables from Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people

stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.
In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.
For this people’s heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts

and turn, and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no roots,

they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Matthew 13:1-23

Shortcomings define us. Not necessarily because we are deficient. But because we are shaped by how we overcome deficiencies. We all make mistakes. We all

fall short. We all fail. These are fundamental truths. At one time or another, we will be the seeds that fall in less-than-ideal spaces. Our response to such a juxtaposition is what defines us.

Sowing seed is an interesting metaphor. Consider that anybody can sow seed. In fact, it seems that we are made human by our seed sowing. We become something not based on where the seed lands…but in our ability to keep throwing seed out…to keep trying.

Seeds don’t just fall randomly. We throw them. Misconceptions lead to bad tosses. The parable is about being able to tell the difference between good tosses and bad ones. Sometimes we need to just go and pick the seed back up.

We keep our wisdom about us so that we might ascertain what is happening around us. You've got to take care of yourself. You've got to keep your mind right. You must keep your sight. We push back against anything that would cause us to be distracted or impaired. Faith is about being ready to grow and you can't be ready to grow unless you keep yourself healthy and prepared for growth.

Good soil is a metaphor for good places. Who we are around matters. Where we are matters. When we are somewhere matters. What we are matters. Why we are where we are matters. Such statements could go on and on…but the point is that we help create the soil by

being in it. We create spaces where we can love each other. We create good soil.

Love is about doing our best to make sure that we are always throwing good seeds into the good soil that we create. God has given us an endless supply of seeds… every moment is a chance to make good throws into good places.

March 20, 2024

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree: Parables from Death Row: Jeff Hood & Bart Johnson

Bart Johnson, Prisoner on Alabama's Death Row

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Death Row Spiritual Advisor

And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Luke 13:6-9

The fig tree was planted with the belief that something good would come from the planting. Indeed, this

parable begins in a place of expectation. The man wanted some figs. When he didn't find any figs he got mad. Doesn't this seem somewhat absurd? To get this mad over some figs? Maybe he was the one with the problem…a fig problem. Is it possible that this man's gluttony over some figs was the primary problem? I mean he was ready to kill because he couldn't get what he wanted to eat. Maybe the tree didn't owe him no fruit?

Trees give us oxygen. This man wanted to kill a tree over some fruit. He would prefer not to breathe if he couldn't eat some figs. Insane.

Just because something hasn’t happened when you want it to happen doesn’t mean that it won’t happen. Why do we always have to be in such a hurry?

Is three years enough time to judge a life? People change and grow. Trees change and grow. We don’t get to just kill when we don’t get what we want.

We don’t own the ground. We share the ground with others. We don’t get to decide who gets to take up ground. The ground belongs to all of us.

May we be like the gardener. May we demand life for all people. May we be the one demanding that people keep getting opportunities. The gardener is the

epitome of grace. May we be the ones out there saving the trees.

Lastly, the gardener was willing to proclaim, promise or do anything to save the tree. May we always be willing to do what we can to stop the chopping. To be about growth more than death.

March 22, 2024

The Last Words of Christ from the Execution Chamber (1)

“Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” -Luke 23:34

Meetings about murder are strange. Each time I accompany one of my guys to their execution, I am required to attend a training session. The gathering usually consists of multiple officials explaining to me the process and asking if I have any questions. Of course, this is a moment for technical questions about how the execution is going to go down. I try not to get to bogged down in moral questions. Such questions are most often quickly swatted down and create tension at an exceedingly sensitive time. Sometimes I feel like a coward for not pressing harder in these meetings. Other times I rationalize such compliance with the fact that if I cause too big of a stink, I'll jeopardize my ability to be there for my guy. I don't know what the right

answer is. I just know that it is a very strange place to be…standing there looking up at the foot of the cross.

Murderers surround you in an execution chamber. There is no getting around it. Everyone there is there to kill someone…namely, the person strapped to the gurney. That is their job. I used to think that I wasn't included in that number. I used to think that somehow, I was clean. Of course, my purpose there is not to kill someone. I am called to be there for my guy. I am called to pray. I am called to read scripture. For all of my good intentions, I ultimately do nothing to stop it. I sit there and watch someone I love be murdered. I feel it. It is so heavy. To know that you can't do anything is devastating. It is the worst sort of moral injury…

regret. I stand there at the foot of the cross…knowing that I stand amongst the murderers.

I used to pray out loud, “Forgive these participants in this execution, for they know not what they do.” Now, I pray, “Forgive me, for I know not what I do.” Maybe by acknowledging my own ignorance…I will at least feel human. The first step toward making something right…toward making something whole…is to acknowledge the deficiency in our own soul.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Forgive me…I stand at the foot of the cross…desperate for guidance…please show me the way…please make me whole.

March 26, 2024

Execution Echoes

Reflections on the Seven Last Words of Christ

Jeff Hood

Echoes.

I’ve heard them.

I’ve felt them.

I’ve known them.

I’ve lived them.

I’ve cried them.

I’ve walked them.

I’ve seen them.

The Seven Last Words of Christ

“Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” -Luke 23:34

“Today you will be with me in Paradise.” -Luke 23:43

“Woman, Behold your Son…Behold your mother.” -John 19:26-27

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” -Mark 15:34

“I thirst.” -John 19:28

“It is finished.” -John 19:30

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” -Luke 23:46

“Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” -Luke 23:34

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to be there for my guy. I don't know what the right answer is. I just know that it is a very strange place to be…standing there looking up at the foot of the cross.

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I stand there at the foot of the cross…knowing that I stand amongst the murderers.

I used to pray out loud, “Forgive these participants in this execution, for they know not what they do.” Now, I pray, “Forgive me, for I know not what I do.” Maybe by acknowledging my own ignorance…I will at least feel my own complicity. The first step toward making something right…toward making something whole…is to acknowledge the deficiency in our own soul.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Forgive my complicity.

“Today you will be with me in Paradise.” -Luke 23:43

Jesus was not alone on the cross. There were two criminals.

One criminal spoke of his desire to be taken down. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." Surely, any of us would want to be saved. Pain shooting through the nervous system does not usually push someone to ask for more. This criminal had the nerve to say it. When someone is being executed, it’s normal to wonder about God’s whereabouts. Such savagery shouldn’t be dismissed easily. Executions shouldn’t pass by unchallenged. God and man should be held responsible.

"Are you not God? " Why doesn’t God stop injustice? Why are these executions allowed to continue? If God is God, why can’t God keep it all from happening? The criminal that demands temporal salvation cannot be dismissed. I am him…and so are you. We do pray for healing…right?

“…for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." This is not true. Jesus committed a multitude of crimes when he challenged the system. Jesus demanded justice. Jesus demanded grace. Jesus demanded so much more than the law allowed. Jesus hung out with criminals and made demands for their welfare…as a consequence…

Jesus hung with them in their punishment too. Jesus was a friend of those facing the death penalty. Jesus became a criminal so that he might know criminals. Jesus was executed so that he might know the executed. Do such truths mean that we should be executed? It certainly doesn't mean that we should be standing on the sidelines. Come closer. Come closer. The horror, divinity and humanity is all mixed together there. Salvation is too.

"Remember me." There are few more human phrases. In our deepest moments of need, we cry out to not be forgotten. The criminal speaks for all of us. Every execution I have ever been in, the cry of the departed is the same, "Remember me." So often, I find the words repeating on my lips. "Remember me." Everything feels

forgotten in the execution chamber. Life takes us to places of death and destruction. “Remember me.” It’s a reminder of reality. It’s a reminder of hope. It’s a reminder for us to remember why we long to be remembered.

"Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." The message of Jesus is clear…God always answers. We will not be left alone…God always comes to us. Even when we feel alone…God is there. The promise to the criminal is a reminder to all of us criminals…all of humanity…we will not be forgotten… we will be remembered. That is the only hope that I can leave an execution chamber with…remembrance.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Remember me.

“Woman, Behold your Son…Behold your mother.” -John 19:26-27

Words are scarce in those moments. You are brought into a chamber devoid of much else other than the weapons that are going to kill someone you love. Your choices are clear. You either pick up one of the weapons or you listen. Sometimes the greatest way to combat oppression is to listen to the voices of the unheard. When there isn’t much that you can do, you either listen or run. I cannot flee…and so I listen.

Words matter. Jesus pointed John to his mother, Mary. In doing so, Jesus was determined to make sure that his mother was provided for. On multiple occasions, the person that I accompanied to the execution chamber requested that I take care of someone that they love. Concern for the welfare of others…especially those you love…is an incredibly human response to impending death. Jesus was dying in much the same way that the guys that I work with do…concerned about those he loved until the very end.

During the horror, John stood at the cross and tried to provide comfort. I'm sure he felt helpless. I'm sure that he felt like he couldn't do anything. I'm sure that he felt like his agency was completely stripped away. I know the feeling. Yet, John was there to respond to one of

Jesus' final requests. Jesus needed John. Jesus trusted John. May we all be prepared to be there…just like John.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Make me present.

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" -Mark 15:34

Why does God allow such horror? It's one of the fundamental challenges for anyone who seeks to touch the divine. If God is powerful to save, then why doesn't God stop the lunacy of it all. Does God not care? Maybe God is not powerful to save? Maybe God is a tyrant? The

circuitous nature of the conversation speaks to the frustration of engaging such conversations. I guess that's why it's' about faith. Do you believe that love is out there…a love that is more powerful than any love imaginable? Sometimes life is about focus…a focus on faith in that which is above all else…love. I have chosen to believe. Or maybe love has chosen me? That doesn't mean it's easy. There are those moments on crosses. Those moments where there is nothing else to do but to scream out. Those moments at the foot of the gurney.

Bleeding out…Jesus screams out. What does Jesus feel in those moments? I think he feels the questions that I just described. The horror of unknowing. The absence of answers. The pain…the full pain of it all. Pain causes us to feel furthest from God. There is no getting around it.

We feel most alone when we hurt the most. Love feels so far away in the throes of suffering. However, these moments call us to cry out to God even more.

I have a reoccurring dream that haunts me. I'm standing in the execution chamber. I am desperate to stop what is happening in front of me. I am restricted from doing anything. All that I have is my voice. When I attempt to speak, my lips won't move. I am muted. I can't say anything…not because I don't want to…but because I literally can't. This is the way that I feel in every execution. I am desperate to cry out to God to stop it all…but I can't. The cries just fester loudly in my soul…as my body begins to shake.

Why have you forsaken me? Why have you forsaken him? Why have you forsaken us? The questions bounce around like marbles in a glass jar. It doesn't matter who is asking them, it just matters that the questions fill the room. Then, death comes. The questions are dead. Maybe. Or maybe the fullness of all answers have finally arrived.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Hear my cries.

"I thirst." -John 19:28

Depending on the state, the condemned are often not allowed to drink (or eat) in the hours leading up to the

execution. Repeatedly, my guys complain about the dryness in their throats. The reason for such prohibition is that the state is concerned that the condemned will vomit on the gurney and disrupt their execution. Such fear is not unwarranted. On multiple occasions, the condemned have violently thrown up on the gurney. Imagine a volcano shooting out of someone's mouth. In such a situation, the condemned suffocates to death on their own vomit. The prohibition of drink is not without reason…but it is exceptionally cruel.

Life cannot be maintained without water. You have to drink. I have to drink. We have to drink. The desire for drink is about as fundamentally human as it gets. Such desire should remind us that the person being executed is actually human. It's easy to forget. Too often, we

think of righteousness as the fulcrum of humanity. We think that there are times where we get so much better than everybody else, that we can dictate who lives or dies. But such a standard is not the standard of what it means to be human. We are all created in the image of God…and that is what makes us human. We all thirst. Jesus was human. The condemned are too.

Since Jesus was thirsty, he knows our thirst. The condemned do not thirst alone. Jesus is on the gurney. Jesus is thirsty. We are thirsty. Such thirst illustrates are need for waters of healing and life…that cleanse us of our desire for killing. I thirst.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Quench my thirst.

“It is finished.” -John 19:30

Executions are complicated. Prior to that moment, you’ve work hard to save a life. You’ve petitioned. You’ve begged. You’ve marched. You’ve written. You’ve spoke. You’ve done absolutely all that you can do. But such things don’t turn out to be enough. Then, you find yourself in an execution chamber. What should you want to happen? On more than one occasion, I’ve felt guilty for praying that one of my guys would die as quickly as possible. I don’t pray for such things because I want them to die. I pray for such things because I don’t want them to suffer. Botched executions lead to horrific consequences. Then again, I don’t want them to

die. The chaos that takes over the brain in such moments is so disorienting. You just long for a conclusion. Whichever direction it goes, you long to hear…it is finished.

What is it going to take to abolish the death penalty? I hear the question regularly. While most questions about the death penalty are exceedingly nuanced, this one is not. People are not going to be willing to even consider abolishing the death penalty until they are forced to see it and feel it. When Jesus declared the end of his suffering, he did so from a place of experience. I'm not sure that we will be able to end the suffering until people are able to viscerally (though not literally) experience an execution. We must draw as many people as we can to that place…it is finished.

I believe there is a time coming when executions will stop. For now, all I can do is sit and listen for that powerful phrase…it is finished.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Be with me in my finishing.

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” -Luke 23:46

There are moments in life where the only path available is forward. In such moments, we make our reality by walking through it. Executions are highly choreographed affairs. The squad that carries them out wants absolutely no surprises. I am a part of the plan…

and the expectation is for me to do exactly as I'm told. For someone who doesn't believe in executions, such a juxtaposition is really difficult. Yet, there are no other options. Whatever you say or do, the outcome is going to be the same. With or without you, the person in front of you is going to be executed. Resistance is futile. The futility of these hours is something that you share with the condemned. They know that they are not going to stop their execution. So, we are taken to a chamber to die together. One physically. The other spiritually. In an execution chamber, the end result is always death. The only option that one has is prayer.

Prayer is a way of surrender. We lift up our concerns to God with the knowledge that such concerns are too great for us to carry. Prayer is a way of declaring that

the only path forward is in God’s hands. In the execution chamber, prayer is the only way forward. There are no other options.

Resistance is over. Jesus is declaring that he has walked as far as he is physically able. His spirit is in God’s hands. This is the only way I know to walk in or out of an execution chamber. I give the spirit of the person I love to God. I give my spirit to God. Our spirits are no longer our own. Such a realization is a reminder that they never were.

Jesus, in your mercy:

Help me give my spirit.

Listen.

March 28, 2024

***NEWSWEEK**

President Biden Should Follow Through on Ending the Death Penalty | Opinion

On Good Friday President Joe Biden will likely go to church. While there, I hope more executions than just that of Jesus fester in his mind.

I was Kenneth Eugene Smith's spiritual advisor during the first nitrogen hypoxia execution in Alabama. There was no one closer. Witnesses from all sides described the same thing, something incredibly evil.

A few weeks ago, Smith, 58, was completely immobilized on the gurney. On his face, there was a tightly secured mask that covered from the top of his head to the bottom of his chin. In fact, it was so tight that I could see tight red bunches of skin around the entire seal.

With little warning, the nitrogen started to flow. Like an expanding tomato, Smith's head grew bigger and bigger. His body was pumping adrenaline in every

possible direction. Every inch of him looked like it was going to explode. Seconds turned into minutes.

The state of Alabama lied. We were told to expect Kenneth to go unconscious within the first few seconds. Smith began to heave back and forth. No one with a conscience could have wanted the entire moment to continue. Fluids shot out of his mouth and caught on the inside of the mask. The concoction looked like a waterfall. His eyeballs protruded out of their sockets. It was like watching a horror movie.

Conversations about nitrogen hypoxia as a method of execution and the death penalty in general followed. Perhaps with wishful thinking, I expected bold leadership from President Joe Biden. Instead, we got a short statement from White House press

secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, "The president has long said and has had deep, deep, deep concerns with how the death penalty is implemented and whether it is consistent with our values. So we are deeply troubled by it, by what we heard by about Kenneth Smith's death."

"Thoughts and prayers?" It's a phrase that has come to define indifference. Whenever tragedy strikes, it's always the auto response. But when do "thoughts and prayers" lead to action? The use of the word "troubled" by Jean-Pierre strikes similarly. There was a time when use of the word "troubled" meant that you would be stirred to do something. Not today. Jean-Pierre speaks for an administration that is so "troubled" that it has

done, and seems aimlessly determined to do, absolutely nothing.

This isn't what we were promised. Back in 2020, President Biden declared on his campaign website that he would, "work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example." He's done neither.

Far from offering leadership of any kind, executions are happening regularly. The U.S. Justice Department continues to seek new death sentences. Now, we even have a new execution method that allows the government to suffocate someone to death. These are not all federal issues that Biden has direct control over, but he promised effort and we have seen none.

President Biden's inaction is not theoretical. As a spiritual advisor to people on death rows throughout the nation, I provide comfort to those who are to be executed by their government. I work to end such moments because they're completely unnecessary, a waste of resources, and contrary to my faith. Executions are also bolstered by unfair systems and generally morally repugnant. But these conversations about President Biden and capital punishment go beyond basic objections and extend to fair and timely questions of failed governance.

On April 4, the State of Oklahoma is scheduled to execute Michael Smith. If the execution proceeds, I will be standing next to him doing my best to provide him

comfort. That's my job. President Biden promised to take on the death penalty, and he is not doing his job.

Reverend Dr. Jeff Hood is a death row minister across the nation.

The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.

April 1, 2024

McAlester, Michael Smith & Jesus

Michael Smith is such a common name. Indeed, there might be a dozen or more Michael Smiths in McAlester alone. The commonality of such a name betrays the specificity of an upcoming execution. You see, the Michael Smith that resides on death row at Oklahoma

State Penitentiary (OSP) is scheduled to be executed next week, April 4.

For well over a year, I've served as Smith's spiritual advisor. Daily, we've talked about the specific struggles that he faces. Of course, we all face specific struggles. Such a path is part of what it means to be human. Existential struggles might be what we all have most viscerally in common. Too often, we dismiss the struggles of others as foreign and therefore unworthy of our time. Yet, real change is only possible when we stop to see each other. The message of Good Friday is to open our eyes to the execution…the struggle…of Jesus. Such a message extends down through the ages to our present realities.

Conversations about historical injustices tend to illicit quick and complete self-absolutions. We want the world to know that we would never just sit by and let such a thing happen. We always believe that we are morally superior to the executioners of old.

Golgotha was well known as the place of execution. When an execution was about to happen, everybody knew where to go. Our present juxtaposition is no different. Everybody in Oklahoma knows where executions happen, McAlester.

Of course, McAlester is also home to those who do more than just live near the execution site. Like the soldiers situated at the foot of the cross, the folks at OSP actually participate in these executions. I assume that most would say that they're just doing their jobs.

Such a response betrays the fact that one doesn't have to work a job that requires them to kill people. Let me make it plain, those who participate in executions are choosing to do so. The soldiers that executed Jesus were morally culpable for what they did. The same is true for the employees of OSP.

Michael Smith is not Jesus Christ. But he doesn't have to be to be relevant on this day. We are told not to kill each other. We are told to love our neighbor. We are told to stand with the outcast. We are told to drop our stones. The contemporary relevance of execution of Jesus manifests in McAlester. The message is quite simple really. Don't be an executioner.

Jesus was murdered because good people did nothing. If Michael Smith is murdered, it will be because McAlester did nothing.

April 26, 2024

Pending Execution:

Commentary on The Book of Jonah (David Hosier and Jeff Hood / 1 of 4)

David Hosier is scheduled to be executed on June 11, 2024.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is Hosier’s spiritual advisor.

This is a commentary on The Book of Jonah they're constructing together.

Jonah 1.

God’s word often comes to us in iterations we don’t expect. Jonah was told to go to Nineveh, a place where he would have never thought God was telling him to go. “Why would I go to Nineveh?!?!?” Sometimes God directs us to spaces and places that leave us shocked. Our shock does not delegitimize what God says. Sometimes the love and grace of God is shocking. The people that Jonah considered to be amongst the worst

on earth, God was determined to save. Why do we get in the way of the grace business? We don't understand the vastness of love. God does not hate anybody. God is desperately trying to turn all to love.

Jonah knew that God was going to forgive the Ninevites. That's why Jonah was so mad. Jonah knew what was coming. We forget that we're called to love our enemies. We forget that we are taught to pray for those who persecute us. We forget. God refused to forget the Ninevites. God refuses to forget us.

Would any of us ever want to be forgotten or ignored? What if Jonah was the one to bring the good news of love and salvation to us?

Jonah ran to a ship going in the opposite direction. How often do we try to run from God? How often do we choose to ignore what God is telling us? How often do we think that we can hide? Love is going to catch you. Love is going to find you. Love is going to make you whole. God is love. That is who our God is. God is always going to love the hell out of you. That is who God is. God's love is not small. God's love is enormous.

The primary mistake that Jonah makes is that he fails to make room in his heart for the infinite possibilities of God's love. Who can comprehend it? We can't. We just have to make room for the possibilities. God loves us. We matter. We are all God's favorite. We are infinitely valuable because God's love is infinite.

Jonah pays the fare. What a strange addition to the story. Jonah didn't just run away from God. He paid to do so. In our society of excess, it is so common for people to spend their money running from God. We buy when we need to give. We want new when old is enough. We invest in all the wrong things. We pay money to run from God. We pay the fare because we think we know better than God. We pay the fare to run from our responsibilities to love.

The storm began to rage. Everybody on the ship was terrified. People start shouting to whatever God they can think of. When things get tough, we cling to whatever we can get our hands on. Sometimes we grasp wrongly. Then again, it seems that God always

seems to honor our reaching. Love always reaches back.

Jonah is asleep. How often when the storm rages are we asleep? The entire ship needed help. The entire world needs help. Yet, we are asleep. There is an execution coming. There is a horrific moral moment coming. How can you sleep? Unfortunately, most of the time people don't care if it doesn't directly touch them.

The folks on the ship finally realize that Jonah is the reason for all the chaos. Of course, they first wanted to escape any collective responsibility. It's easy to blame the executioner. It's harder to blame the entire State of Missouri that is about to carry the execution out. Too

often, we blame the individual when the collective is responsible. The other people on the ship are not sinless.

Of course, they threw Jonah overboard. But it's important to remember that Jonah asked for it. At this point, it becomes apparent that Jonah is suicidal. He has had a complete mental collapse. The other folks on the ship simply just did what Jonah asked them to. He wants to destroy himself.

Is it ever right to sacrifice the one to save the whole?

God saves Jonah in the strangest way possible. Jonah is quickly swallowed by a huge fish. Maybe a whale? In a matter of weeks, David is scheduled to be executed. It's

important to clarify that we believe a fish is coming. We don't know whether that will mean that David will be saved by the State or that David will be saved b being caught by God, but we do know that a fish is coming.

When the other guys throw Jonah overboard, see him get eaten by a fish/whale and see that the sea has grown completely calm, they all turn their hearts to God…they turn their hearts to love. Why does it take such drama for us to do the right thing? It seems that some things are obvious. For example, it's always a bad idea to kill people.

Even amid the hardest times, we have to have faith that God has a fish…God is going to make a way.
Regardless of what the next couple of weeks hold, God

is going to make a way. Though an execution is coming, God is going to make a way.

April 29, 2024

Pending Execution:

Commentary from the Book of

Jonah (Complete)

David Hosier is scheduled to be executed on June 11,

2024.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood serves as David Hosier's spiritual advisor.

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Regardless of what the next couple of weeks hold, God is going to make a way. Though an execution is coming, God is going to make a way.

Jonah 2

Jonah is still inside the whale. Solitary confinement is like being inside the belly of a whale. There is nowhere to go. Water and excrement slosh back and forth all around you. You are left alone with your prayers and the hope that somebody might be listening. No sunlight. Little edible food. Just haunted memories of what might have been.

In his despair, Jonah called out to God and God answered him. We are praying with all that we are that God might hear us and stop this execution. The belly of this whale might seem hopeless, but we are clinging to hope. We are not going to let some whale destroy our faith that God still answers prayers. Hope never dies.

Even in the belly of a whale, life is worth cherishing. Jonah wants to live. Yet, it seems that Jonah begins to figure out that life is not life unless life rests in the arms of God. So, Jonah turns back to life. We are turning back to life. We will not let an execution date stop our living. God is life so life will never end no matter what may come. Difficulty does not mean that things are over. We still pray. We still live. We still love.

Jonah is in the depths. Sometimes it is necessary to think about how far we have come to know how far God can take us. The depths are not the end. In fact, they are only the beginning. The beginning of God showing us how far that God can bring us back up. There is no depth that we can go that God cannot find us. The harder things get the more God gets to show out. There is no depth that we can go that we cannot turn to God. Jonah is down right now…but Jonah is determined not to stay down forever. We feel similarly.

There is seaweed wrapped all around Jonah's head. He can't see. Yet, he knows where to turn to get his sight back. We must want to see. We want to see.

Jonah is in the pit. We are in the pit. But God is going to bring us out of the pit. No matter what happens, David is going to get out of that pit. Life is coming no matter what. Whether we live or die, God has got us. Whether one is executed or not, God has got us. There is nothing to fear from the pit. There is nothing this side of heaven worth clinging to. We are God's no matter what comes. Salvation comes from God. Salvation is coming no matter what. We will see God. No execution is going to shut us down.

Then, the whale vomited Jonah up on dry land. We have no doubt that we all will be vomited up on dry land. No execution is going to stop the vomit. In this life or the next, we will be vomited up on dry land. We are going to get out of the belly. One way or another, we are

going to be vomited up in dry land. Beautiful vomit awaits no matter what happens in the coming days.

Jonah 3

Jonah got thrown up by the whale. Jonah is sitting in the vomit. Then, God tells him where to go. The location is the same as before. Jonah is to go to Nineveh. We are all a little dense from time to time. Even when we've gone through circumstances that make it more than obvious, sometimes we've got to be reminded where we're supposed to go. God is always read to point us to places of love.

For whatever reason, Jonah hates Nineveh. Sometimes feelings are not logical. Jonah knows that God is going to have grace on Nineveh. He can't understand why he must go. Jonah forgets that love loves no matter what. Love is not put off by extravagant gestures. Love is not put off by unexpected journeys. Love goes where love needs to go.

Nineveh is huge. There are a ton of people there. Jonah wants to just ignore all of them. Jonah just wants to let them die. What type of person sees people in trouble and doesn't stop to help? Maybe Jonah wasn't that good of a guy? Or maybe Jonah was just like all the rest of us, unable to see past his own selwhale desires? People matter.

Jonah preaches doom and gloom throughout Nineveh. I would imagine his sermons were terrible. He had no desire to be there at all. Still, people heard and responded. God uses who God wants. Our abilities mean nothing in the economy of God. For God is the driver of what God wants, namely grace and love.

This juxtaposition reminds me of modern departments of corrections. We are constantly told that prison is about corrections. Anybody who has been to a prison knows that such places are about punishment and torture not corrections. How can the death penalty be about corrections? How can solitary confinement be about corrections? How can our modern criminal injustice system have anything to do with correction? There is no correction in corrections. They don't want

you back on the street. The system exists for one to fail. Change is not rewarded. Growth is not rewarded. There is no reward for any correction. It is the ultimate repeat business. Think about how much money is made from prisons. Contracts for bedding, food, medicines and all sorts of other things. Why would anybody making money from corrections want any actual correction? Jonah claims that he is preaching for repentance, even though he doesn't want the Ninevites to repent. God works despite our systems, our lunacy.

The King of Nineveh realizes the error of his ways. Immediately, he changes. The King of Nineveh didn't need a time of extended corrections. He just changed. Jonah couldn't stand it. He was like most of our society. He didn't want to believe that change could

happen so fast. Why are we so opposed to God performing miracles in the lives of people? God can perform miracles. God changed the King of Nineveh and through him the entire city.

Why can't we believe that people on death row can change?

What happens when a leader admits that they made a mistake? It sets an example of repentance that others can follow. Entire societies can change. The King of Nineveh changed. Nineveh changed. God rejoiced at such a change. We can always turn around.

God is merciful. God is always trying to show us mercy. Why do we feel the need to execute those that God has shown mercy to?

The Book of Jonah is a story of people giving in, giving in to love. The love of God is so powerful that it will catch you sooner or later. It grabs you when it touches you and it will not let you go. Love changes cities. Love changes worlds. Love changes even the hardest of hearts.

Stop killing people! Turn toward love! End the death penalty! You don't have to kill anymore! Love can bring these statements to fruition.

We pray that God will open eyes fast enough to stop the execution. Even now, we believe that hearts can change. May all eyes be open. May Missouri repent. Just as Nineveh did.

Jonah 4

The people of Nineveh repented. Shouldn't Jonah be pleased? He wasn't. In fact, he was angry. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. God was supposed to destroy the evildoers. Why does grace bother us so much? Too often we confuse the word justice with the word vengeance. Jonah wanted these folks to get what was coming to them. God wanted them to turn from

evil so that God might shower them with mercy. Isn't this what God always wants? Why do we live for vengeance? Why can't we live for love?

Then, Jonah decides that he doesn't want to live. Can you imagine? Jonah wants vengeance so bad that he would rather die than extend grace and love to the Ninevites. This is what happens when one lets vengeance take hold. Everything that matters is slowly strangled to death. Mercy is like oxygen, it's the only thing that can actually keep us alive.

God doesn't hate how we hate. God always leaves space for mercy. When we demand that God hates how we hate, we are always going to be disappointed by God's boundless mercy.

Jonah goes out on a hill and waits for the city to be destroyed. Growing more and more uncomfortable, Jonah grows angrier and angrier at God. He wanted destruction. He wanted vengeance. God's answer is love.

Jonah is struggling so much that he again says he wants to die. His desire for vengeance is tied to his identity. When God takes away vengeance, Jonah feels like his identity has been destroyed. What are we going to be known for? If we place our identity in anything other than love, we are going to feel like life is not worth living. Love is life and life is love.

Jonah is confused and so are most of us. We place our identity in so many fleeting things. Love is all that is clear.

Love is always the way over. Love is always the way out. Love is always the way through. Love is always the way around. Love is always the way.

Regardless of what comes, love cannot be destroyed by an execution. Love will live forever. So will we.

May 1, 2024

The Narrative of David Hosier:

A Claim of Innocence

*This edited narrative is the product of a conversation between David Hosier and his spiritual advisor, The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood. Hosier desired to produce this narrative so that people could clearly hear his side of the story

during the clemency process and as a potential execution date approaches on June 11.

I was introduced to Angie Gilpin by a friend that I used to work with at the Jefferson City Fire Department. We often went out to a particular bar. I'd go in there to shoot pool and listen to country music. On Friday and Saturday nights, they'd often have a band, and we'd just dance and enjoy the music. Angie and I really enjoyed each other's company and one thing led to another. I knew she was married…but it didn't seem like a big deal because she said they were separated. His name was Rodney Gilpin and I knew him too. Believe it or not, we were actually friendly with each other.

We ended up going together for almost two years. Then, she suddenly went back to her husband. Honestly, it'd have been fine if she'd had the decency to give me sort of explanation. Then, she started accusing me of all sorts of stuff. It was unbelievably frustrating. But I just tried to put it behind me and move on.

I had no contact with Angie or Rodney in September of 2009. I was doing everything I could to just ignore all the stuff that she was accusing me of. It was slanderous. Stalking. Stealing. Assault. Anything and everything she could think of. None of it was true. I was doing my best to ignore it. I was desperately trying to move back to my hometown in Indiana. I just wanted to get away from all the mess.

While I was up there visiting, I got a call from a police officer. Angie was making even more accusations. She was going completely nuts. Next thing you know, I'm getting phone calls from my landlord telling me that if I don't get my stuff out of my apartment by the end of the month, he's going to throw it out on the street. I had a huge gun collection that was worth a great deal of money that I didn't want to part with. So, I rushed back into town and loaded the collection into my car.

Desperate to clear my head, I decided to go for a long drive. I was so exhausted. I just needed the wind and the radio. After a few hours, I ended up in Oklahoma. I really didn't know where I was when I got pulled over. They said that Jefferson City, Missouri wanted me and that I was going to be taken to the Erickson County Jail

in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I had no clue what was going on. Later, I'm sitting in jail. The police came in and asked a few questions. Immediately, I felt like I needed a lawyer. On Wednesday, they take me to court. I found out that I was being charged with felony fleeing. They asked me if I had an attorney or a representation. I said, no. So, they postponed the hearing and said that they'd get me a court-appointed attorney. They loaded me back up, and took me back to the jail. Friday morning, two US marshals grabbed me, stuck me in a van and we were off to federal court in Muskogee, Oklahoma. The new charge was felony possession of ammunition. That's when I found out that Angie and Rodney had been murdered in Jefferson City.

Unbelievably, it slowly became clear that I was a suspect.

For weeks, I was shuttled around federal prisons throughout Oklahoma until I was finally sent to a federal facility in Morgan County, Missouri. On November 5, the feds dropped the gun charge. Morgan County notified Cole County (Jefferson City) that if they still wanted me then they needed to come pick me up. No answer. I sat there and I sat there. They were unquestionably abusing the idea of a detainer. Then, I was told that they finally had produced a warrant for my arrest. They're supposed to charge you within 72 hours of your detainment. Well, I sat in the Morgan County jail for 33 days. I have no doubt that they were spending all that time planting false evidence and

creating their narrative. There was chatter about what I was accused of…but I didn't know the full extent. I called lawyers and nobody helped. There was nothing that anyone could do. I was just left to sit there.

Then, I was officially arrested and charged with the murders. A public defender showed up. He had unquestionably drunk his lunch. I knew that the fix was in. I had no idea how I was going to beat this. I just knew that I didn't kill anybody.

I sat in the county jail for almost four years. The entire time I was represented by people who were getting paid by the same people who were trying to execute me. I just kept getting put off. The investigators wouldn't talk to me. They kept saying that the things

they found were confidential. It was my case!?!?! It was all a fix.

I felt like I was being punished for being somewhat of a loner. I'd always just come and went as I pleased. I never reported my comings and goings to anybody. We live in a free country. If I choose to go for a ride, what difference should it make? I was just trying to relax. Now, I was being punished for driving. They had no witnesses…no physical evidence…nothing to put me at the scene of the crime. I'm guilty for having gone for a drive?!?! They twisted everything so bad. Even the search warrant for the crime scene was dated eight days before the crime ever occurred. How is that even possible? What is more, I was in Indiana at that time. If

they get to make up the rules as they go, then how can I ever properly defend myself?

My attorneys bent over backward to not make the prosecutors mad. It's as if that was the only thing they cared about. I knew I didn't have a chance. But I prayed like I did. Repeatedly, the prosecutors hurled innuendoes and insults to see what would stick. I emerged from all of their vileness a monster. I don't lie. They said I did…and everybody just believed them. Hearsay evidence sprayed in from every direction. One prosecutor declared my rights null and void since they "knew" I killed Angie and Rodney. I was convicted before the trial even started. Ultimately, I was only tried on one murder. They do that so that they have another chance if something goes wrong on the first one.

Basically, they get two shots at the same crime. It's not fair. They got to say the entire time that I killed two people when I was only being tried for one. But nothing is fair about any of the process. That's why I'm where I am.

I wasn't in the city. I wasn't in the county. I wasn't even in Missouri. I was nowhere near these murders. But the prosecutors got to turn me into a monster…and my lawyers didn't do anything about it.

I think about Angie and Rodney all the time. I wish we all knew what happened to them. They didn't deserve any of this. Whoever did this to them deserves to be punished to the fullest extent of the law…but that someone ain't me.

How can someone be found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt and sentenced to die when there are no witnesses, no DNA, no fingerprints, no trace evidence or anything else? I tried to express myself in court. Nobody would listen.

I know what it feels like to lose someone. My father was an Indiana State Police Officer. He was killed in the line of duty. I wouldn't wish that upon anybody. There is no possible way that I'd ever kill someone.

This is no longer just about my life. This is about the truth. Are there any honest people left in Missouri? Wake up! You're about to execute an innocent man.

Sign David's petitions for clemency @

Missourians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty:

https://madp.salsalabs.org/ClemencyForDavidHosier/index.html

Death Penalty Action:

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-david-hosier-in-missouri/

May 11, 2024

Missouri Executioners: A Warning of Justice to Come

Late nights birth early mornings. Though he preferred to sleep, he had to get up. The job demanded it.

Quickly drinking a cup of coffee, he raced out the door.

Each step felt tougher than it had the day before.

Popping the trunk, he loaded all his gear into the car. It

took multiple turns before the car would start. On the horizon, thin grey skies looked ominous. The weather was as cold as his heart had become. Even though he didn't want to do it, the money was too good. Meeting up with his team, they talked about the plan one more time. Timing is everything in a matter like this. Though they'd done it many times before, there was no room for error. Proceeding up the stairs, they knew exactly where their target was. The building was much warmer than they expected. Perspiration formed along his brow. When he saw them, he knew it was over. With the team swarmed all around him, there was nowhere to run. Resistance was futile. Terror filled every second. Though it would've been easier to just shoot him, it would've been too hard to clean up. The boss

told them to make it look as clean as possible. So, they jabbed him with a needle filled with poison. The look in his eyes waxed and waned until it was no more. Holding him down, they stayed just long enough to make sure that he was dead. Just like all murderers, they justified their actions by declaring that he deserved it. Talking about everything except what just happened, the team left as fast as they'd arrived. Murder never looked so professional. That's the way he preferred it. Now, all there was left to do was to go home and wait on the check.

What should happen to the person whose business it is to kill? One would think that the above man would be arrested and charged. Punishment should be swift, right? It shouldn't matter who the boss is, right? The

entire team should be dealt with similarly, right? It shouldn't matter why. It shouldn't matter who. Murder is murder, right?

The man is an employed executioner. The team are the individuals who carry out executions. The bosses are the governments that perpetuate the death penalty.

There is a time coming that all people who participate in executions will be seen as the story above describes. Ruthless killers employed by other killers to partner with other killers to kill the defenseless.

Make no mistake, a time is coming when it will not be a defense to say that you were just doing your job. One day, investigations, courts and tribunals will be formed to hold executioners responsible for their crimes against

humanity. Remember, justice does not have an expiration date.

DAVID HOSIER is scheduled to be executed on JUNE 11.

Corrections Officers: YOU DON'T HAVE TO PARTICIPATE. NO MISSOURIAN CAN BE FORCED TO MURDER ANYONE.

Of course, such admonition also goes for every other executioner in every other state.

May 15, 2024

Emmanuel Littlejohn: The Official Narrative of an Injustice

Through interaction over a number of months, Oklahoma Death Row inmate Emmanuel Littlejohn constructed this narrative with his spiritual advisor the

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood to let people know that he didn't kill anybody and certainly doesn't deserve to be executed.

"Underwhelming." That's how Emmanuel Littlejohn described his initial interactions with Glenn Bethany at Joseph Harp Correctional Center in the early 1990s. The two really didn't get to know each other at all. "I just knew him from a distance. Honestly, I really wasn't all that interested in getting to know him." Littlejohn was focused on getting out as quickly as possible, not making new buddies. Eventually, he did get out, but quickly returned to his old ways. By the time Littlejohn encountered Bethany again (1992), they were at the Ambassador Courts Apartments in Oklahoma City, "getting high and drunk." Littlejohn looked right at

Bethany and declared, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” The interaction led the two to become business colleagues of a sort. One of the local drug dealers enlisted them to help him sell dope in the neighborhood. The two got to work. Late one night, Littlejohn and Bethany returned to bring back the earnings to the drug dealer. It quickly became apparent that Bethany was short close to $300. Looking at Littlejohn, Bethany admitted to smoking most of his dope. The drug dealer said that he was going to kill them both if he didn’t get his money. Littlejohn said his options were limited, “What would you do? The fastest way I knew to get money was to rob somebody. We had to do what we had to do to survive. I wish it hadn’t been like that, but it was.”

For multiple hours, Emmanuel Littlejohn and Glenn Bethany surveyed the streets for a place to rob. Some stores were too crowded. Some stores had security. Some stores were too close to other stores. Eventually, the two settled on a small store called, “Root-n-Scoot.” Parking a block away, Littlejohn and Bethany got out of the car. “We thought that the block distance would create some distance between us and the crime.” As they walked toward the store, Littlejohn had his gun fully displayed and Bethany had his hidden. Upon entering the store, Littlejohn pointed his gun at the clerk Tony Hulsey and demanded the contents of the register. Bethany screamed loudly, “Give me the money! Give me the money! Give me the money!” Littlejohn recalled in vivid detail, “From outside the

store, it appeared that Husley was the only person in the store. Even when we were in the store, it seemed like this was going to be an easy score. That is, until it wasn't." Bethany kept demanding more money. Littlejohn was ready to get out of there. They already had more than enough. Then, Bethany screamed, "Look out!"

Kenneth Meers appeared from the back of the store. Both Littlejohn and Bethany had no idea that he was there. It looked like he was carrying a shotgun. Immediately, Bethany opened the door and Littlejohn ran out. "I was doing my best to get my ass to the car. I wasn't interested in shooting nobody. I wasn't interested in getting shot." Meers kept coming and Bethany fired back into the store on the way out.

Witnesses that lived directly across the street described Bethany as the shooter. “We weren’t sure exactly what happened when we both got back to the car. Neither one of us thought that anybody was going to end up dead.” Not long after, word reached both Littlejohn and Bethany that Meers was dead. “Immediately, I went to Bethany and declared, ‘You killed dude?’ I didn’t understand why anybody would be that dumb. It was just senseless. We already had the money. He was like, ‘oh well.’ I knew I had to get out of town as quickly as possible.” Before Littlejohn left, his girlfriend encouraged him to kill Bethany. “She was convinced that Bethany was going to try to pin it all on me. She was right.” Littlejohn took off to his mom’s house in Wichita, Kansas. Three days later, the police caught up

with Littlejohn and informed him that Bethany was trying to pin it all on him. Littlejohn vividly remembers his first thought in the back of the police cruiser, “I should have listened to my girlfriend.”

Prosecutors pursued murder charges against Emmanuel Littlejohn and Glenn Bethany separately. Meaning, they were able to advance a different theory of what happened at each trial. In Littlejohn’s trial, they argued that Littlejohn was the actual shooter. In Bethany’s trial, they argued that Bethany was the actual shooter. Prosecutors plainly stated that there weren’t two shooters, yet they argued that two different people were the shooter. “At Bethany’s trial, they spent the entire time arguing that I wasn’t the shooter. When people ask me how I can prove that I wasn’t the

shooter, I just tell them to listen to the arguments that were presented at Bethany's trial." Even though prosecutors made similar one shooter arguments to secure convictions against Littlejohn and Bethany, only Littlejohn received the death penalty. The sentence was handed down over 30 years ago, in 1994. In the coming months, Littlejohn is scheduled to be executed. Bethany is serving a life sentence. How is such discrepancy fair? The State of Oklahoma is about to execute Littlejohn for killing Kenneth Meers after they spent an entire trial (that of Bethany) arguing he didn't actually kill him.

"I am about to be killed for never having killed anyone. I shouldn't have been there. I shouldn't have taken part in any of it. I was young and dumb. I've

repeatedly apologized to the Meers family. But it doesn't make sense for Bethany to get a life sentence and for me to get the death penalty. Right before trial, prosecutors offered me a life sentence with parole. They knew I wasn't the shooter. None of the witnesses said I was the shooter. I'd be out by now! But I knew I didn't shoot anybody. Damnit! I ain't going to say that I killed Kenneth Meers when I know I didn't."

May 17, 2024

DAVID HOSIER is DYING /

Who's "Backing the Blue"

Now?

Yesterday, I received a phone call from David Hosier telling me that he has gone into acute heart failure. Even if David wasn't scheduled to be executed next

month, x-rays of his chest and abdomen have confirmed that he is not long for this world. Presently, he's in an outside hospital struggling to move, eat or breathe and filled with fluid. Based on his current condition, it is possible that he might be bedridden for the foreseeable future. The State of Missouri seems to be pursuing medical treatment for one reason and one reason only, so that they can execute David on June 11.

After Indiana State Patrol Sergeant Glenn Hosier was murdered, the "Back the Blue" crowd neglected to stand with his son David in life. Will they also now neglect David in death?

Before I learned of the severity of David's condition, I wrote the following concerning the hypocrisy of those

who claim to "Back the Blue" amid his impending execution.

Let me be perfectly clear, I hate the police. Not necessarily particular police officers or those close to them. I hate what seems to be the prevailing iteration of modern policing, the unrestrained lawless collective that seems to target those with the least. I find the fact that we empower certain citizens to treat other citizens however they please with little to no consequence to be particularly problematic. If my juxtaposition isn't clear, I'm a fierce activist against police brutality. So much so, I was at the center of one of the deadliest moments in the struggle.

Imagine. July 7, 2016. In response to the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, I'd organized a rally and march in Dallas, Texas. Our rhetoric was hot. Still, everything was relatively peaceful. Shots rang out. I was close enough that I instinctively grabbed my chest. In the distance, I saw officers drop. Turning around, I did everything I could to get people out. By the end of the night, the full scope of the moment was clear. Five police officers dead. Dozens injured. The assailant coopted our protest to unleash his terror. For days, I appeared extensively in the media. Ever since the terror of it all, I've struggled with what I could have done differently to save the lives of those officers. It's hard to stop one lunatic with a gun. Even though my feelings about police brutality remain as fierce as they did that

night, those five officers are never far from my mind. Parts of me will forever remain in Dallas. Yet, the rest of the world moved on long ago.

Public tragedies are bizarre. One moment, everybody cares. The next moment, nobody can even remember the details of what happened. I experienced it in Dallas. I experience it now.

When I met David Hosier several months ago, I met someone who'd also left parts of himself at the scene of a bygone tragedy. The scene was the death of his father. On April 26, 1971, Indiana State Police Sergeant Glen Hosier died from a gunshot sustained while trying to apprehend a murder suspect. Following that tragedy, everybody said they'd be there for David. Especially,

those who declared the most fidelity to “Backing the Blue.” However, few followed through. The neglect has created a life of struggle. Now, David is 69.

On June 11, 2024, the State of Missouri is scheduled to execute David Hosier for the 2009 murder of his former lover, Angela Gilpin. It was also heavily implied that Hosier killed her husband, Rodney Gilpin. One could fill many shelves with the transcripts and briefs constructed about this case. Throughout the legal process, David has maintained his innocence, even rejecting a plea for a life sentence. Despite a conviction and death sentence, there are questions that remain. There were no eyewitnesses. There was little physical evidence. During mitigation, no doctors or psychiatrists examined David. The State relied primarily on an assumed motive,

David was fiercely angry that Angela had left him and was determined to get even. Even if it's all true, the case can't be extracted from the broader trajectory of David's life. What if the "Back the Blue" crowd had been there for David like they promised they would be?

None of this seems to create the moral or ethical room to justify the bizarre act of using public resources to strap a defenseless old man to a gurney and pumping him full of poison until he's dead. But I'm sure that most of those more determined than I to "Back the Blue" would disagree.

Indeed, the "Back the Blue" folks are determined to make anyone with a suggestion of blood on their hands pay the ultimate price. But how could they take such a

bloody stance in the case of David Hosier? This is a child of a fallen officer. Do the “Back the Blue” folks not see their complicity in the events surrounding this case? I thought “Blue Lives Matter”? I thought the pledge was to leave no family member of the fallen behind? I suspect that such talk is nothing more than “Back the Blue” bluster. I’d love to be wrong. I’d love to see the “Back the Blue” crowd arise and commit to trying to save David. Not because of how they felt one way or another about David’s case, but because they’re honest in their stated unwavering intention and determination to support families of fallen officers. Don’t you think some type of effort to save his son is what Sergeant Hosier would want?

May 21, 2024

Letter to Louisianans Considering Nitrogen Executions

* The Louisiana House Judiciary Committee will be voting on SB 430 (to keep nitrogen as a form of execution) at 9am CDT on May 21, 2024.

05/21/2024

Dear Legislators.

I was the closest witness to the first nitrogen execution in Alabama. Please hear me out.

Our common humanity will be either our common triumph or our common downfall. Right now, it is our lack of humanity that is making room for conversations about new execution methods. We are desperate to find ways to humanely kill those we condemn. There is no humane way to kill a person. We seem so determined to go backward. In Alabama, we were promised humanity in the first nitrogen hypoxia execution. What we saw was everything but.

As Kenneth Smith's spiritual advisor, I was in the chamber before, during and after the curtains were opened for his execution. Meaning, I watched him slowly suffocate to death. There is no one alive today who has been closer to a nitrogen hypoxia execution than I have. This is what I saw:

Affixed with a gas mask that went from the top of his head to under his chin, Kenneth said goodbye. Then, the nitrogen started to flow. I watched as Kenneth's head turned redder and redder. His body began to pump adrenaline ferociously. It looked as if his head was going to explode — perhaps even his whole body. We were told that Kenneth would go unconscious in seconds. Then, seconds started to turn into minutes.

Kenneth began to heave. Each time he rose, mucus, saliva and other fluids shot from his mouth and out the front of the mask. The liquids began to drizzle down like a waterfall. His eyeballs were bulging out. Back and forth over and over, everything, everywhere moving all at once. Like a fish out of water being stepped on until they flop no more.

There are times when the bluster of politicians is nothing more than that. There are other times where that bluster has real consequences. This is one such time. Those championing nitrogen executions as painless, safe and humane have absolutely no idea what they’re talking about. I saw it. I promise that you don't want anyone else to be able to say the same.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

National Death Row Spiritual Advisor

May 31, 2024

Preparing for the Next US Execution: David Hosier June 11

*I serve as David Hosier's spiritual advisor. I will be with him in his final days and accompany him to the execution chamber on June 11.

David Hosier will be executed on June 11. It's beginning to look inevitable. Though I pray for a miracle, I can't let myself believe it's possible. If I did, I would never be able to prepare myself for what I must do. In the coming days, my job is to prepare David for the end. You can't prepare someone for the end by pretending that the end isn't coming. Some might challenge me. I can hear it. "Where's the faith in that?"

Amid hard truths that accompany executions, I don't have the luxury of pretending that the horrors aren't real. The execution machine is already cranked up and prepared to devour David. What am I supposed to do? Trick my brain into thinking that maybe the State of Missouri might lose the keys? I can't live like that. David can't either.

We cannot be governed by the fantasies of wishful thinking nor the tyranny of systems of injustice, we must chart our own way. Fantasies pull us from being present in the present. Those that I have seen spend their time thinking that they wouldn't be executed, are most terrified when the execution happens. Peace is not a fantasy. Indeed, peace is something that is earned in the difficulty of each second. We can't dream away our circumstances, but we can work to not be defined by them. We can be present despite the temptation to be everything but present.

David and I are facing the reality of what is. Tyrannical systems of injustice are worthy of our rage. We should burn hot when societies take it upon themselves to murder defenseless people strapped to gurneys simply

because we find them murderable. We should rage simply because the system is so unbelievably unfair. We should rage. But rage cannot define the final days of a life. Indeed, rage is the killer of peace.

One must exist in a giant ball of rage yet exist in the center of the flame without being defined by the fire all around. This epicenter of existence is neither a fantasy nor hate. It is something so much more. Namely, love. One cannot love that which is not real. One cannot love that which is hated. One must love despite all temptations to the contrary.

That is where David and I are. We are learning to love. I am under no illusion of what is coming. It will be horrible. It will be a nightmare. It will be the apex of injustice. It will be a great many awful things…but it

can also be filled with love. Even on the gurney, there will be seconds left. Those seconds can be filled with love. David and I have no time for anything that will distract us from the divine task at hand. We exist to love.

June 9, 2024

Nightmare: On the Impending Execution of David Hosier

It's 4:38am. The nightmare is familiar. I've just watched one of the guys I've worked with executed. Right after they're declared dead, I'm about to leave. Suddenly, they look up and ask, "Why didn't you help me?" When I try to speak, nothing comes out of my

mouth. It's as if I know that there is nothing to say. Desperate to explain why I can't. I wake up with a jolt. Tonight, it was David Hosier. Even though he's not even dead yet, he's already haunting me. They never leave, they're always there. This is the price of choosing to love. This is the price of defiance in a world determined to kill.

Questions of help are a baseline of spirituality. You can't love if you are not willing to help. I've loved David so much. Yet, such love is probably not going to be enough…not going to be enough to save his life. It tears at our heart. It rips at your soul. I know that I will love him until the end. Maybe that's the point. Maybe there is no end. Maybe it's all an illusion. It certainly

doesn’t feel like it. “Why didn’t you help me?” feels like the exact same question as, “Do you love me?”

When I can’t speak in the nightmare, what I’m trying to say is that I’m doing the best that I can. I’ve tried to help as much as I can. I’ve done everything possible. I’ve left nothing on the table. It doesn’t matter. It seems impossible to stop the mechanisms of death. So, I’m left there with nothing to say. The one who has just been executed still lies there executed.

There are two executions that take place during every execution. There is the executed. But…there is also something that is executed within me. I think it’s the belief that somehow love can stop these horrors. Then again, that’s the only hope that I have. I wake up after the nightmare. I believe that I will also wake up after

the nightmare on Tuesday. I also believe that David will always be close no matter what happens.

Love is hope amidst hopelessness. Nightmares be damned. David is alive. Love is alive. Hope is too.

Hope.

June 9, 2024

Poem: More than a Day

As the execution of David Hosier nears, I revisit a poem

I wrote several years ago after an execution.

More than a day.

I’m alone

Nobody’s here

That room

The source of my fear

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Nobody cared

To show me the way

Surely a life

Is more than a day

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Stop staring at me

Just let me be

Can’t you see

I just want to be free

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

I didn’t know

How far this would go

I feel the pain

Poison flows into my vein

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Get me up

Quit talking

Religious fluff

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

Eyes start to close

Everybody knows

This isn’t right

But nobody will fight

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Where were you

Execution is through

Why didn’t you say

One more day

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

Go on home

Sleep in your bed

The injustice of it all

Live in your head

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

To the end of the hall

I’m finally free

But truth remains

Your killing addiction

Leaves you in chains

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

Somebody please

Listen to me

It’s a long road

It’s a long road

June 11, 2024

The Final Visit: Minutes with David Hosier

Prisons are all the same. You hurry up to wait. Nothing happens when they tell you it's going to. You are forced to just sit. The process of my final visit with David Hosier was anything but smooth. You don't dare

complain. They could very easily kick you out. Through it all, you are just left alone with your thoughts.

Though I'd had such final visits before, this one was different. David Hosier was unsettled. I wracked my brain around what I should say. When the last door finally opened, I decided to be ready. Sometimes life is nothing more than a choice to be ready.

David looked horrible. Though he'd told me earlier in the day that he wasn't feeling well, I didn't expect him to look like this. His face was devoid of color. There was a greyness that permeated his entire being. The booth was cold and sterile. I picked up a phone to talk to David through the glass. Each word seemed more

labored than before. I could tell his heart was weakening. In fact, I knew it was breaking.

Before I could jump into planned words, David wanted to talk about the lawyers. “Have they filed anything that might stop the execution?” I shook my head. “Are they still trying to beg the governor to reconsider the clemency decision?” I shook my head. “Is there any chance that this thing might be stopped?” I shook my head. The mood changed. It was as if the head shakes allowed us to rest in a space of finality. When your direction is certain, I guess it’s easier to settle in for the journey.

We started with a reading of Psalm 59. I knew that David would be invigorated by the intensity of the

language. The Psalm is filled with phrasings of a great battle between good and evil. “Deliver me from my enemies, O God.” “Save me from those who are after my blood.” “Fierce men conspire against me for no offense or sin of mine.” “For the curses and lies they utter, consume them in your wrath.” “You, God, are my fortress.” The truth is that I will never know who killed Angela and Rodney Gilpin. The only thing that I know is that David was 100% convinced that it wasn’t him. It’s not my job to change his mind. It’s my job to meet him along the way and walk with him for a time. I knew Psalm 59 would help him continue walking.

Though his breathing grew more labored. We went through a liturgy of repentance. If we’re conscious, I think it’s only right that we all get the opportunity to

confess any last things. When I asked David if he had anything he wanted to confess, he asked if we could do a blanket confession for both of us. I didn't hesitate. Together we read Psalm 51. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out all of our transgressions." I wanted to make the meaning of the Psalm very clear. "David Hosier, God has granted you absolution and remission of all of your sins. The grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit guide you now and forevermore." I don't think he was expecting me to make the sign of the cross over him. David isn't exactly Catholic. When I finished, he asked if we could read some of the New Testament.

Time was drawing short. I quickly flipped to John 8. The passage is famous for Jesus' admonition to the religious authorities who were gathered to execute an adulterous woman. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." I could tell that David felt every word. In fact, he said, "How many of the executioners tonight will be without sin?" One of the pieces of the story that people often miss is that Jesus gave his famous admonition from the dirt with the woman. If the execution had commenced, Jesus was prepared to die with her. I assured David that Jesus would be there with him on the gurney. Indeed, closer than he could ever imagine. David's reply came quickly, "You will be too. But I need you to keep on living. There are a bunch of other folks out there who need you too."

Sensing the tears welling up in both of our eyes, I pressed on. I wanted to make sure I got to everywhere he wanted me to. John 14 is Jesus' vision of heaven that he blesses us with. I read it at every execution. It moves my heart so. David and I have read it many times over the last few days. "Let not your hearts be troubled." "I go to prepare a place for you." "I am the way." I am the truth." "I am the light." Though familiar, the phrases hit differently. David began to heave and weep. When I asked if he was ok, he told me to keep going.

The guard was growing impatient. I knew it was time to go. So, I stood up and read his favorite verse, 2 Timothy 4:7. Only this time, it was explicitly for him,

“David you have fought the good fight, you have finished the race, you have kept the faith.” I put my hand on the glass. We were both crying. I told him that I’d see him tonight. I told him he wouldn’t walk alone. I told him I loved him. I told him…. Then, it was all over. I felt the guard guide me out of the booth with her hand. Quickly, I turned around and blessed him, “In the name of the God who created you, redeems you and will never leave you.” The prison was so much colder when I left. I couldn’t wait to get outside.

Right before I exited the building, the receptionist encouraged me to, “Have a great day.” For a second, I stopped and turned, “Don’t you think that’s a weird thing to say when y’all are about to kill someone?” I didn’t wait for a reply. The weather was hot. So, I sat

in my car for a good minute to allow my soul to thaw back out.

June 21, 2024

Scattered Thoughts On 18 Years of Ordained Ministry

18 years ago, I was ordained a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia.

*Yes. Since then... I've had to get glasses. I've shaved my head. I've grown a beard.

2 years ago, I was incardinated into the priesthood of the Catholic Church by Bishop James St. George at St. Miriam Parish in Flourtown, Pennsylvania.

“Do you believe in a literal hell?” I’ll never forget that question. For one of the pastors that convened my ordination council, that was the most important question that he could come up with. I answered matter of factly, “I believe that any separation from God is a literal hell.” Life has changed so much since then. I’ve slowly learned that nothing can separate us from the love of God. I try to live in that truth daily. Sometimes that pesky question from my ordination council pops up into my head. Theology that draws us away from the love of God has a way of doing that from time to time. But I believe that love covers a multitude of sins. I think

this is the reason I'm able to still look back and celebrate the communal recognition of the calling of God on my life. Even though such a calling has changed dramatically in the many years since.

Three men are pictured with me the night of my ordination. Rev. Charles Worthy was the most loving man I'd ever known. I don't know that anyone has changed my life as drastically as he did. Indeed, he set me on a path to do the justice work that has filled my ministry ever since. Rev. Worthy died not long after the picture was taken. Rev. Don Bazel is still the most fundamentalist pastor I have ever let get close to me. Multiple years after he helped lead the ordination, he tried to convene a council to take it away based on my beliefs about LGBTQ people. Such efforts failed. In

recent years, Rev. Tripp Skipper has come back into my life. For the reappearance of a dear friend, I’m thankful. Without these three men, the ordination would have never happened.

The young man that was ordained that night many years ago no longer exists. I’ve been baptized through the fires of so many heartaches, hells and injustices. Then again, though I’m different…love still abides. God has been so faithful to me. Indeed, God has helped me to die to all the certainties that I carried back then…so that I might truly live for others.

In recent years, I've found a home in the sacraments of the Catholic Church. Regularly, I am fed in order to feed. So thankful for my friend Bishop James St. George standing in the middle. Here's to 18 more years.

June 24, 2024

What Difference Does it Make if Ramiro Gonzales Prays?

Spirituality is complicated. For almost two decades, I've ministered to all sorts of people. One of the things that I've come to realize is that no two people are the same. We are all trying to find the God that is beyond God. That is the entity that is beyond all

comprehension that gives life meaning. Those who claim to know the totality of the divine are fools who should never be trusted. God is indescribable and that is what makes God…God. Too often, there is a cultural phenomenon that demands certain expressions of spirituality for societal gain. Performance becomes spirituality and spirituality becomes performance. There seems to be few greater visceral manifestations of the consequences of such demands for performance than when it comes to the desperation of those facing execution.

It's hard to judge the sincerity of those facing death. Most would do or say anything to save their life. I've witnessed the desperation firsthand. It's a cruel game. You force people to perform when the truth is that

they’re probably going to be executed regardless of their performance. The desperation that those facing execution face certainly permeates and often guides the actions of those who advocate for the desperate. In recent years, such activity has been especially apparent in Texas.

In 2021, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) started a faith-based program for death row inmates that consists of classes, worship, fellowship and occasional special meals or people usually confined to the hopeless doldrums of solitary confinement. Of course, a great many want to be in this program. The incentives in and of themselves would be enough for anyone. Those who live in spaces with great concentrations of evangelicals know the bait and switch

of such construction. Come get “saved” and we will hook you up with treats.

Now, TDCJ says such a program is interfaith/nondenominational. Of course, that’s what has to be said for the program to remain within the boundaries of the law. However, the pictures of baptisms, the selection/ordination of ministers and fundamentalist preaching from within the program tell a different story. Such incentivization of evangelical Christianity disincentivizes every other spirituality. Such blatant promotion of religion is unquestionably unconstitutional and morally unconscionable. How can anyone who advocates for the welfare of persons on death row argue for a system that manipulates their agency and takes advantage of their desperation?

In recent years, the supposed success of the faith-based program has been used to create various manifestations of campaigns to save the lives of men facing imminent execution. While I don't blame those who do everything they can to save the life of a person facing execution, I do blame them for the promotion of a faith-based program that is inherently bigoted toward those who do not practice evangelical Christianity. Religious bigotry always begins with the preferencing of one religion over another. That is exactly what we are seeing in Texas.

In March of 2023, I accompanied Arthur Brown in the final few days of his life, culminating in being in the execution chamber with him when he was executed.

During one of our final conversations, I asked him what he thought about the faith-based program. His response still lingers, “The faith-based program ain’t about faith. It’s about the manipulation of desperate people. Such manipulation has nothing to do with God. I don’t fear death enough to play games with God like that. They shouldn’t kill me because they shouldn’t kill me…not because they think I’m a dog that’s finally learned the right tricks.” It seems that advocates are trying to convince those who make decisions about clemency that the person they are trying to save from execution is just like them and has learned the right tricks.

In October of 2023, the Texas attorneys and advocates were able to create a huge messaging campaign around

Will Speer and his faith. What the attorneys and advocates wanted us to know is that Will Speer changed his life and was now a minister in the faith-based program. For nearly a decade, I've known Speer and consider him a friend. Recent conversations with Speer have solidified in mind that the spiritual basis of the entire campaign (his transformation) was legitimate. Regardless of the legitimacy of Speer's faith conversion, the fact remains that the campaign got traction based on the promotion of his evangelical Christian faith. From the Baptist Standard to Christianity Today, a whole host of major Christian outlets promoted the claim that Speer had become an evangelical minister in the faith-based program and therefore should not be executed. Such efforts gained traction in the secular press too.

Let me make something very clear, the message was, "We can't execute an evangelical Christian minister." Surprisingly, the message worked. To illustrate the injustice of it all, just a few weeks prior a faithful Jewish man named Jedidiah Murphy was executed. I guess he chose the wrong faith? The lunacy of such a conclusion demonstrates the lunacy of creating campaigns based on "religious development" or better put, "jailhouse religion."

Recently, the Texas attorneys and advocates are doing the same thing with Ramiro Gonzalez. I have no reason to doubt that Gonzalez's spiritual transformation in prison is legitimate. By all accounts, Gonzalez is an evangelical Christian minister who is very fervent in his

practices. The ask of the current campaign is similar to the ask in the Speer campaign, “Don’t execute an evangelical Christian minister.” With the execution fast approaching, we are once again seeing a burst of writing about Gonzalez and his faith. Such is his reward for having a faith that has currency in a place like Texas. Texas attorneys and advocates are obviously doing all that they can to utilize that currency. It’s clear that they know not what they do.

People are going to value what they value. That’s not the point. We can’t change society overnight. But we can change ourselves. Folks who advocate for those on death row should be incredibly cautious. The faith-based program has created a whole host of major moral problems. The faith-based program exists for the

benefit of one manifestation of spirituality and one manifestation of spirituality only - evangelical Christianity. Intentionally or unintentionally, attorneys and advocates have become some of the great evangelical Christian evangelists in Texas. Indeed, attorneys and advocates seem to be basically promising those who participate in the faith-based program and function well as evangelical Christians that they are going to go all out to try to save their lives too. Such a development is very disturbing and promotes the rank bigotry that some lives matter more than others based on their spiritual location.

Furthermore, these campaigns promote a whole host of bigotries. Because the only way that such a campaign can happen is if someone fits into evangelical

Christianity (i.e. the prevailing faith-manifestation in the faith-based program and in Texas in general). What happens when the homosexual doesn't fit? What happens when the Jew or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu doesn't fit? What happens if the intellectually or mentally disabled person doesn't fit? What happens if one holds a whole host of views or positions that are contrary to evangelical Christianity and can't fit in the faith-based program? When it comes to their advocacy for both Speer and Gonzalez, Texas attorneys and advocates are capitulating to a world of injustice, intolerance and inequality.

The ends don't justify the means. Just ask any LGBTQ or Muslim or Neurodivergent or Jewish kid trying to make it through each school day in Texas. Though I pray

relentlessly for Speer and Gonzlez to not be executed, the inequalities inherent in the faith-based program are evil and it is evil to try to give currency to such inequalities.

Jesus is not the reason to not execute an evangelical Christian minister. Jesus is the reason to not execute anyone. To launch and promote a campaign that uses spiritual intolerances to take advantage of societal currency is absolutely anathema to anything that Jesus ever taught and incredibly offensive to anyone even remotely serious about following Jesus.

July 2, 2024

THE DEATH ROW SPIRITUAL ADVISOR: A PRIMER

Beginnings are important. We speak to someone where we find them. We cannot begin beyond where we are. Perhaps one can go back, but the beginning is always the beginning. We do not begin in endings. The

spiritual advisor must meet all that they meet where they are, not where they were.

Spirituality is complicated. No two people are the same. We are all trying to find the God that is beyond God. That is the entity that is beyond all comprehension that gives all life meaning. Those who claim to know the totality of God are fools. Such people should never be trusted. The indescribability of God is the very constitution of God. Then again, it's possible that the indescribability of God is the only attribute of God. Too often, there is a cultural phenomenon that demands religious certainty for anything to be considered real spirituality. Such demands will never be met. The primary attribute of the human condition is uncertainty. We can only know what we know. But we

can’t even really know that because to know anything is to trust the flawed and partial processes by which something is known. We are not perfect. We are searching. We are human. The spiritual journey is about faith not answers.

Spiritual direction most often comes from the location that our spiritual attempts come from. There are few more unique locations than death row. The location begins in a lack of humanity and ends in the destruction of humanity. Most often, the prisoner has shown a lack of humanity in the crimes that they’ve committed. Society has been right to judge their actions as being something less than human. The problem is that society is unable to see how they contributed to the dehumanization or even how the lack of humanity seen

in the other is a lack of humanity in the self.

Dehumanization is the only possible way that any society can have a death penalty. One must believe that there is something completely unhuman about someone before they can be comfortable destroying someone. The job of any lover of God is to step into the spaces of a lack of humanity and dehumanization and create humanity. Indeed, the job of the spiritual advisor is to resurrect humanity in both the judge and the object of judgement.

Dehumanization becomes complete when transformation is declared to be impossible. Such a tragedy takes place in a variety of ways. Sometimes the person who is a victim chooses to believe that the transformation of the instigator of their pain is

impossible. Something dies in the person. In fact, a suicide of compassion has been perpetuated in their soul. Sometimes the person who is the perpetrator chooses to believe that they can only be defined by the crime that they have committed. Deep in their soul, they choose to believe all that is said about them. While monsterization or complete dehumanization becomes complete, the perpetrator is left with no other choice but continued destruction. Societies that make decisions to perpetuate the dehumanization of people perpetuate their own demise. The dehumanization in me is the dehumanization in you. The spiritual advisor is a prophet of transformation through miraculous expressions of humanization. The person who is a victim somehow finds the ability to believe that the

perpetrator of their pain is human and can be transformed. The offender is brought out of darkness and into the light of revived humanity and transformation from evil to wholeness. Society decides to believe that all the world is bigger than injustice and pain. We can bring about humanity in the darkest places of dehumanization. We can transform our world into a place in which humanity is transformed to a place of right. Prophetic humanizations are the epicenter of the work of the spiritual advisor.

Where are we going? We can never completely know the path that life will take us. Relationships are complicated. Roles become mixed. On a basic level though, the spiritual advisor exists to be there when

death is announced, death is fought and when death arrives.

Throughout the judicial process, death is constantly announced. From the moment a sentence is handed down until that sentence is carried out, death is constant. How do you comfort someone when death is so imminent? The spiritual advisor declares that death does not exist. That which is being threatened is but an empty threat. One cannot be sentenced to nonexistence when there is never a moment when one will not exist. One is created to be and such being can never be lost. The very essence of being is the be in the being. Comfort is found in constantly lifting up life. Death has no power if we choose to believe. The job of

the spiritual advisor is to be an evangelist for life. That is the epicenter of comfort.

The very definition of injustice is anything that tries to create death amidst life. The spiritual advisor exists to push back against a society obsessed with death. By seeking to stop every execution, we are pushing back against injustice so that the condemned will not face the injustice of an execution. Whether one is talking metaphorically or quite viscerally, it is the primary responsibility to try to save the life of the condemned. In the battle for a specific life, the responsibility of the spiritual advisor extends to the collective life of society. The spiritual advisor is a conduit of societal change. By standing with the condemned, the spiritual advisor is standing firmly on the living side of the life of the world,

namely justice. It is wrong to kill another. In every direction, the spiritual advisor makes the horrors of death clear, so that life can bring about life. Hope comes from the battle against death. We are not alone in such efforts. Love is always close. The spiritual advisor's greatest tool is the spread of life.

Executions are the final battle. In the execution chamber, the life that is carried by the spiritual advisor and the condemned push back against death. The purveyors of death want one to think that they are in control. They are not. Life is in control. The spiritual advisor and the condemned are a testament that life matters and that no matter what the outcome of the moment life continues. The outcome of the battle is always to those who decide that the battle for life is

always worth the fight. The condemned can never be executed. Life lives on. The spiritual advisor walks out of the execution chamber as a witness that death cannot win…and that hope still breathes.

Life is about giving life. Death is about taking life. The spiritual advisor always leaves a part of who they are in spaces of death. However, death and life go together. Meaning death brings about resurrection. Life is multiplied. The spiritual advisor is the mathematician that has figured out the ultimate problem of life, how to live to die and die to live.

July 7, 2024

The Execution of Michael Smith: A Full Account from Oklahoma

*Earlier today, I released all of my writings on the April 4, 2024 execution of my friend Michael Smith in Oklahoma. Below is the chapter that I wrote about Smith's execution. The entire book "Underrepresented:

Michael Smith, Oklahoma & the Death Penalty" is available for purchase here.

Amidst horror, descriptions fail. Towering walls on all sides holding back countless tons of dirt. Each stone whispering secrets of imprisoned souls. Glass doors that lead underground. Though you can see through, you have absolutely no idea what's coming. Once past the threshold of hope, you wait until it's your turn. Sign in. Turn around. Spread your legs. Hold your arms out. Foreign hands rubbing all over your body. The only thing apparent now is that any agency you ever is now dead. You left it with the same officer that you gave your keys and license to. Hope dies quickly. Now, you're a prisoner too.

Loudly, the door slides open. The officer pushes you forward. Mindlessly, you just do what you're told. What else are you supposed to do? If you think about it too long… Just keep walking. The hallways are long. For the guys I work with, they all lead to the same place, death. I couldn't think about everybody right now. I had one objective. Michael Smith. After what seemed like miles, I turned the corner. There he was. Sitting at the table. Tough as nails. Smiling like always. Quickly, he arose. The room changed. For a second, we were no longer in prison. Hope returned. We were brothers. I think we believed that somehow the humanity we shared in that small visitation room would transcend the horrors that united us. Maybe. Just

maybe. Somebody on the outside might connect with what was happening. Life.

We hugged longer than usual. When you know that you're giving someone what could be their last hug, I guess you want to make it count. While this was of course a spiritual visit, we chose to define what was spiritual broadly. Life is always spiritual right? Michael wanted to know about the vending machines. Unfortunately, prison officials weren't interested in us getting any snacks. I noticed the table was freshly scrubbed with a sanitizing wipe. I found it strange that Michael would be so concerned about germs with less than a day to live. But then again, that was Michael. Each time I'd traveled to see him, I saw him wipe that table down as hard as he could. Over and over. I was

more concerned with the ethical germs that seemed to be everywhere. The infection of evil all around. Whispers of murder around every corner. I had to get my brain back. Focus.

Michael wanted to know what was going on with his case. I knew the truth. Nothing. Throughout Michael's case, lawyers had let him down. It seemed that whenever he got close to hope, there was always a lawyer there to snatch it right out from his grasp. Though Michael had obvious mental delays, he was smart enough to understand it was happening again. Repeatedly, he demanded to know what was being done. Repeatedly, I had to say that I didn't know. How do you tell someone that it's the end? How do you snatch away every ounce of hope they might have left?

I knew his attorney wasn't going to do shit, and that whatever he was forced to put together was going to be shit. When I offered that we were at least going to have a rally and petition delivery at the Governor's Office in Oklahoma City, he quickly cut me off, "That ain't going to do shit." He was right. Michael was right the entire time. The fix was in. There was nothing we could do to stop this thing from going off the cliff. But hope dies last.

Eyeballs are powerful. Michael regularly used his to get his point across. I have no doubt that he'd won many staring contests. This time though, his gaze began to drift. Executions have a way of breaking down even the most focused minds. When I began to ask Michael about tomorrow, he started talking about a phone call

that he had to take later on in the afternoon. I didn't have the heart to tell him that there would be no afternoon. The execution was scheduled for the morning. Slowly, his focus returned. We began to discuss last things. I couldn't help but notice that the guard hadn't stopped watching us the entire time. It was as if he thought that we were going to run out at any moment. Even if we made it out the door, there was nowhere to go. Door after door destroyed hope of any kind. I wanted to tell him to chill out, but I had more pressing things to worry about. "Do you think you're going to heaven?" I asked the question only because I was curious about his response. Honestly, the only type of salvation I was worried about was keeping him from being executed. I figured I'd let God

sort out the rest. Love always has a way of getting everybody where they need to be. “Hell yeah!” Michael’s response had me cracking up. I’d never met faith so simple so strong so close to an execution. Though Michael was often unsure of the path, he had no doubt about the destination.

There was a sign above our heads telling visitors what to do with the snacks they bought from the vending machines. Empty all contents on a napkin on the table. No closed packages are to be kept by prisoners. Such rules seem foolish. I considered the meaning of such words amidst the present juxtaposition, but I was distracted by rat shit a little ways down. Immediately, I was so thankful that Michael scrubbed the table. Using a paper towel, I wiped the table one more time before I

moved the elements of the Eucharist between us. “So, that’s my snack?” Michael and I talked about the meaning of each part. Now, Michael’s eyes were fixed somewhere beyond where we were. He looked straight up, but it was clear that he was seeing something else. I didn’t ask. The moment was too important. “This is my body.” The words struck me from every direction. The State of Oklahoma had every intention of destroying the body of Michael Smith. Yet, the body of Jesus illustrates that the body can never be destroyed. I was trying to make sense of it all. Michael just looked up. “This is my blood.” It’s strange to talk about blood when you know that the blood in front of you is about to be spilled for no reason. Michael lowered his head. His eyes were closed. Yet, somehow, I was aware that

Michael was seeing more clearly now than he ever had. He never opened his eyes. He just devoured the bread and wine. "This is all the food that I need." Michael had more faith than I did. I was desperately trying to figure out how to keep him here. Yet, his soul already seemed to be somewhere else. The end already seemed predetermined. Yet, Michael wasn't done. "Time's up." There wasn't much time to say goodbye. We both had places to go. I slipped as I tried to stand. I think the guard thought I was going to resist leaving. "Time's up." Other guards came to the door. Ignoring the collective ignorance, I leaned in to hug Michael. "You've got this!" I took my thumb and made the sign of the cross on his forehead. "God is with you." He pulled me close. "I love you bro." As I turned to leave,

I wanted to make sure that everybody heard me, “I love you too.” And just like that, I was swiftly escorted out. Door after door slammed behind me. When I asked the guard how he was dealing with being this close to an execution, he said it plainly and firmly one more time, “Time’s up.”

The cruelty of the sun burned. It was a reminder that this day was fleeting, and tomorrow was dead. I jumped. I sat. Then, I pointed my car toward Oklahoma City. I rushed to see if there was anything to be revived. Little did I know, hope already bled out.

Some people drive to take a break. Not me. Not this day. Every bump brought new disturbances. Every sign was a clue as to what more could be done. Every mile a

reminder that Michael was still alive. Every breathe a reminder that time was running out.

There are always final petitions to the Governor. You run up the steps in hopes that your voice might be the voice that stops the insanity. Of course, the Governor never hears these petitions in person. I'm not sure it matters. When you go to the office, you talk to a secretary. While they say your words will get to the Governor, it feels like the conversation is more of an opportunity for advocates to vent than it is to legitimately try to save a life. Something of a loud blubbering self-help group for activists. We repeatedly talked about Jesus. Despite the horrible Christian music playing softly in the background or the numerous displays of civic Christianity, Jesus wasn't there. In fact,

you had to leave your Jesus at the door. The real Jesus would probably never even get through security. We begged them to save Michael, they just smiled politely. That's their job. They're professionals at leaving their feelings secured in the glovebox of their car. After a surplus of tears and raised voices, it was over.

In the hallway, I became aware that Michael's lawyers had lied once again. Dishonesty is something that folks on death row are accustomed to. From my experiences, I'd come to realize that the lawyers that represent the condemned in Oklahoma are some of the worst in the nation. Regularly, they miss deadlines and tank cases. The only thing that they'd offered Michael was to grease the rails of his impending execution. He hated them. I'd grown to feel similarly. Anyone with a soul would.

His helpless cries in the night festered. Though they'd promised Michael that they'd file a final appeal to the United States Supreme Court, we were told at the last minute that any such assertion was a misunderstanding. Of course, such a characterization was a lie, just like all the so-called misunderstandings before. The family couldn't figure out what to do at this late hour. Can you imagine if these lawyers just nonchalantly dropped the last chance there was to save the life of someone you loved?

Anguish took over. Questions ricocheted off the marble. I couldn't let it go. Looking at Michael's brother, I suggested that the group go to the lawyer's office and demand that the lawyers file the appeal. Before I knew it, I was standing with dozens of people

outside a narrow hallway that led to Michael's lawyer's office. I stepped back. Sometimes one must unleash the whirlwind and let God take it from there. Nobody wanted any trouble. Everybody just wanted the lawyers to do what they said they were going to do. I knew it was important for the family to take the lead. When the lawyers saw all these folks standing outside the door, they immediately locked it. Cowards. They wouldn't even face the family. Instead of engaging the issue at hand, they did what white people most often do when faced with a large crowd of black people, they went and got a black person of their own. This guy shows up and says that he was there to keep the peace. No justice. No peace. How could we feel any differently? Promises

made. Promises broken. Promises don't mean shit in Oklahoma.

Remembering. I raced to bed. I was so excited. I was a young child. When you're young, hotels are the types of places that dreams are made of. It was my first vacation. I remember sliding into the covers. Something snagged on my skin. Ripping the covers off, I realized that something was clinging to my leg. It was a yellowed toenail. I screamed. Ever since then, I've hated sleeping in hotels. So, I don't know what I was thinking when I chose this cheap hotel to stay in. I was dreading that bed the entire time I was driving back from Oklahoma City. Then again, I do know what I was thinking. I was broke. I take very few donations to do the work that I do. I have a strong belief that money

poisons everything. When I got back to the room, I noticed something that I hadn't seen prior. There was blood on the comforter. It was the middle of the night. This was a cheap hotel. There were no quick solutions. I was exhausted. So, I just left all my clothes on and laid down. Once I cleared the blood from my mind, Michael took back over.

Horror. Desperation. Pain. The night before an execution is the sum of all fears. The words of Christ became the words of Michael. "Stay awake with me." I was so tired. I'd given everything that I had. Yet, I felt such a duty to stay awake. I didn't know how to pray. I just knew to pray. Michael was my only focus. I tried to push any distractions from my mind. The fact that I still didn't know whether the attorneys actually filed the

final appeal or not gnawed at me. Nevertheless, I prayed. “God stop this insanity!” “God draw near to Michael!” “God show me your face!” These were less requests and more demands. After an extended amount of time, I fell asleep. I didn’t mean to. I just couldn’t help it. When I woke up, I knew I’d failed. When I looked at my phone, I realized how bad. At 2:48am, Michael had sent a text message trying to figure out how to make his attorneys file his final appeal and asked me to make a public appeal to help. He was clearly scared. He was clearly in agony. He was clearly in pain. I’d clearly fallen asleep. I hadn’t stayed awake with Michael on the most frightening night of his life. Pulling myself into a sitting position, I sat on the edge

of the bed and cried. The blood hadn't been enough to keep me awake.

The water couldn't wash away the guilt I felt. When Michael needed me, I was asleep. It was hard to determine whether I was awake or dreaming. My eyes were open, but I wanted everything to be a nightmare. Regardless, I guess it was. I grabbed the Gideon's Bible. Strangely, I'd made a habit of using the Gideon's Bibles from the hotel rooms I stayed in. Something about it made me feel like I was using something new for the guys. Think about it like an athlete that wears a new pair of cleats for every game. I also knew that the pages would always be clean, and I'd be able to write whatever I wanted to in it. Anyways, I kept packing the car. It was colder than I thought it would be. Maybe

that was just the condition that I felt in my heart. I'd let Michael down. I was frozen. I had to get going. Everything was packed. Come what may, I was prepared to make my escape immediately after it was all said and done. I didn't want to stay in Oklahoma one second beyond what was necessary. I'd had enough. I'd had more than enough.

Sulfur smells permeated doors and windows. I knew that I was getting close to the epicenter of evil. The place where demons played with life and death and called it justice. I'd been instructed to park in a small lot right next to Oklahoma State Penitentiary. The contradictions tore at my soul. Was I supposed to be here? Michael needs me. Was I supposed to run? This place felt so far from God. Before I could make up my

mind, I saw one of my escorts waving at me in the distance. Turning around, I saw an officer close off the parking lot behind me. There was nowhere else to go. I asked if I could take a second to finish preparing the oil that I would later anoint Michael with. I didn't wait for a reply. I just finished. Grabbing the Bible and the oil, I walked through multiple huge doors that slammed behind me. There was no turning back. I was sick to my stomach. "ID!" I was startled by the woman demanding my driver's license. Her tone made it clear that she hated me. Then again, they all acted just like her. When I got to the conference room, I immediately went to the bathroom. Dropping to my knees, I spewed out everything in my stomach. I guess you could say all the anxiety collectively balled its fist and punched me

right in the gut. As I sat on the floor, I wondered how I was going to keep it together. Then, I heard a knock at the door. “Are you ok?” I did my best to answer convincingly. “Just a second.” Of course, I knew better. I jumped up, washed my hands and splashed my face with cold water. Be brave.

The seats were just comfortable enough. Then, one of the state officials that I’m closest to appeared. I guess you could say that he was an escort of sorts. More than that, we were friends. For over a year, he’d been a source of encouragement. Theologically, we were on opposite ends of the spectrum. But on a heart level, we were very close. While I suspect that he’s opposed to the death penalty, I don’t know. But one thing I do know is that he's interested in making the life of this

world a little gentler. We began to talk. The conversation quickly turned to the horror to come. Ever so subtly, he began to inch toward what I was going to say. Finally, I let the cat out of the bag. I was planning on reading a modern rendition I'd constructed of the beginning of John 8. In the narrative, an adulterous woman is brought before Jesus who the authorities planned to execute. Jesus' response continues to reverberate through time and space. "You who are without sin caste the first stone." In my rendition, Michael Smith is thrown before the executioners. Jesus looks at all who are gathered to execute Michael and says, "You who are without sin inject this man with poison." When I got done reading the rendition, my

official friend quickly reacted, “Please, don’t read that.” I didn’t figure he’d approve.

Before I knew it, the huge prison doors were closing behind me. Whatever light there was outside, was gone. I mumbled prayers to myself. I’m not sure anyone heard me. The huge doors slammed behind me, one after the other after the other. It was as if each slam was one more ring of hell that I had to pass through to get to Michael. I kept going. Eyes peered through the peep holes of cells. Others imprisoned at Oklahoma State Penitentiary were used to this ritual. They knew exactly what was about to happen. Occasionally, I saw a fist. The symbol of resistance reminded me that I too had a job to keep up the resistance. While there was nothing that I could do to

stop the execution, I could be a presence, a symbol that what was happening was wrong. When the last door slammed, I heard my friend and prison escort say, “I’ll be right here when you get back.” I was somewhat startled. I’d almost forgotten he was there. When you walk through pain, it’s hard to remember that you are not alone. I climbed the large steel steps. Looking down through the grates beneath my feet, I could see the floor grow further and further away. When I arrived at the top, I noticed a big group of prison officials. Quickly, I realized that this was the team whose job it was to strap Michael down to the gurney. When they saw me, they scattered. There is a fear that pervades everyone that is involved in these executions that what they do might reach the sun. I guess there is a fear

that I might make that happen quicker than they desired. When they pulled back the curtain and brought me to the door of the execution chamber, I saw a familiar hooded face. In the execution chamber, there is someone who stands next to me whose job it is to drag me out if I do anything to remotely disruptive. This was the third time the same hooded face had escorted me into the chamber in Oklahoma. When I remarked that he looked like a ninja, or the same as he did when I saw him last time, he immediately slammed down any small talk. "You are going to…" Cowards that live behind masks don't have the strength for real human interaction. The words he uttered next were drowned out by my fear of what was behind those doors. "Do you have any questions?" I knew that if I

had any questions, I'd ask the officials in the room. Ultimately though, I was struggling with a soul question, "What are you going to do to resist the evil behind that door?" Rightfully, Michael expected more from me than just to stand there mumbling meaningless words. He expected me to be something…a prophet that he knew would proclaim that what was happening to him was wrong. "You've got to stand strong for me, Jeff!" With multiple responsive knocks, the door opened. Questions would now become answers whether I liked it or not.

Noises pulled me back. The door opened. I wasn't prepared. Who would be? Isn't murder always unexpected? Even when it's scheduled? Humanity shouldn't feel so confident in trading in life and death.

But there we were. I was part of a theatrical presentation. I was a character. I was to play a part. Something pushed me through. The director of the execution stood in my way. Michael was right behind him. It was as if the director had to assert his power over the process one more time before letting me comfort the person that he was about to kill. Words slowly spewed out of his mouth. I don't know why he kept talking. I knew the parameters. I knew what I could and couldn't do. I knew that I needed to ask him before I did anything. The more he talked to me the more I felt like I was simply part of his production. When he finally got out of the way, I quickly moved to Michael's side. The first thing he asked me was beyond clear, "Did the attorneys get the appeal filed?" I didn't

know. But what I did know was that they weren't even going to consider it until we showed up in mass the night before. "We pushed them in every possible way that we knew how." Michael made it plain. "They ended up being like all the rest of them…just rats holding out for that paycheck." I didn't know what to say. I sure as hell wasn't going to sit there and apologize for them. Most of his lawyers were, are and always will be, pieces of shit. Instead of continuing down the path of past and present shit, I said the most powerful words I could think of, "I love you very much brother." Michael started to cry. Tears gently streamed down the left side of his face. We were there. All of each of us was there.

The anointing oil had exploded in my pocket. It was because of the cheap plastic container I had to carry it in. Everything was so heavy, I hadn't noticed. Now, I was very aware that my thigh was now all oiled up. I got as much of it in my hand as possible. As I leaned over, I whispered in Michael's ear, "God lived for you. God died for you. God rose again for you. God loves you more than anyone or anything ever can or will. In this hour of peril, know that God is going to see you through. God will be waiting on the other side with arms wide open. Know that these words are true as you feel this oil on your forehead. I bless you my dear friend and brother in the name of God, who is your creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen." The oil went on thick. Streams of it went down both sides of his

head. Light reflected off of every contour of skin. The smell was powerful and filled the room. I guess I hoped it would reach a few other hearts in the room too, but I wasn't holding out hope. Execution chambers can make even the most faithful believers struggle for hope.

Before I backed away, I told Michael, "God loves you. You are about to experience love forever. Don't forget to hold the gate open." In typical Michael-speak, he replied through the tears, "I got you bro." I put the oily plastic container back in my pocket.

Stepping back, I placed my hand on Michael's ankle and began to read. Psalm 23. "Even though we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil." John 8:1-11. "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone." John 14:1-4. "Do not let your heart be

troubled. Michael believe in God, believe also in Christ." I read it all over and over again. Everything disappeared. It was me and him. This wasn't his first time hearing these words. I could see him whispering them. For Michael, these were no longer just words, they were a path to something beyond the horror. Right before the execution commenced, he made me promise to tell his mom and brothers that he loved them. While he thought they might be there, he wasn't sure. I was. They'd already made it clear they weren't going to be there. But I simply acquiesced to everything he said at that point. I didn't want his last words to be ones of disagreement with me. In the midst of it all, he kept going back and forth about whether he was going to make the last words he'd

planned. The attorneys had failed him so bad, but he didn't want to go out with that being the last thing that he said. "Fuck them." While I didn't know what those words meant, I knew they meant something.

Curtains are a means of passage. The movements start the show. The movements end the show. When the curtains move, you move or you're moved to leave. There was no turning back now. The curtains controlled my reality. The curtains controlled me. While I did my best to keep my eyes on Michael, I couldn't help but see Attorney General Gentner Drummond. He was front and center. While I don't know if he was proud of what was happening, I do know that he wanted to be the star of the visitation gallery. Maybe a better way of saying it is that he was seated in a place where he couldn't be

missed. Just like always. On some level, I can respect someone who doesn't run and hide from the terror they cause. But on the other hand, Drummond was now unquestionably the self-appointed Butcher of McAlester, how can anyone respect that? Michael wanted to make him feel it. So, did I. I'd already told Michael exactly where he would be. When the curtains were raised, I looked directly into Drummond's eyes. I stared so hard that he became visibly uncomfortable. I wanted him to be as uncomfortable as possible. "Don't you dare close your eyes." I wanted him to have to turn his eyes back at Michael. He did. The tears had never stopped. Can you imagine looking directly into the eyes of someone that you put on that gurney? What do you think of in those last moments? I hope that he saw the hell that he

helped wrought. I hope that Michael's face terrorizes him every night. Curtains can reveal so much about the hearts of humans.

When the death warrant was read, I was reminded of all of the horrors that Michael participated in. While I'd been unable to sort it all completely out, he'd made very clear that he'd done a tremendous amount of things that he wasn't proud of. You can't help but be torn into the past in moments like this. Pain is so visceral. Yet, it is the past that reminds you why the present is so wrong. Murder was wrong then. Murder is wrong now. I noticed that the execution director's hands were shaking. In the gallery, I noticed that the reporter who'd regularly trashed Michael and his fierce complaints about his attorneys. Yet another sack of

shit. Executions bring all sorts of demons together. Michael still had small tears streaming down the left side of his face. I felt so connected to those tears. I prayed that they would offer some sort of redemption. When the time came for his final statement, I'd be untruthful if I didn't say that I desired for him to bash everyone who'd treated him so bad. I wanted him to let people know that the horrors they'd committed hadn't gone unnoticed. But Michael decided differently. When the execution director asked, Michael simply replied, "Nah, I'm good." I thought I saw a smirk. In the nonchalant way he answered, I realized that he'd won. Poison flowed. One of the cruel tricks of those final moments is that you don't know what's happening until it happens. In fact, you have no idea when the

condemned will go unconscious until they're unconscious. Whatever you need to say, you better say it quick. I quickly added that I loved him. "I love you too, bro." Tears still formed and fell. Michael closed his eyes. I told him that I was there. He nodded his head. Psalm 23. "Even though we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil." John 8:1-11. "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone." John 14:1-4. "Do not let your heart be troubled. Michael believe in God, believe also in Christ." I jumped around and tried to read as much as I could. Repeatedly, I reminded him, "God loves you, Michael." It didn't matter what I said, he never came back.

Michael closed his eyes and chose when he would leave. I'd never seen anything like it. In the midst of an execution, Michael chose his own time. As his eyes watered, mine did too. I removed my glasses. While still reminding him of God's love, I lifted a fist. I told him that we would stand together in resistance until the very end. When Michael asked how he would know that we were resisting together, I told him that I would raise my fist. I kept it up until my arm felt like it was going to fall off. Michael snored and gargled for much longer than I expected him to. He sounded like he was slowly being drowned. It was if he was being pulled underwater by his ankles until he was dead. I'd heard the death pangs before. Michael's were very loud and clear.

Witnesses leaned toward the glass. I wondered if they were proud of themselves. So many people sitting in that room could have stopped all of it. Their eyes got bigger and bigger. I guess they were just enjoying the spectacle of it all. I still had my fist up. Movement slowed. Noises stopped. The hooded ninja pulled me back. I'd almost forgotten that he was there. Somehow though, the touch of his hand on my arm brought me back to reality. Michael was leaving and I was to remain. The doctor shook Michael to make sure that he was completely unconscious. I stepped forward to read John 8:1-11 as many times as I possibly could. "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone." "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone." "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone." The ceiling opened. In

the distance, I could see all of the other guys I'd accompanied to their executions before gathering around Michael. A great cloud of witnesses of hope. Michael was not alone in his journey to God. No matter whether evil prevailed for a moment, love was always going to win in the end. I saw it.

I saw one small tear drop down the side of Michael's face. I knew he was gone. I was terrified. Too much was happening all at once. It was as if I felt like the drying of that tear could be the end of our relationship. We all fear endings. Before the tear dried up, I saw it glimmer. My attention was directed back to the opening in the ceiling. "We got him." "Behold, I am making all things right." Then, I was back. Staring at the bright white light above the execution gurney.

Had it been real? I didn't have time to think about it. The director of the department came out to announce that the execution was over. Of course, he called it a success.

As the body of Michael Smith grew cold, I once more gave his soul to God. I saw the tear glimmer once more. I thought one more time about what I saw. Then, it was gone. It was time to go.

I ran out. Not literally of course. I was just ready to go. I hugged the department official to thank him for not leaving me alone. Even though our beliefs were different, I knew that he cared. The doors kept slamming. As far as I was concerned, let them slam. In fact, I felt like they couldn't slam fast enough. When the last doors finally slammed, the light was

overwhelming. I did my best to recount everything that happened. I still don’t know if anybody heard me.

I drove home alone. In fact, I was more than alone.

July 9, 2024

The Execution of David Hosier:

The Final Full Account

*Earlier today, I released all of my writings on the June 11, 2024 execution of my friend David Hosier in Missouri. Below is the chapter that I wrote about Hosier's execution. The entire book "THE DAVID

HOSIER STORY: Writings from a Campaign” is available for purchase here.

The Execution of David Hosier: The Final Full Account

David Hosier gave me a tremendous gift. Over the final few months of David’s life, he let me in. While this might not sound extraordinary to many, for David there’d only been a few times that he’d let anyone into his life. Make no mistake, I loved David Hosier very much. Every ounce of access that he gave me into his life, I tried my best to return. Innocent or guilty, David was loved. It’s an important place to begin. There is so much noise amidst an execution. There are so many messages that so many people try to get out.

Sometimes we forget the most important message, love. Let it be known far and wide, David and I both shared a deep belief that love covers a multitude of sins.

For hours, I'd sat outside waiting on the moment to come. There was a large gap of time between my final visit with David and the actual execution. To say that there isn't much to do in Bonne Terre would be an understatement. Luckily, I was able to find a small Mexican restaurant to pass a few of those hours, but I largely just sat in my car and thought about what was to come. It was awful. I just sat and stewed in my sorrow. I was just so sad for David and so many others that were about to perpetuate a completely unnecessary evil against him. I wondered about the

families of Angela and Rodney Gilpin. What would it be like to yearn so hard for revenge, only to find that it wasn't as sweet as you thought it was going to be? I knew they were about to face one of the biggest letdowns of their lives. Killing David wouldn't do anything to help them. Quite the contrary, it was only going to cause them more pain. I couldn't keep on thinking about it all. I had to get my mind right. Every thought just seemed to bounce in every direction. How do you quiet a mind when you know that murder is coming?

When I pulled up, the place looked like Fort Knox. I was surprised by how quickly the prison became the most important place in Missouri in a matter of hours. The car was searched very thoroughly. Who would be

stupid enough to try to bring something in at this point? Eventually, a police van pulled up to escort me to a parking spot right up front. I had a reserved spot for the execution of David Hosier. The heat was overwhelming. I fumbled around in the car to make sure that I had everything that I needed. Of course, the guys in the van were behind me watching my every move. It's difficult to make sure that you have everything when you know that there are people behind you who would love nothing more than for you to make a mistake. I didn't. I had my identification. I had my copy of the New Testament with other verses and prayers written in. I checked my pockets and robe one more time. I didn't want to take anything in by accident. It's all such a mess. Then… "Dr. Hood?"

One of the members of their elite squad was ready for me to follow him. I did. What other choice did I have? When I reached the entrance, I saw a familiar face. During the execution orientation (yes, it's a thing) a few days earlier, I'd met the Assistant Warden. I found him to be incredibly kind and engaging. It was clear that he didn't want to be a part of this process at all. I found his admitted moral uncertainty to be comforting in a space of such feigned moral superiority. While we waited to proceed toward the execution chamber, we proceeded to a few chairs. He was shocked that I sat in the chair right next to him. Little did he know, I sometimes struggle to hear in such spaces. I just wanted to make sure that I could hear him. Obviously, I wasn't trying to get fresh. I was curious to engage

him. We started by talking about the nature of punishment versus rehabilitation. When I brought up the success of various prison systems in Europe that limit sentences and emphasize rehabilitation, he was quick to reply, “I really admire much of what they do over there.” I was shocked and immediately asked, “What keeps y’all from implementing such practices here?” He responded swiftly, “Money and will. Nobody in their right mind looks at this prison and thinks it’s the best we can do.” Though astounded, I wanted to ask one more question, “Do you feel guilty being part of all of this?” He responded clearly, “It’s my job. I wish none of it had to happened.” I found him to be very sincere. I appreciated his candor and wanted to ask a few more questions. But our time was up. On his

radio, I heard a voice declare, “We’re ready.” I knew what that meant. The door in front of us opened. Though I desperately did not want to, I put one foot in front of the other. I owed it to David.

Something happened. Everything got dark and all noises were gone. I was laser-focused on what I had to do next. Then, I felt a hand on my arm. “Hey brother, she needs to see your ID.” I couldn’t figure out why they needed to see my ID so many times. I pushed it up against the glass. Leaning forward, the woman behind the dark glass gave me the thumbs up and put her hands together in prayer. It was as if I could only see her hands. Then, the Assistant Warden led me on. The huge door opened loudly and shut just as loudly behind us as we walked through. The Assistant Warden

kept talking to me, but I wasn't paying attention anymore. David was the only thing on my mind. We were stuck at the next door. Obviously, somebody forgot that we were coming through. It was very strange. One would think that as much as they practice these executions that there would be no delay. The Assistant Warden radioed ahead. I could sense his frustration boiling up. Then, after a few more minutes the door opened. I accidentally stepped on my robe and stumbled a bit. Not so much that I was going to fall, but more so that it reminded me that I needed to remember to walk. Once I entered the waiting area, I noticed something that I'd seen at many other executions. Employees of the Department of Corrections were just hanging out. I've never

understood how people can just chat amicably when someone is about to be murdered in the next room over any second. I didn't have the will for any condemnations. I had to be present for David. We made it to the room next to the chamber, the control center of the entire operation. The Assistant Warden knocked, and the door quickly opened. Multiple officers guided me through a viewing room right next to the chamber to the place where I would go in to see David. The door shut behind me and I realized that the Assistant Warden was gone. When we passed through the next door, I noticed that the holding cell and all the equipment for the execution were right in front of me. I was turned sharply to a door to my left. There were so many doors that I didn't know what was going to be

next. I started to breathe rapidly and grow more anxious by the second. “What was taking so long?” “Can’t this damn door just open?” “What’s in there?” Within a millisecond of such thoughts, the door slid open and I realized that I’d arrived at the epicenter of the house of horrors.

Imagine a hospital room with mirrors for walls. Every direction you look, you see yourself. I stepped in. I looked to my right. David was directly in the middle of it all. There was a white sheet covering his entire body. There were lines running out from under the sheets that went through a hole in the wall. “Hey brother. I’m here. Just want you to know that I love you very much.” I don’t know if it was the right thing to say. I just spoke from my heart. That’s the best you

can do in a moment such as this. David motioned with his head for me to sit down in the chair next to him. He was clearly sedated. Immediately, I asked him about the sedation and other accommodations. He assured me that it was all taken care of. The green plastic chair was the only object of color in the entire room. It was the same as the chairs that visitors sit in in the visitation area. It wasn't lost on me that somebody would soon unknowingly sit in the same chair that was present for the murder of a man. David had been unwell for weeks. He looked like death on the gurney. His skin was so grey and looked like it was growing greyer by the moment. "I'm glad you're here my friend," David replied. I put my hand on his shoulder and left it there the entire time. Like we'd discussed previously, I

started to read from the scriptures. Everything looked so medical. If one was not paying attention, it would be easy to mistake the room for something different than murder. I guess that's the point. "God is my shepherd." Though we were the only two who were physically in the room, I wanted him to know that we were being guided by something so much greater than the two of us.

David wanted to make sure that I thanked everybody who'd listened to him. Even in those final moments, it was clear that the biggest spot of liberation for David had been getting to tell his story. Such an achievement was my primary goal when we first connected. I was so grateful that he was approaching the end knowing that he'd done it. "I love you, Jeff." The words pierced my

heart. I was surprised that he said them. David was not the biggest sharer of feelings. Yet here we were. “Ye, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” I told David that we were walking right through that valley and that he’d be meeting all that he ever loved in minutes. “He will restore your soul.” I wanted him to know that the restoration would soon be made completely. I mentioned his dad. I mentioned his grandfather. I mentioned all those that had come before. I wanted him to know they were going to be part of the restoration. He then asked me a surprising question, “Angela and Rodney too?” I replied, “absolutely.” The mention of the victims wasn’t an admission of guilt as much as it was a genuine hope that all things would be restored. I assured him that

faith was the assurance of things hoped for. Everything was about to be restored.

One of the things that is most shocking about Missouri's execution chamber is that there are no instructions. There is nobody there to tell you that the execution has started. There is nobody there to tell you that the execution has ended. In every other state, there are announcements throughout the execution. Not in Missouri. It was just David and I. The only sound was the sound of my voice and the strained breaths of David.

We continued to pray together. I encouraged David to repeat the following exhortation of the Apostle Paul with me, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." I kept telling him

repeatedly how proud I was of him. In the midst of all the bullshit, he had stood his ground. The lawyers would not silence him. The press would not silence him. David was going to tell his story. David was going to live his story. Before I moved on to the next reading, David stopped me and said, “Don’t let what has happened to me happen to anybody else. Give em’ hell, Jeff. Give em’ hell.” I told him that I would keep fighting. I told him that what was happening to him was wrong. I told him we would all keep fighting. I told him to listen to the words of Jesus in John 8. As I was flipping through the scriptures, I could hear the rustling of the curtains. I figured we were getting close. There was a camera above my head. I knew they were listening. “…this woman was caught in the act of

adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?" David let a slight smile come to his face. He knew the story well. I told him that I was with him. I told him that I was down in the dirt with him. "All right but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" I said it loud enough so that all the executioners could hear. "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" None of the executioners were bold enough to even enter the room. I was the only one there with David. I told him that he was now free to embody the words of Jesus forever, "Go and sin no more." David exercised tremendous courage. He refused to let them see him afraid.

Looking at my watch, I realized that time was drawing short. I skipped over to John 14. “Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me.” David let out a few words, “I believe brother. I believe.” As I dug further into the verses descriptions of heaven, I could see a calm come over his face. David was ready to see God. David was ready to see the mansions that Jesus spoke of man centuries ago. “I’m ready.” When I heard him utter those two words, I responded, “Know that I love you. Know that I’m proud of you. Know that I love you.” I wanted those to be the last words that he heard. His life was so full of missed chances and failed loves. I repeated those words of affirmation over and over. David responded, “I know.”

There was a line running underneath my elbow. The tube was labeled, “2.” Clearly, this was the second line. When I saw the poison start to pass through the tube, I knew that the execution was in full swing. The fact that the death tube was so close was very tempting. I figured I could rip that thing out of the wall and buy David a little more time. Of course, such thoughts are but fleeting fantasies. The second such an event happened I would be removed from the chamber, never be able to help anyone again and they would still have killed David. Once you get to that point, it’s over. The only thing one can do is pray that God will forgive them for doing nothing to stop a murder that is taking place in front of you. I prayed that David would forgive me too.

I could tell that the poison was started to take effect. David's entire body began to change. One last time, David said, "Give em' hell." I started reading the story of Jesus' passion. I spoke of forgiveness. I spoke of love. I spoke of pain. I spoke of the promise of eternal life. I leaned in. I wanted to hear that he was walking the exact same road that Jesus did. I wanted him to hear the words of Jesus on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." I could feel him slipping away so quickly. I wanted to grab his soul and hold it to his body. I knew that I couldn't. I also knew that he would never want me to. David was going to be all right. It's the rest of us that are left to stew in this moral hell. Right when I read "It is finished" I knew that David was gone.

When I started to pull my hand up, it stuck to David. The sweat had gelled around his shoulder. I didn't want to let go. But I needed to commend his soul to God. I made the sign of the cross three times. I told him to go. I told him he was loved. But I told him that God loves him so much more than any of us ever could. I told him to go. I made the sign of the cross three more times. It was then, that I knew he was gone.

David went from grey to greyer throughout the execution. Now, it was as if his entire body had turned to ash. Eventually, the door opened. One of the officers asked me to come out. I stopped and made the sign of the cross three times over his body. David looked more at peace than I'd ever seen him look. I remembered his words. Then, I looked up to see myself

in the mirror. Behind me, I saw every guy that I'd accompanied to their executions. David was with them. They were all saying the same thing, "Give em' hell." When I exited the room, I thought I was going to get to leave. You can't blame anybody for wanting to get out of such deadly lunacy. But I was forced to sit in a seat in the execution control center until everybody else had left. That was some of the longest fifteen minutes of my life. My mind raced about what could be happening next. Was I getting arrested? Did I do something wrong? What in the hell is going on? The guy at the desk was not interested in taking any of my questions. Eventually, the phone rang. It was time to go. The big door opened. Then, another big door opened. Eventually, I met up with the Assistant Warden

again to be escorted out. He could tell that I was shaken. Who wouldn't be? He asked, "Are you ok?" It was a kind question. I just didn't know how to respond. I simply said, "No."

By the time we reached the parking lot, there'd been a bunch of small talk and I'd past through multiple security checks. I don't remember any of it. I just knew that I needed to tell the world what just happened. Before I got in the car, I gave the Assistant Warden a hug. I wanted him to know that they hadn't executed love…they'd only caused it to grow.

July 20, 2024

*MCALESTER NEWS

“Eye for an Eye, Tooth for a Tooth”

“Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” The abbreviation of the Book of Exodus 21:24 is a favorite for those who support the death penalty. So much so, that the verse regularly even gets recited by those trying to justify

their ownparticipation in executions. The logic of course is that if you kill someone then you deserve to be killed. On the inverse, the logic is that if you don't kill someone then you don't deserve to be killed. Pretty basic stuff, right? The State of Oklahoma seems to literally live and die by such logic. But what if I told you that there is someone scheduled for execution who quite possibly has taken no eyes or no teeth? In fact, even prosecutors remain admittedly unsureif whether the person they're trying to execute actually killed anyone or not.

Though tragic, the events that transpired are rather simple. Emmanuel Littlejohn and Glenn Bethany were desperate to continue funding out of control drug habits. Realizing that the Root-N-Scoot convenience

store had a check cashing component, the two guys decided that it was the perfect hit to score a bunch of cash. So, on June 19, 1992, they proceeded to rob the business on the Southside of Oklahoma City. Upon entering the store, they turned their guns on the clerk at the desk. From the back, store owner Kenneth Meers charged at them with a broom. Witnesses across the street described the taller shoplifter as having fired the fatal shot that killed Meers. The taller man was Glenn Bethany. Regardless of whether one believes such eyewitnesses or not, a few things are clear… There was only one shot fired. There was only one shooter.

For his part, Glenn Bethany was convicted of the murder of Kenneth Meersand sentenced to life in prison without

the possibility of parole. At trial, prosecutors argued that Bethany was the shooter. Later, prosecutors tried Emmanuel Littlejohn twice and argued that he was the shooter each time. Again, prosecutors said that there was only one shooter, yet they tried two people for being that one shooter. Littlejohn was also convicted of the murder of Kenneth Meers. Yet, prosecutors convinced a jury to sentence Littlejohn to death. How is it possible that there is one shooter and two people were convicted of being that one shooter and one gets life and the other gets death? Shouldn't the fundamental principle of "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth"apply? It would seem that you can't start taking eyes and teeth from people who have taken no eyes or teeth. There was only one shooter. In both

trials prosecutors argued that that man was the shooter. Yet, there was only one shooter. The death penalty should have never even been an option for either man in such circumstances. How in the world could anyone know that they are taking the right eyes or teeth in such a situation?

While Glenn Bethany still sits in prison, Emmanuel Littlejohn is scheduled to be executed September 26. Shouldn't basic fairness be the fundamental principle that guides our justice system? What is fair about executing someone who very possibly has never killed anyone? Multiple courts have agreed that the evidence is uncertain. But such courts have also said that Littlejohn's involvement is enough to warrant a death

sentence. I guess they've never heard of an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth."

Societies that self-righteously claim to be following God's law while doing the opposite are at the apex of hypocrisy. I don't believe that Emmanuel Littlejohn killed Kenneth Meers. But such belief shouldn't matter. We are told that the death penalty is for the "worst of the worst." Yet, Oklahoma is about to execute someone that prosecutors themselves argued wasn't the actual shooter(in Bethany's trial). Courts have repeatedly questioned the evidence. Littlejohn doesn't need your sympathy. He simply needs you to live by your oft-stated mantra, "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." Under such words, one has to be certain someone took some eyes or teeth. In this case, there is no way you

can be. Those most closely connected to this case still aren't. If the State of Oklahoma kills Emmanuel Littlejohn on September 26, the thing that the State should be honest about is that it really doesn't believe in an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." There are too many remaining questions to justify the taking of any "eyes or teeth" from Emmanuel Littlejohn. But if you kill him and he didn't actually kill Mr. Meers, I guess it will be time to start coming for your "eyes and teeth" next.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor to Emmanuel Littlejohn

July 23, 2024

Officer Sean Grayson Deserves Death, Grace Will Be More Painful.

Fucked up. Disgusting. Evil. There are only so many words available to describe the catastrophic intentional murderous actions of Officer Sean Grayson. Indeed, in

this situation words will always fall short. Grayson deserves a swift sentence of death. However, I suspect that grace will be much more painful.

On July 6, Sonya Massey heard noises around her home. Suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, it's anyone's guess if such noises were real or imagined. It shouldn't matter. Massey called the police because she was frightened and felt endangered. Isn't that what the police are for? We are supposed to call them when we need help, right? When two police officers arrived at Massey's home, they searched the premises. Clearly annoyed, the officers came to the front door and gruffly informed her that they found nothing. The officers then asked for Massey's driver's license. Unable to locate it

quickly, Massey went inside. When Officer Sean Grayson spotted a pot of boiling water on the stove, he instructed Massey to take the pot off the stove. Upon Massey picking it up, the officers moved away. Massey asked the officers, “Where are you going?” Officer Grayson replied that he was moving away from the hot steaming water. Massey declared, “Oh, I’ll rebuke you in the name of Jesus!” With his gun drawn, Officer Grayson moved toward Massey. When the situation escalated, Massey retreated behind the counter with her hands up. Officer Grayson screamed, “You better fucking not…” Kneeling with her hands up…posing absolutely no threat to the officer…Massey yelled, “I’m sorry.” Officer Grayson unloaded three shots at her head. The kill shot entered right below her eye socket.

After Massey was struck down with her hands raised, Officer Grayson's partner tried to render aid. Massey was declared dead a short time later. In the ensuing weeks, Officer Grayson was arrested and charged with first-degree murder.

In the face of such astounding evil, it's difficult to advocate against the death penalty. Officer Sean Grayson is a cold-blooded killer. He deserves the full weight of the law to crash down on his head. He deserves death. Since Illinois has abolished the death penalty a number of years ago, death is not what he'll likely get. Such a fact should bring tremendous relief for all those who advocate for Sonya Massey. Prayerfully, Grayson will receive the grace of spending the rest of his life in prison staring at the blown-out face

of Massey in his mind. Death is too merciful for such a man as this. He should be kept alive to stew in the horror that he has wrought. Day in and day out, he should have to face a world that knows what he did.

For the sake of the memory of Sonya Massey, I oppose the death penalty. She deserves more justice than death can provide. Grace is the much more painful sentence that Officer Grayson deserves.

More information on the Massey murder:
https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/22/sonya-massey-illinois-shooting-video

August 6, 2024

Trepidation in Oklahoma: On Clemency & Emmanuel Littlejohn

For over two years, I've served as Emmanuel Littlejohn's spiritual advisor. To say that I've come to love him would probably be an understatement. Far from the

bloody caricatures most make of those on death row, I've found in Emmanuel an older man with a big heart. From time to time, humanity can still surprise us. Then again, it's important to remember that such surprises can only find us when we open our hearts to their possibility. Many months ago, Emmanuel approached me about my thoughts on the clemency process. When someone you love confides in you, you've got to tell them the truth. Sometimes it hurts.

"Emmanuel, clemency is a lie in Oklahoma." We have seen it repeatedly. Even if someone gets a favorable vote from the Board, the chances that someone will actually get clemency from the Governor is microscopic at best. So, why would anyone advise someone that

they love to participate in a process that offers a glimmer of hope that is consistently pulverized?

“Emmanuel, the State will destroy you.” There are no rules in these hearings. The State can say whatever they want. In that room, there are no objections or corrections or restraints. The State will do everything they can do to monsterize you and make sure that you don’t get clemency under any circumstance. On multiple occasions, I have seen the State resort to lies to achieve the desired result…death. So, why would anyone advise someone they love to participate in a process that will only rough them up and take away from the precious life that they have left?

“Emmanuel, life is more than preservation.” The message of Jesus is clear. Those who spend all the time that they have trying to save their life will lose the life that they have left. Tremendous amounts of emotional and physical energy are expended trying to prepare for the clemency process. For what? There are things worse than death. Namely, subjecting oneself to an added punishment on top of the punishment of death that one has already received. The clemency process has become an added dagger at the end of the life… intended to exact as much extra blood and pain as possible. So, why would anyone advise someone they love to submit themselves to such torture?

Though he had reservations, Emmanuel made the decision to engage the clemency process. Not because

he thinks it's fair, but rather because he wants to make sure that the world hears him loudly proclaim that he didn't kill Kenneth Meers. I can accept that. There is liberation in the opportunity to tell the world your truth.

So, here we are. The clemency hearing is just hours away. I don't suspect that the process will be fair or ultimately generative. Then again, maybe hearts will shift? It's important for a person of faith to believe that such shifting is possible. I'm trying. Indeed…against my better judgment…I've tried to help Emmanuel keep hope too. Regardless of what is to come, I trust that Emmanuel will share his truth…the truth that he did not kill Kenneth Meers. In our conversations, we've prayed for all parties involved…that they might know the truth…and that the truth might set them free.

August 21, 2024

*MCALESTER NEWS-CAPITAL

Clemency for Littlejohn! : A Letter to Governor Kevin Stitt

McAlester News-Capital /

https://www.mcalesternews.com/opinion/clemency-for-emmanuel-littlejohn-an-open-letter-to-governor-kevin-stitt/article_74025c66-5fd0-11ef-b947-17203e216f52.html

*Text of the above OpEd is below.

August 18, 2024

Clemency for Emmanuel Littlejohn: An Open Letter to Governor Kevin Stitt

Dear Governor Kevin Stitt,

There are hours that try our souls. We don't necessarily know what to do. We are left to exist in a place where only the most fervent of prayers will do. Presently, I exist in such a space. Throughout my days, I'm haunted by the possibility that you might not choose to grant clemency to a soul under my care, Emmanuel Littlejohn. When I considered how to make this appeal to you, I thought about trying to do what a lawyer or a mitigator

or judge or any number of other professionals might and give you all the favorable facts, figures and arguments. But such efforts have little meaning when one is searching for the voice of God. One could give me a whole world of evidence…but the verifiable undeniable voice of God reigns supreme. I suspect the same is true with you.

Just a few years ago, I was surprised at the boldness of your words.

“Father, we just claim Oklahoma for you. Every square inch, we claim it for you in the name of Jesus…”

link*

Honestly, I thought you might have just gotten a little carried away. Maybe exaggerated? But in speech after speech, you’ve made it crystal clear that you’re

determined to fiercely dedicate the State of Oklahoma and your administration to Jesus. With regard to your upcoming clemency decision for Littlejohn, I hope your still dedicated. If so, there is absolutely no way that Littlejohn will be executed. The voice of God has already spoken on this matter.

You remember the story. In the scriptures, Jesus only attended one execution other than his own.

Early one morning, people started to gather around Jesus.

Officials brought someone who'd committed a capital offense to Jesus. The officials loudly declared, "We're commanded to stone those who commit such offenses! What do you say?"

They asked these questions to test and see if Jesus was who he claimed to be. But Jesus refused to answer. Instead, Jesus simply bent down and started writing in the dirt. The officials refused to stop. Then Jesus declared, “Let any of you who is without sin throw the first stone.” Again, he stooped down and wrote in the ground.

The officials left in shame. Then, Jesus looked to the condemned and said, “Go and sin no more.”

Jesus was the arbiter of clemency. Indeed…in the Book of John (of course paraphrased from 8:1-11), Jesus made it crystal clear who he’s standing with (or for that matter who he is stooping down in the dirt with). The story is about a woman caught in adultery (a capital

offense in his day), but it could just as easily be written about Emmanuel Littlejohn.

Think about it.

I don't doubt that you yearn as I do to hear the verifiable undeniable voice of God. While I believe that we can hear in all sorts of ways, I think that scripture does still speak to our present hour. Jesus' ministrations of clemency in an hour of execution speak. I've prayed many hours over this very passage. It's almost as if God has taken me there from time to time. The ideations have been so visceral that it's as if the dirt is still on my feet when I open my eyes. When the story is juxtaposed with the present desperation facing Littlejohn, a simple truth emerges.

Jesus makes it clear that one can either do the slaying or the praying.

But you can't do both.

When the clemency decision arose, Jesus got in the dirt with the condemned.

Too often, we think that decisions to save another are based on the preparation of the person to be saved or whether someone deserves to be saved or whether someone is ready to be saved or on all sorts of other variables. In Romans 5:8, the Apostle Paul turns such thinking on its' head, "Jesus died for all of us…Jesus saved all of us…while we were yet sinners." I do believe that on a temporal and celestial level Littlejohn is included in that number. Governor, I am asking you to see Emmanuel Littlejohn as Jesus would…a child of

God worthy of dying for. Of course, I'm not asking you to die for anybody. I'm simply asking that you live for Jesus. I'm simply asking that you share the mercy that you have known.

Governor, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. Littlejohn is a sinner just like you. In the economy of God, the two of you are not different… sinners desperately in need of grace.

In this desperate hour of clemency, Governor you have a chance to show the world what our faith is all about.

Clemency.

With the utmost sincerity.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Emmanuel Littlejohn

September 18, 2024

*The State

I am called to be a spiritual advisor for inmates but haunted by their executions | Opinion

Executions Traumatize Our Spiritual Leaders

In the coming weeks, South Carolina is scheduled to resume executions. Since the State's last execution in 2011, the functioning of an execution chamber has radically changed by several decisions from the United States Supreme Court. Perhaps most significantly, the Ramirez v. Collier (March 2022) decision mandated that executing states must allow an inmate's spiritual advisor (pastor, minister, priest, imam, rabbi, etc.) into the chamber during an execution. Since the decision, spiritual advisors throughout the nation have accompanied the condemned in their final moments. During this time, I've served as a spiritual advisor to seven men in four different states: Scott Eizember (Oklahoma), Arthur Brown (Texas), Anthony Sanchez (Oklahoma), Casey McWhorter (Alabama), Kenneth

Smith (Alabama), Michael Smith (Oklahoma) and David Hosier (Missouri). There is no one else who has seen more executions in more states during this time. In the coming months, I'm scheduled to accompany another five men to their executions. It's a gruesome task filled with trauma and waves of resultant grief.

Spiritual advisors in South Carolina are not ready. Such an assertion has nothing to do with competency or education or anything else. It has to do with the fact that nothing can prepare anyone to see someone murdered right in front of their eyes.

While the gaggling and gurgling sounds of a lethal injection are disturbing enough, more visceral or

physiologically violent forms of execution seem to offer an added layer of visual trauma and extended grief. South Carolina is quite possibly about to expose spiritual advisors to seeing someone shot and electrocuted. While I've never seen either type of execution, I was in the chamber for the world's first nitrogen suffocation execution in Alabama last January, that of Kenny Smith, and there are not enough words to describe the horrors that still haunt me.

This is some of what I saw:

When nitrogen gas started to flow, Kenny's face grew more and more intense with every second. Colors started to change. Veins started to flex. Every muscle in

his body started to tense. Kenny looked like he was going to explode. Veins spider-webbed in every direction… Repeatedly, Kenny's face jerked and heaved toward the front of the mask…. Saliva, mucus and other substances shot out of his mouth…. back and forth until all life in him stopped.

I was told that it would last seconds, it lasted more than twenty minutes. I went through all of this to simply live out my calling as a priest. Spiritual advisors in South Carolina are just as dedicated and courageous. But they shouldn't have to be.

South Carolinians need to consider what they are about to put their finest religious counselors, teachers and

leaders through. Imagine the Priest forced to watch the chest of a dedicated follower of Jesus explode at the crack of a bullet. Imagine the Imam forced to smell the burnt flesh of the faithful Muslim after electricity is shot through their body. Imagine the Rabbi forced to listen to an observant Jew drown after being injected with poison. One could easily imagine all sorts of iterations of faiths and nightmares. Such images and sounds and smells never leave you.

Most people are unable to manifest a tremendous amount of empathy for the condemned. I guess that's why a great many states still have the death penalty. But I do hope that the people of South Carolina will manifest some empathy for those of us who are simply

living out our calling to minister to all people…those who give their lives to be on the front lines of seeking to make life gentler for us all. It seems to me that the auxiliary pain that these executions cause is enough of a reason to not execute anyone at all.

South Carolinians are better than beating up their spiritual leaders to pacify their need for vengeance.

October 9, 2024

Beyond the Headlines: The Search for the Real Steven Nelson

Softly, I met Steven Nelson. There were no lights.

There were no reporters. There were no cameras.

There was only us. Immediately, it was clear that he

was much quieter than the headlines I'd read about him. Of course, I'd encountered misleading headlines before. It's just that the discrepancy was so stark in this instance. Headlines don't often lead to deeper truths. Most of the time, when you trust them, they lead you far from both the human and divine. If one wants to know the truth, they must always go deeper.

Immediately, it was clear that Steven had been hardened by a lifetime of broken promises and dreams. That's where I found him, but that's not where we stayed.

Before we ever talked about the headlines, Steven told me about a car accident.

"The night was dark. I was sitting in the backseat. Of course, I didn't have a seatbelt on. I was just a kid. I

didn’t know the importance of such things yet. I saw the headlights out of the corner of my eye. Before I knew it, the car slammed into the backseat. I doubt they ever slowed down. The grill of the car came within inches of my face. I literally could’ve kissed it. There was no reason I should’ve walked away from that accident. When that happened, I knew there was a God.”

Then, came knowledge of the headlines.

In a highly publicized trial, Steven was convicted of the brutal robbery-murder of Rev. Clint Dobson and the assault of church secretary Judy Elliott at NorthPointe Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas. In addition, Steven committed a variety of infractions while imprisoned at

the Tarrant County Jail, and was also a suspect in the murder of a fellow inmate.

The difference between the two Stevens bounced around in my head like marbles in a glass jar. The stories didn't make sense. How could a child that God saved turn into a murderous monster? Truth is always more complicated than our dichotomies.

I'm thankful Steven has chosen me to be his spiritual advisor. I've done this work for a long time. Upon first meeting, I don't go directly to the crime. Who would want to begin a relationship talking about the worst thing that they'd ever done in their lives? Truth be known, I care more about the person than I do the crime. That's my job. But the crime does always come up.

Of course, the crime that Steven described is very different than the one the headlines describe. Instead of being the lone perpetrator, Steven describes himself as the lookout. He recalled only seeing the bodies of Rev. Clint Dobson and Judy Elliott one time, when he went in to steal a laptop out of the church. Indeed, Steven said that he didn't even know that Dobson had died until he saw it on the news. Such a story is a far cry from the ruthless barbarism that prosecutors pegged him with. With regard to the numerous incidences in the Tarrant County Jail, Steven described himself as someone desperately trying to resist the oppression and injustice that surrounded him. Lastly, Steven said that the guy who died in the Jail committed suicide and that he had absolutely nothing to do with it.

So, what's the truth? Are we to believe that Steven is someone that God saved in a car accident so that he might live long enough to later live to kill Rev. Dobson? That doesn't sound right to me. Maybe a better way of saying it is…that's not the type of God that I believe in. The type of God that I believe in is known for grace and mercy…not murder. While I doubt any of us will ever know the complexity of what happened, I do know that truth is always found beyond sensational headlines and that killing Steven won't make any of us any better… only love can do that.

Truth be known, I've found Steven to be a beautiful person. I'm sure that people are always going to be different depending on when you meet them. But people are always capable of love. I've found that

capability in Steven. In fact, I've found him to be amongst the more capable people that I've ever met. Despite his circumstances, he chooses to believe that deeply intimate human interactions are worth the risk. Why destroy such capability?

Steven is scheduled to be executed on February 5. With such a date looming, God is calling us to listen. Rev. Clint Dobson still speaks. Can you hear him? The words of Jesus reverberate from his life. Particularly, these paraphrased words of Jesus in the Gospel of John (8:7), "Let the one who is without sin execute Steven Nelson."

October 21, 2024

The Execution of Casey McWhorter/The Only Eyewitness Account

*Casey McWhorter was executed on November 16, 2023. As his spiritual advisor, I was the only eyewitness to the entirety of the execution. I recently sat down to gather my recollections and thoughts about that night.

On the last day, I arrived at Holman Prison a little later than usual. The weather seemed overcast. Then again, everything seemed overcast. I wanted Casey McWhorter to spend some of that precious time alone with his family. Plus, I knew that I was in for a long day. There were multiple things that I needed to take care of. Numerous last-minute appeals to try to save Casey's life were at the top of my list. Regardless of how hard I tried, I wasn't hopeful. But all of that was over now. I'd just taken off my robe and boots when one of the guards begin to question the sacramental elements I was bringing in. There was a minimal amount of oil, wine and a wafer in clear plastic containers. I told them that they were welcome to taste the oil. They didn't think such a comment was as funny

as I did. Once everybody had calmed down and successfully patted every inch of my body, I put my robe and boots back on. I felt violated and they seemed to enjoy it. The clear glass door swung open.

The visitation area is called a yard. However, it's not outside. The room is made of windows on all sides. However, the windows are made for looking in not out. Bizarre glass that cut in every direction. Walls were behind every window. Casey and his family were seated at a table in the middle of the room. Throughout the day, I watched as Casey leaned on his mother. People came and went, but Casey kept his head on his mother. I couldn't help but think about the head of Jesus on the breast of Mary. The passion under the glow of fluorescent light. The only time he took a break

was to sip from a grape soda, his favorite. While Casey laid on his mother, I was left to talk to Casey's mother's preacher boyfriend. He was bald, tall and old with glasses and a large nose to hold them up. While I can't remember his name, I do remember his theology. It was a mix of fundamentalism, freedom and fanaticism. The fundamentalism based on a fidelity to the Bible that seemed to defy reason. The freedom based on belief in charismatic gifts. The fanaticism based on a belief that he and he alone was correct in his understandings. For hours, I listened to this dude talk. Even when everything seemed to get quiet and serious, he still talked. Thankfully, Casey saved me multiple times. Even with death approaching, he had an intuitive way of taking care of those he loved. The day got shorter and

shorter. The lights seemed to turn more purple and start to dim.

By now, we'd been in that room for hours. I was cooking inside my robe. Eventually, Casey wanted to talk about what his final words would be. We leaned into each other and spoke softly. In the stillness, I encouraged him to use those last moments to speak to those he loved and to those who'd wronged him. Of course, he wanted to speak of his love for his family. They'd stuck with him through some very difficult hours. I can't imagine what such a road looked like. Next, he wanted to make sure that he spoke to his archnemesis, Warden Terry Raybon. For a very long time, Raybon had made Casey's life hell and he wasn't going to miss this opportunity to let the world know (in

his words), “how big of a piece of shit he really is.” When the Warden’s name came up, Casey flashed a mischievous grin. His disdain wasn’t out of place. Throughout his career, it was well known that Raybon had repeatedly got in trouble for abusing people. There’d been numerous stories in the press, not the least of which concerned multiple incidents where he abused women. We got into specifics. Casey wanted everyone to understand the absurdity of one of the most immoral people he’d ever known being the self-righteous functionary presiding over his execution. Before we could sketch out all of the words, Casey’s last meal arrived.

Growing up, my grandfather loved eating those Turtles candies, the ones with caramel and pecan covered in

chocolate. When Casey told me that they were his favorite kind of candy, I almost fell over. I hadn't seen them in years. Casey assured me that they were still out there and that he had been craving some for decades. When the time came to order his last meal, I had no doubt what he wanted.

A red platter of Turtles candies was brought in. One by one, Casey devoured them. He couldn't get the wrappers off fast enough. Quite frankly, I started to get sick watching. I think he literally ate 25 of them. Casey was experiencing pure joy with every bite. You could see it on his face. Determined not to interrupt the beauty of it all, I simply set back and smiled. The wrappers piled high. In the back of my mind, I knew time was drawing short.

When we got to the point where there was less than an hour left, Casey put his head back on his mother. I could see small blue tears streaming down both of there cheeks. For what seemed like an eternity and mere seconds at the same time, Casey laid there. Not wanting to distract from the beauty of it all, I started to slowly walk around the room. In fact, I walked so hard that my feet started to get tired. I could feel every bone. Every step was a prayer. I keep reciting the 23rd Psalm. Casey's mom's boyfriend heard me and came over to walk around with me. While I didn't mind the company, I did get a little worn out by the conversation. All I wanted to think about was Casey. It was clear that he wasn't sure if I was the right type of Christian or not. I tried to pay it no mind. Jesus comes

in all shapes and sizes. Of course, I was trying to pay the most attention to the valley of the shadow of death.

The guards came in to warn us that there was about ten minutes left. I encouraged the family to go ahead and wrap it up if possible. The last thing you want is for anybody's final memory to be their loved one being dragged away screaming. When the moment came for the family to walk away, I'll never forget Casey's outstretched hand to his mother as she left. Eternity seemed to separate them. For one brief moment, she turned around with a final blue tear in her eye. Tightly, I put my arm around Casey. He clinched my robe. Repeatedly, I reminded him of his strength. Quickly, I offered brief spurts of prayers. Then, the guards came

to take him away. The execution was about to commence.

Besides the constant gaze of the cameras overhead, I was alone. In fact, there have been few other times that I'd felt more alone. Unsure of how to function amidst the loneliness of such horror, I started walking again. Heavy steps over and over in a pattern of devastation. I kept stepping along the same path. One foot in front of the other, that's all I knew to do. Though it took longer than I expected, I still wasn't ready. The door opened. The guards called me forward. We began to walk to a place that I didn't want to go.

Parts of Holman Prison are literally uninhabitable. When you go through the prison, you walk back and forth between areas that are condemned and areas that are not. The guard pushed me to keep up a pretty good pace. I couldn't outrun the smells. I think she didn't want me to look around too much. As we approached a dark hallway, I heard her gasp. Looking up, I realized there were cats everywhere. I was struck by the colors going in every direction. While I'd heard that Holman had a cat problem, I never imagined that walking through the halls would be like parting a sea of cats. To call it distracting would be an understatement. Can you imagine having to dodge cats on the way to seeing someone you love executed? The

solemnity of the cats only seemed to foreshadow the evil approaching.

I thought I was going directly to the execution. When the door to the waiting area (or the holding cell next to the chamber) opened, I was immediately struck by how loud the television in the room was. It wasn't even all that big. ESPN was blasting so loud that I didn't even immediately notice Casey in the holding cell. Once I did, I couldn't get to him fast enough. When the cell door opened, I sat as close to Casey as I could. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to hear him. The bed was softer than I thought it would be. I realized that Casey was on the phone. He was practically shouting. Then, I realized that he was talking to his mother.
Communication was practically impossible in any

direction. Eventually, we were able to pray together. I was only able to stay for a few more moments. ESPN had filibustered the entire visit. I tried to read scripture, but it was of no use. Desperate, I repeatedly asked the guards to turn the television down. They laughed at my pleas. With snacks laid out in every direction, they just ate and enjoyed the exhaustive coverage of the day's sports. The lack of humanity was stunning. The guards didn't want to be disturbed. I grew angrier and angrier. Casey leaned in and said, "I'm about to get a blank slate. God's going to give me a blank slate. I got this. Forget about them." Then, they told me that our final visit was over. I was escorted out the door, past the horrific conditions, through the cats and back to the visiting room. Everything was so heavy.

Standing there alone, I continued to pray. Nothing seemed to make it higher than the ceiling. I felt dumb for continuing to try. Sweat poured from my head. Defeated, I sat down in the corner. The day had been so long. I hadn't slept in days. The corner was cool and quiet. I closed my eyes. I drifted back and forth. For a short time, I dozed off. In the dreams that arrived, I could see the execution chamber. The only difference was that it was me on the gurney. Needles and tubes flowed down my arms. Warden Terry Raybon loudly pronounced my sentence. Right before I was to be executed, I was shaken awake. There was nobody there to wake me. I was still alone. I could feel multiple hands. I still don't know where they came from. They were foreign yet still familiar. As I was trying to get my

head together, the guards came in to take me back to Casey again. I did it all over again, horror, cats and general lunacy bundled all together.

The guard did the secret knock on the door. I guess I hadn't picked up on it the first time. There were four quick taps and two slow taps. Hollow knocks from the hands of hollow people. I could hear the television blasting ESPN still. When the door opened, I was struck by the empty holding cell. Casey was gone. Multiple guards were still sitting there munching on snacks and watching television. Every crunch made me more and more angry. Do these people have no soul? We were mere seconds from a murder. These soulless reprobates just sat there and stuffed their faces. The door to the chamber was right in front of me. It looked

like the door to a vault. The knock was the same. The door swung open. Death spewed out.

When I entered the room, I went straight to Casey. Sweat continued to pour from my forehead. I wasn't hot. I was in agony. Reaching out, I put my hand on his shoulder. With that reassuring look I'd seen him give many times before, Casey said, "I love you, Jeff." I didn't hesitate, "I love you too, brother." Though we'd prepared for this moment for months, I was finding hard to breathe. I began to read from John 8. This was the passage Casey wanted read first. Indeed, he wanted those in the room (which included Captain McKenzie, Lieutenant Quarles and Regional Administrator of Prisons Stewart-Riley) to know how evil what they were doing was. When I hit the infamous

words, “Let you who are without sin caste the first stone,” Casey let everybody in the room know, “He’s talking to you.” I leaned further in. I wanted him to know that I was completely there. Then, we moved on to Psalm 23. “Thou anointeth my head with oil.” I pulled out the small vile. Making the sign of the cross multiple times. I poured oil on his forehead. In the background, I could still hear ESPN blasting. Then, the Captain pulled me back. I didn’t want to go. It’s like my legs wouldn’t move in the right direction. I’d left my soul on the gurney.

For a brief second, my ministry flashed before my eyes. In the suspended seconds, I considered what it would mean for me to dive on to Casey and start ripping tubes out. Then, I remembered all of my other guys. I started

to hear familiar voices. Scott Eizember said, “Don’t be stupid.” Arthur Brown said, “You got to keep resisting. This isn’t the last one.” Anthony Sanchez said, “You still have love to give.” Then, Casey turned his head as far as he could and said, “It’s ok. I’m ready, Jeff.” Knowing that there was only so much that I could do, I turned around and walked to the place that I was told to stand. Though I felt defeated, I knew that Casey wasn’t done with his resistance.

I assumed that the execution was about to begin. I think everyone in the room assumed the same thing. Captain McKenzie gave the signal. Everyone leaned forward in expectation. The lights even seemed to flicker. Then, Warden Raybon swung the door open from the control center and told everyone to stop. The

look on his face was one of horror. When I looked to the viewing room behind me, I realized what they had done. They'd almost started the execution without the witnesses. I couldn't believe the stupidity. I could smell the ignorance. It smelled like bullshit.

For dozens of minutes, Warden Raybon kept poking his head from the command center behind the gurney to tell the staff that it'd be a few more minutes. He looked like a turtle. The minutes got longer and longer. I felt my body get heavier and heavier from the enormity of it all. The wall behind me was the only thing holding me up. I was just so tired. The only noise that I could hear was ESPN. "University of Michigan football coach Jim Harbaugh has accepted a three-game ban from the Big 10." It was a big story. In fact, the guys on the

execution squad were so into it that I could hear every word that was said. Through it all, Casey just laid on the gurney with his eyes closed. Nobody gave a shit.

I tried to approach Casey multiple times. They kept waving me off. If the execution was delayed, I couldn't figure out why I couldn't be there to pray by Casey's side. I took solace in the fact that I'd just told Casey, "God will never leave you nor forsake you." Even if I couldn't get there, God was there.

Have you ever seen a soul float? Looking at Casey, it was clear that he was suspended somewhere between here and there. The officials just stood there with their hands behind their backs. On this night, the monsters just wore simple smirks. I heard the witnesses moving

to their seats behind me. When I turned around, I saw dignitaries filling the middle box. Alabama rewards those who pursue these executions with the prize of getting to watch the show. The other windows are difficult to see through, but I could tell who was who or at the very least which group of people were which. When the execution finally began, we'd waited close to 45 minutes beyond when the officials in the room thought that everything was going to begin. Amid the lunacy, Casey just laid on the gurney fighting for his peace.

Once everyone was in their seat, Warden Raybon swung open the door to the command center and shuffled across the floor. Evil has a strange look. I could see a trail of sulfur on the floor behind him. For somebody

with such a reputation for horror, he was so weak and moved so slow. When he arrived at the microphone, he popped it on the top to make sure that it was still working. What an amateur. One would think they'd be sure that the microphone was working before it got to this point. We also had to listen to Warden Raybon clear his throat for what seemed like an hour. From the deep guttering guzzling noises, I suspected that he might have a gigantic octopus down there. After the death warrant was read, Warden Raybon shuffled the microphone over to Casey.

Even though he was lying down, Casey stood tall. "I would like to say to my mother and family that I love them, To the victim's family, I'm sorry and I hope they find peace. It is not lost on me that a habitual abuser of

women is carrying out this execution." The microphone was quickly silenced. Everybody was reminded of the truth that Alabama has a habitual abuser of women as their executioner (someone who was previously fired from the State Patrol and eventually held to account in court for such actions). Warden Raybon shuffled to the control center in shame. Casey closed his eyes in triumph.

When he realized that the poison was starting to flow, Casey opened his eyes one last time and looked to the heavens and declared, "I'm coming home Lord. I'm coming home." I never averted my eyes. I was fixated on the courage he was showing. It was incredible. After a few more minutes had passed, I approached him for a final prayer. Casey was barely awake. I could see

him shifting his fingers a bit. I prayed just loud enough for him to hear me. “Don’t delay my friend. Go. You’re free now.” Not long after that, Casey gasped and breathed his last. It felt like every ounce of oxygen was sucked out of the room. I made the sign of the cross. Actually, I made the sign multiple times. I think I just wanted to remind the world that they were seeing a child of God being murdered. Maybe somebody might take a second to realize that what just happened might not flow with the Jesus that they’d claimed.

Captain McKenize loudly yelled Casey’s name and poked his face. He was being treated like a dog. They obviously thought that this was the best way to figure out if he was conscious or not. I’d never seen such ignorance in person. Even though he didn’t respond, I

still wondered if he might still be breathing. When Casey didn't respond, they declared the execution over. The time was 6:47pm. As I made one final sign of the cross, I was swiftly ushered out of the room. Later, I found out that the State of Alabama said that the time of death was 6:56pm. I couldn't help but wonder if Casey might have still been alive when I left the room. If he wasn't declared dead until later, is it possible they could have executed him after the execution? Though I'll never know, I sure as hell didn't trust any of the morally bankrupt idiots in there with him.

As I walked back through the holding area, ESPN was still blasting. Multiple members of the execution squad had never even stood up. The guards were interested in getting me out of there as quickly as possible. I of

course wanted to remember as much as I could. The guard in front of me kept shooing cats out of the way. On the way out, we passed the visitation room. I'd spent so many hours in. I missed sitting with Casey there. Then, we went to the reception area to get my driver's license and keys. Stacked behind everything was multiple trays of food that were for the party that the guards and prison employees were having after the execution. When I asked about it, the guard said that it was a time for them to celebrate, "a successful execution."

Then, I was ushered into the night. It was cold. The last gate shut with a slam. The concrete felt so hard. The last thing the guard said was, "have a good rest of your night." I walked across the parking lot, opened

the car door, sat down and cried. There was nothing good.

October 23, 2024

The Only Eyewitness to The Execution of Emmanuel Littlejohn

*After a fierce campaign that almost saved his life, Emmanuel Littlejohn was executed on September 26, 2024. As his spiritual advisor, I was the only eyewitness

to the entirety of the execution. I recently sat down to gather my recollections and thoughts about that morning.

The Only Eyewitness to The Execution of Emmanuel Littlejohn

Mornings come the quickest when hope is fading fastest. Throughout the night, I'd thought about the final appeal. The only person who could save the life of Emmanuel Littlejohn was Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt. I had to get to him. Bright lights pulled against my humanity. People don't understand that cameras don't add weight, they thin the soul. Then again, those who think about such foolishness don't often go on camera. I didn't have a choice. Who else would stand

against the creeping injustice of it all? There was no turning around. It was time to stand and deliver.

The lights were so bright. It was almost as if I was undergoing an x-ray examination of my soul. When I opened my mouth, I spoke beyond the lights:

“Governor Stitt, we are sitting here in McAlester, Oklahoma waiting on you. Emmanuel Littlejohn has asked for grace…he has asked for mercy. We are begging you to show that grace…to show that mercy… this morning. We know that you just got a stint put in your heart…we are trusting that your heart is good. We are trusting in that good heart to save Emmanuel Littlejohn.”

I don’t know how many people heard me. Of course, you always wonder if the right people hear you at all. I didn’t have time to wonder. I had a path that was chosen for me.

Closer. I could literally feel it in the pit of my stomach. The churning was almost more than I could handle. Before I left the area, I prayed for some sort of divine intervention. “Do something God!”

By the time I made it to the staging area, I’d already been up for hours. I was so tired. Running on fumes, I showed my identification to the woman at the door. Strangely, she was super friendly…borderline joyful. “You do know that there is an execution today, right?” The question immediately changed her mood. I was

glad. I didn't want Littlejohn's family walking through the door to such foolishness. This was a serious moment that deserved to be treated with the seriousness. The interaction reminded me that I was not in a space where anybody really cared about Littlejohn. I was the resistance.

When I got to the conference room, I exchanged pleasantries with the gathered officials. We all talked. Though, I'm not sure anything was actually said. There was a ghost in that room. The cruel delay. What was Governor Kevin Stitt waiting on? Was he trying to inflict as much pain as possible? I kept reciting prayers to myself. Then, I made the first of what would ultimately be many trips to the bathroom. I was growing sicker by the minute. It was the only place that I could briefly be

alone. I don't know how I had anything else in my stomach. Between bouts of blowing my guts into the toilet, I prayed. "God, save my friend." "Be real to Emmanuel right now." "Be near." "Do not let us walk alone." I was tossing up whatever prayers came to mind. Repeatedly, I splashed cold water on my face. I just couldn't wake up.

Not long after I sat back down to the table, Emmanuel's mother and daughter joined me. Though the circumstances were horrific and I'd rather none of us had to be there at all, I was relieved to see them. Indeed, their presence made everything seem a little more human. We all chatted nervously and waited. The cruelty perpetuated by Governor Stitt's indecision lingered just beneath the surface of it all. Eventually,

the officials came and took us to go to the cars that would transport us to the prison. I rode in a vehicle designated for clergy and everyone else rode in a van designated for witnesses. We all assumed that a decision had already been made. We were wrong. None of the vehicles moved. We were still waiting on the Governor. I tried to pray. The only thing I could produce was anger. Maybe that was the best prayer that I had? When the cars started to move, nothing had to be said. The end was now defined.

Once we got to the prison, I did everything by memory. Remove the robe. Walk through the metal detector. Spin around. Spread your arms and legs. Hand identification to officer. Answer questions. Nod cordially. Before I knew it, I was being led down a long

colorless cement hall. I knew where I was going. I'd been here before. It didn't make it any easier. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to run. However, I'd come too far and loved Emmanuel too much to look back. Eventually, I arrived at the port that led to the steps that led to the execution chamber. Then, everything stopped. For what seemed like an eternity, I waited for some sort of sign. I passed the time by ripping up whatever I could get my hands on. Bible cover. Napkin. Piece of paper. I guess you could call it a nervous habit. If I touched it, I ripped it.

One of the executioners pulled back the curtain at the top of the stairs. I knew that this meant that Governor Stitt had failed Emmanuel Littlejohn. The door in front of me opened. I was motioned up the stairs. Each step

seemed to pull me back. The resistance was strong. Every fiber of my body didn't want to go up those stairs. I guess I thought if I could at least slow down each step then I could slow down the inevitable.

When I got to the top, I was met by the same man who had met me on three previous occasions. Dressed in a full mask, the man was to be my minder once more. The first time he took me through the rules, I was frightened. The fourth time, I just let him be the hard ass that he thought he had to pretend to be. When the door opened, Oklahoma Department of Corrections Chief of Operations Jason Sparks was standing there. As Oklahoma's chief executioner, Mr. Sparks oversaw the room. After giving me some instructions that he'd shared with me on previous occasions, he stepped aside

and let me in. I'd been thinking of what I'd say when I saw Emmanuel. I didn't have to say anything. Emmanuel blurted out, "Aw shit. I thought we was going to stop this thing." My eyes welling up with tears, I replied, "I did too. I'm so sorry brother." Time stopped for a second. Regret killed all hope. Then, Emmanuel motioned for me to come closer. I walked up and grabbed hold of his hand. The tattoos on his forearm stood out as much as they ever had. "You can hold my hand Jeff…but don't start all that caressing and rubbing shit." Despite the circumstances, I knew Emmanuel was still very present.

Though I tried to forget about the minder, he was ever present. Chief Sparks had to ask him to back up at one point. It wasn't necessary for him to be close enough to

smell his breath. The room was flooded with fluorescent light. Truthfully, they do a really good job of making the space seem as medical as possible. Tubes, monitors and white sheets litter the place. Since I'd been in the space before, there wasn't much that was surprising. Then again, the ease with which the executioners function is very strange. I didn't have time to concentrate on it. I had a job to do.

Quickly, I asked Emmanuel if they'd had any trouble with the line. It's important to secure all details like that for the future. Unfortunately, I knew that Emmanuel wasn't going to be the last person executed. In typical fashion, Emmanuel replied, "There were no problems at all. They're doing a very successful job of killing me."

When I reached under my robe to get the oil, I realized that it had spilled all over my pants. It looked like I'd peed all over myself. The container was so slick that I could barely grasp it. When I raised it to the gurney, Emmanuel started laughing. I couldn't figure out why. Then, he blurted out, "Jeff, you done brought some weed?" Looking down, I realized that the container looked like a dime bag. Though I was laughing on the outside, I was struggling on the inside. Each breathe was more painful than the last. I just wanted to stop the world.

I started to read from the 23rd Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd…". "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death…I will fear no evil…". When I hit the words, I opened the oil. "…you anoint my head

with oil…" With multiple oily movements, I made the sign of the cross on his forehead three times. Emmanuel closed his eyes. "I can feel it." His words showed that something was happening…and he started to relax. When I asked him if he wanted me to keep reading, he said, "Jeff, what in the hell do you think you're here for?" I proceeded into the scriptures we'd talked about.

We turned a corner. I started to read.

John 8:1-11. The story of Jesus and the adulterous woman echoed loudly. For many weeks, we'd studied the passage. Emmanuel knew that this was the scripture that most directly spoke to where he was at. When I got to the words, he closed his eyes and said

them with me, “Let the one who is without sin caste the first stone.” Before he let me continue, he looked up at his executioners and said, “whether you believe it or not…this shit applies to y’all too.” The silence in the room spoke volumes.

John 14. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God…”. Emmanuel kept interrupting the reading with affirmations. “I do. I do. I do.” When I got to his favorite part, he read softly with me, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth and the life.’” Emmanuel couldn’t resist, “I receive it!”

John 18, 19 and 20. The arrest. The betrayal. The trial. Emmanuel wanted to stop for a second here and said, “Governor Stitt is Pilate…just washed his damn

hands of it all." The pain. The Crucifixion. The Resurrection. I stopped to tell Emmanuel that I believed in the resurrection of Emmanuel Littlejohn. "This is your release date," I added. With a huge smile on his face, Emmanuel wasn't going to let it slide, "What if I told you I like it here Jeff?" I didn't know what to say. "Just keep reading the damn passages Jeff."

Revelation 21. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." Ever muscle in his face started to relax. "Death will be no more." Emmanuel could feel it. For a second, I realized that everything else in the room had melted away. It was just me and him. Time was getting short.

1 Corinthians 13. “Love never ends.” I squeezed his hand and said, “Brother, you’ve been a good son, you’ve been a good brother, you’ve been a good uncle, you’ve been a father…they all love you so much. That love isn’t going anywhere. Love never ends.” “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Chief Sparks motioned for me to return back to the wall. I squeezed his hand one last time. I didn’t want to leave him. But I knew I had to. I had to give him to God. “I love you brother, very much.” Emmanuel didn’t hesitate, “I love you too.”

The curtain opened.

It's so strange. Row after row of people gathered to take in the spectacle of it all. What is it that they wish to

see? I guess it's important that they're there. Perhaps the eyes of the gathered is the only thing keeping the executioners from just slicing the condemned's head off? I don't know. I just know that it is shocking to see row after row of people hungry for blood. When I turned my head, I saw Emmanuel's mom and daughter. For an instant, I watched them hold each other. Then, I turned back to Attorney General Gentner Drummond and questioned how he could live with himself with my squinted eyes. The discomfort in his face made it clear that he understood me.

Chief Sparks grabbed the microphone and read the death warrant. It was time for the execution to begin. I kept my eyes on Emmanuel. I refused to run. I wanted him to know that I was there no matter what. Chief

Sparks asked Emmanuel if he had a final statement. It was as if the heavens were slowly opening above his head. I knew he wasn't long for this world. "Yes, I do." Emmanuel looked to his mother and said, "Mom, you ok?" "I'm ok," his mother replied. Emmanuel managed to reply, "Everything is going to be ok. I love you." After the microphone cut off, I leaned in and told Emmanuel one last time, "I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop this." I will remember his words forever. "Jeff, if it hadn't been for you we would have never made it this far." His eyes rolled back, and he drifted out of consciousness. Loud snores filled the room. Emmanuel was leaving in a hurry. It was as if I could see his soul leaving his body. It was lingering above the table. The

light was falling from the heavens. He was pulling away. I could feel the rips.

“Faith, hope and love…but the greatest of these is love”. I raised my hand and said it dozens…if not hundreds…of times. I wanted for the last thing that Emmanuel heard to be that he was loved. I know that everyone in the room got tired of hearing it. I didn’t care. If they were participating in an execution, I figured they needed to hear it as much as anyone. Each time I finished saying the phrase, I made the sign of the cross. Emmanuel saw me. Emmanuel heard me. Love always finds a way through.

Emmanuel just laid motionless on the gurney. Head laid back. Mouth opened. Rotten teeth exposed. Before

long, the doctor came in and declared a time of death. I already he was gone. I'd seen him leave. He was in God's hands now.

I was ready to get out of there. The door swung open. Oklahoma Department of Corrections Director Steven Harpe came out to speak to the gathered. The show was over. I have never understood why there was any need for any further comment. The dead body says it all. Each time, I try to be courteous. I shook Director Harpe's hand. Emmanuel would have kicked my ass. I can just hear him, "Why would you shake that motha fuckers' hand? He just killed me Jeff." Thankfully, Emmanuel was too distracted with the eternal reward of love to pay attention.

November 2, 2024

We know. We are. : Meditation Practices from Death Row

*Steven Nelson is a prisoner on death row in Texas.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood serves as his spiritual advisor.

This piece flows out of a conversation that Dr. Hood had with Nelson on meditation.

We close our eyes. We breath. We meditate. Then… We discover there is more than what is. We keep going. We feel the presence of the all in one. We know. We are.

Our prisons don’t have to define us. Our beings are more powerful than our bars. We can exist in spaces beyond what is. We can exist in a space of what might be. Meditation transforms the meditator not because it is salvific…but rather because it is a vehicle to places that are. The savagery of our moment is that we remain convinced that meditation is only for the lost. Yet, only in meditation can one truly be found. The development of a meditative practice is the key to unlock all our prisons.

When all hell is coming down on your head, one can sit and be burned up or one can figure out how to exist beyond the fire. Anxiety cripples the soul. Stress suffocates the brain. Depression chains the body. Only when we allow our mind to go to places beyond such hells can we be who we are and become more than we ever thought that we could be. If one has control over their mind, one can be locked up all day every day and never even know the bars exist.

Inner peace is a strange phrase to most. We live in a world where there is no peace. Everyone is just so busy all the time. Conflicts provide entertainment. We destroy all that we know. How can anyone have any

peace? The mind has to be unchained from temporal restraints.

No two meditation practices are the same. One can read books to figure out a direction, but we all must create our own paths. Once the eyes are closed, that which is beyond description takes over. To start one must simply close their eyes.

Why do we fear the darkness? Life was birthed from the darkness. We come from the darkness. We are darkness in our most simple form. To meditate we must go into the darkness…we must become part of the darkness.

The divine has created us to be one with the divine. Inner peace exists at the core. Inner peace rests in the darkness. Everything else fades away when we meet that which is everything. When we meditate, we are collapsing into fullness.

Meditation is also a form of prayer. We are pushing to find the divine that can awaken the divine within. We present our core so that we might know the creator of the core.

There is a peace that passes all understanding. The journey of meditation is the path there. It's like disappearing so that one might appear more fully than one ever thought possible.

We close our eyes. We breath. We meditate. Then…

We discover there is more than what is. We keep going. We feel the presence of the all in one. We know. We are.

November 9, 2024

Inhale. Exhale.: Breathing Exercises from Death Row

*Steven Nelson is a prisoner on death row in Texas.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood serves as his spiritual advisor.

This piece flows out of a conversation that Dr. Hood had with Nelson on breathing.

Close your eyes. Breathe. Invite God in. Exhale. Breathe. Imagine love. Exhale love. Breathe. Really meditate on what love looks like. Exhale. Breathe. Really meditate on giving love away. Exhale. Breathe. Imagine love. Exhale love. Breathe. In your breathing, invite God to exist with you. Exhale. Open your eyes.

How should we breathe? It's a basic question with profound implications. The way that we breathe determines our existence. If we stop breathing, we can't survive. Each breath that we take means something.

Love. The greatest of all constructs. How does one breathe it in? How does one breathe it out? Love is not

a substance you can physically breathe. It is more of a construct to describe a state of being. Then again, when we breathe, we are taking our place in the universe. We are inhaling and exhaling life. What do we want our life to be about? How can we make each breath that we take in to be about love…each breath that we breath out to be about love?

God breathed life into existence. How do we breathe life into others? Lives that matter are the ones that exist to give life to others. Love is about sharing life. We cultivate love of self so that we might give such love away. Each breathe strengthens one to exhale…to exhale life. One cannot love somebody else until they figure out how to love their self.

The problems with our society originate from the fundamental inability of humanity to breathe right. Everybody walks around hating their self and can't figure out why they can't love someone else or why can't nobody else love them. Fix yourself first. Get your breathing right. God breathed live. We can too.

We are surrounded by people desperate to find their next breath. We can be the source. We can breathe on others. We can breathe for others. God loves us. Such love teaches us how to share love….how to share breath.

Too often we think that the point of life is to get as far as you can as fast as you can. God is telling us to look

back. We were made in the image of God. We are to do as God has done...exhale.

Close your eyes. Breathe. Invite God in. Exhale. Breathe. Imagine love. Exhale love. Breathe. Really meditate on what love looks like. Exhale. Breathe. Really meditate on giving love away. Exhale. Breathe. Imagine love. Exhale love. Breathe. In your breathing, invite God to exist with you. Exhale. Open your eyes.

Inner peace comes from the daily practice of breathing right. We close our eyes to push out distractions. We invite God in to remind us that God is the one who gave us breath. We breathe to remind us of our need to breathe...and our desire to be conscience of each breath. We imagine what we want our breaths to be

for. We imagine giving our self to others. We draw back to imagining the very definition of what love is. We breath life. We exhale life. In our inhaling and exhaling, we ask God to make all that we do to be about love. Conscious of how our breathing can change the world, we open our eyes to proceed out into the world.

Close your eyes. Breathe. Invite God in. Exhale. Breathe. Imagine love. Exhale love. Breathe. Really meditate on what love looks like. Exhale. Breathe. Really meditate on giving love away. Exhale. Breathe. Imagine love. Exhale love. Breathe. In your breathing, invite God to exist with you. Exhale. Open your eyes.

November 11, 2024

LETTER / First Baptist Church of Arlington Protest/Press Conference for Steven Nelson (Friday 11/11 @ 10am)

On October 31, 2024, I sent the letter attached below to every email address listed on the First Baptist Church of

Arlington's website. This was the first opportunity I gave the church to respond to deep concerns that a great many have about the way that they handled the aftermath of the murder of Rev. Clint Dobson, the subsequent trial of Steven Nelson and the resultant death sentence.

Indeed, after the death sentence was handed down, First Baptist pastor Dr. Dennis R. Wiles glowingly remarked, “We have all waited for this day…this guilty offender is being appropriately punished.” In the years since the tragic murder of Rev. Dobson, First Baptist has betrayed their own stated belief that they are concerned for the souls of the world and done absolutely nothing to reach out to Nelson or anyone associated with him.

Due to a lack of response to the letter, our response has grown. On Friday 15 at 10am CT, I've organized a press conference with other supporters across the street from First Baptist (at the corner of West South St and S Pecan St) to speak directly to the evil of a pastor and church supporting an execution and to demand their repentance.

Each subsequent failure to respond with the grace and hope of Jesus Christ will lead to an added level of response. Make no mistake, Steven Nelson's life is on the line and we will demand that all who claim Christ to act as such.

October 31, 2024

To the leadership and people of First Baptist Church of Arlington,

Greetings. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. As a body of believers, I am aware of the tragedy that you (along with the people of the church you were helping plant) faced in 2011. By all accounts, Rev. Clint Dobson was an amazing pastor and an even more amazing person. Even in our present moment, the survival instinct of Judy Elliot remains beyond inspiring. The horror and pain that Steven Nelson

unleashed is beyond what the mortal heart can ponder. I can't imagine how confusing of a time his subsequent arrest, trial and sentencing was. On some level, I can even understand why you as a church pushed for a death sentence (or at least did nothing to stop one). These words are not meant to minimize the courage of either victim or the resilience of your church in the face of this tragedy. They are intended as an invitation to Christian love and grace. While the mortal heart might be incapable of forgiveness, with God all things are possible.

Perhaps, it is important to explain my personal juxtaposition to the tragedy. I serve as Nelson's spiritual advisor. This term is a legal term that the State of Texas uses to designate someone as a person facing

execution's pastor. In recent months, I've had the opportunity to come to know Nelson and find him to be a person deeply familiar with the love and grace of God. While such talk often seems cliché, Nelson has grown tremendously since these crimes took place. But this is not necessarily a letter about Nelson. More so, this is a letter about you.

When I heard of your satisfaction that Nelson received the death penalty, I was deeply disturbed. In John 13:35, Jesus makes clear, "They will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Of course, Jesus also commands us in Mark 12:31, "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is nothing loving about killing someone. Presently, there is a growing movement of believers dedicated to saving the life of Nelson. In the

face of a looming execution date of February 5, it seems the only loving thing to do would be to join us.

Of course, I'm not unaware that a great many Christians support the death penalty. Forgive me for the continued use of scripture, but I have been told that you are a church deeply invested in the Word of God. How can someone believe in executions in the light of John 8:1-11?

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this

woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus stopped the only execution he ever attended besides his own. Based on this passage, Jesus’ instruction to the believer with regard to the execution of Nelson is clear, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” We are called to be a people that is daily growing more like Christ. 1 John 2:6 tell us that we are even responsible for “… living just as Jesus did.” The bottom line is this…Jesus Didn’t Kill. How can you or anyone else call yourselves Christians if you don’t fight to stop Nelson’s execution? Can you imagine Rev. Clint Dobson immersed in love and standing in glory demanding the execution of

Steven Nelson? You know that grace doesn't work like that.

On top of arguments based on our shared faith, Nelson's legal team has presented solid forensic evidence that Nelson wasn't the only person that participated in this crime. Yet, Nelson was the only person ever convicted…the only person ever sentenced to death. Even from an unabashedly secular perspective, how is this fair?

If you're like me, the legal arguments matter less than the spiritual ones. In John 10:10, Jesus makes it very clear that we must follow his example and always stand on the side of life, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and

have it to the full." In the coming days, I am going to be directly challenging you. Regardless of who you think the thief is, Jesus tells us that we must be about life…abundant grace filled life. Bottom line…Jesus Didn't Kill.

Let there be no doubt, there is a great test upon you. Will you repent of your past support of the death penalty? There is still time. Surely, the witness of Rev. Dobson demands more than the missteps of the past and the indifference of the present. There is still time to save Steven Nelson. Do not let the extravagant grace of God pass you by.

If you are interested in joining our campaign to save Nelson, I am more than happy to discuss next steps.

“Now to HIM who has the power to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to the power at work in us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

December 12, 2024

Why in the hell isn't Gary Wayne Sutton home for Christmas?

Gary Wayne Sutton is an innocent man on death row in Tennessee. For over 33 years, Gary's been left to rot.

Most people think that if somebody is on death row

then there must at least be some evidence. In this case, there is not. The case was never strong. Gary was just a convenient fall guy. In fact, there is absolutely nothing that ties Gary to the murder of his close friend Tommy Griffin or Tommy's sister Connie Branam.

Gary and Tommy were best friends. There was no evidence of any conflict between the two.

Gary had no motive to kill Tommy.

Dr. Charles Harlan was one of the chief witnesses for the prosecution in Gary's trial. The time of death that Dr. Harlan tried to establish was found scientifically impossible by multiple independent experts. Dr. Harlan lied about how rigor mortis works (or perhaps was too

ignorant to describe it correctly). The prosecution failed to share that Dr. Harlan was under investigation for gross misconduct when he testified at trial. Ultimately, Dr. Harlan lost his license after he was proven to have lied in multiple cases.

It was scientifically impossible that Gary killed Tommy or Connie within the timeframe Dr. Harlan gave.

There was another more plausible suspect by the name of Lester Johnson. Both Tommy Griffin and Connie Branam were scheduled to testify against Johnson. They had knowledge of Johnson's brutal rape and attempted murder of a woman named Tina Hartman. Johnson had the motive and the means to kill Tommy and Connie. Following a surprise acquittal (that came

after Griffin and Branam were murdered and unable to testify), Tina Hartman and her family were stalked and terrorized by Johnson (including death threats and arson).

Lester Johnson was never investigated as a suspect.

There were conflicting accounts about the vehicles associated with the crime. One witness claimed to have seen a car in a black box style. One witness claimed to have seen a pickup truck. Neither vehicle was every proven to have any connection to Gary Sutton. *Lester Johnson drove a truck that closely resembled the witness' description.

Shotgun shells were planted at the scene.

Even at trial, prosecutors openly worried about the possibility that they were going to have to “cut Gary loose” based on a lack of evidence against him.

Multiple state legislators and other politicians have come froward to ask Gov. Bill Lee for a review of the case, including Senator Page Walley (R) and former Lawrence County Mayor T.R. Williams.

NO Eyewitnesses. NO Murder Weapon. NO Motive. NO Forensic Evidence. NO Credible Expert Testimony. NO Reason for Gary to be in Prison.

So…

Why in the hell isn’t Gary Wayne Sutton home for Christmas?

Check out Nashville Investigative Reporter Dennis Ferrier’s series of stories on FOX17/News9:

Flawed witness testimony questions validity of Gary Sutton's double-murder conviction

https://fox17.com/fox-17-investigates/flawed-witness-testimony-questions-validity-of-gary-suttons-double-murder-conviction-tommy-griffin-connie-branam-blount-county-sevier-county-smoky-mountains

New investigation questions Gary Sutton's decades-old double murder conviction

https://fox17.com/fox-17-investigates/new-investigation-questions-gary-suttons-decades-old-double-murder-conviction-blount-county-tennessee-death-row

Unraveling tangled evidence: Tenn. death row inmate's innocence questioned after 33 years

https://newschannel9.com/news/local/unraveling-tangled-evidence-death-row-inmates-innocence-questioned-after-33-years-gary-sutton-smoky-mountains-tennessee

Reinvestigating the conviction of Gary Sutton: Is the wrong man on death row?

https://fox17.com/fox-17-investigates/tommy-griffin-connie-branham-blount-county-tennessee-execution-reinvestigating-the-conviction-of-gary-sutton-is-the-wrong-man-on-death-row

Friday 12/13 Press Conference:

Press Conference:

NOT ANOTHER CHRISTMAS WITHOUT GARY!

Friday December 13 @ 10 am

@ Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church

Summary:

Gary Wayne Sutton is an innocent man who has been on Tennessee's death row for over 30 years. On Friday, December 13th at 10 am, Sutton's closest supporters will gather for a press conference at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church to collectively demand, "NOT ANOTHER CHRISTMAS WITHOUT GARY!" Their collective cries will be directed at Governor Bill Lee who has the power to make such a demand a reality. In fact, with the stroke of a pen, Lee has the power to make sure that Sutton is home on Christmas morning. Private investigator Heather Cohen will challenge Gov. Lee with the overwhelming evidence of innocence. Sutton's spiritual advisor The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood will challenge

Lee with the moral and spiritual ramifications of continued inaction. Finally, Sutton's longtime confidant Carolyn Miller will speak to the long, lonely struggle (especially at Christmas) family and friends have had to endure throughout this entire nightmare.

Details:

Friday, December 13, 2024 @ 10am

Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church

2931 Kingston Pike

Knoxville, TN 37919

Contact:

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

December 16, 2024

Rev. Clint Dobson, Steven Nelson & Consequences of Vengeance

Even though there are a variety of mitigating circumstances and questionable evidence that Steven Nelson was the actual killer…Nelson is scheduled to be

executed on February 5, 2024 for the murder of Rev. Clint Dobson. One of the primary supporters of the execution is Rev. Dobson's former employer, The First Baptist Church of Arlington.

December 15, 2024

To the leadership and people of First Baptist Church of Arlington,

It's been a month and a half since my last letter...

Luke 3:4-6, 7

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley

shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

In this season of Advent, the words of Isaiah still ring out down through the ages. John the Baptist used such words to preach of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. These moments prepared the way for the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. It seems as if stinging words from the wilderness have always been the forerunner of the inbreaking of the fullness of God.

Clint Dobson should still be alive. The evil actions and inactions of Steven Nelson and others deprived the world of an incredible man of God. Now what? For

over a decade, you have selfishly drowned in your grief. Instead of helping people grow in grace, you have taught them that is appropriate to care about their temporal feelings above all else. Jesus is crying out in the midst of such lunacy, “I can’t breathe.” Drowning… at your inability to love. It’s as if you have this delusion that you matter more than anyone else. What an opportunity you have wasted.

Repeatedly, you could have shown the world what grace and compassion look like. There could have been an inbreaking of reconciliation. The world could have more fully seen Jesus. Why am I even having to say any of this? You know the truth. You know what you missed. You know what you’ve done.

Love was possible. Even in the midst of the horrors, love was possible. You could have straightened the crooked places. You could have lifted the valleys. You could have brought the mountains and hills low. You could have made the rough ways smooth. You could have made sure that all flesh could see the salvation of our God. Nope. You don't care about anyone except your own vanity project that you call a church.

Even when we visited… We spoke of empathy. We spoke of love. We spoke of forgiveness. You spoke of nothing. Repeatedly, the press gave you the opportunity to speak a word of healing. Nothing. John the Baptist baptized with water. In our present hour, all you know how to do is to baptize this entire situation in shit. What type of Jesus are y'all teaching about? It

seems to me that the only God that y'all know of is your grief. If that's it, then more than just Clint Dobson died. Indeed, it seems that your connection to the powerful reconciliatory message of Jesus died as well.

You've missed it all. You let the evil of a moment scuttle your entire ministry. You are too rich and righteous to see that you have grown too rich and righteous to love and forgive. Open your damn eyes!

Pain is a heavy burden for all to bear. You have made it heavier. There could have been love. There could have been Jesus. Clint Dobson could have been known for so much more than being the victim of a murder. Your actions have made it close to certain that his legacy will be the execution of Steven Nelson. Your grief has now

successfully destroyed all that you've said that you care about.

If there is one thing that I am sorry for, it is for encouraging Steven to believe that you might have some grace left in you. I do not wish you a Merry Christmas, on the contrary, I pray that you will be haunted until you repent of the evil ravenous spirit of vengeance you have both cultivated and perpetuated.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

December 23, 2024

Biden Commutes 37 of 40 Federal Death Row Sentences: WTF?

Joe Biden just announced that he is commuting the sentences of a vast majority of people on federal death

row (37 of 40). To this end, I have released the following quotes:

"Just when I thought Joe Biden was going to give our nation some ethical clarity, he has presented us with a new nightmare…the ranking of murder victims. Either Biden finishes the job and commutes all federal death sentences or we are left in the same place we were before…a moral abyss of federal sentencing that only pursues death sentences in rare cases, prioritizing some murder victims above all others."

“This is not time for celebration. We are in the same moral abyss we were in before. Regardless of how many death sentences President Biden just commuted,

by not commuting them all he has made sure that the killing will continue."

Back in March (2024), I wrote the opinion piece below for Newsweek. Though some details have changed, I still feel strongly that President Biden (even with the latest news) has dramatically failed to meet his campaign promises or moral obligations.

President Biden Should Follow Through on Ending the Death Penalty | Opinion

On Good Friday President Joe Biden will likely go to church. While there, I hope more executions than just that of Jesus fester in his mind.

I was Kenneth Eugene Smith's spiritual advisor during the first nitrogen hypoxia execution in Alabama. There was no one closer. Witnesses from all sides described the same thing, something incredibly evil.

A few weeks ago, Smith, 58, was completely immobilized on the gurney. On his face, there was a tightly secured mask that covered from the top of his head to the bottom of his chin. In fact, it was so tight that I could see tight red bunches of skin around the entire seal. With little warning, the nitrogen started to flow. Like an expanding tomato, Smith's head grew bigger and bigger. His body was pumping adrenaline in every possible direction. Every inch of him looked like it was going to explode. Seconds turned into minutes.

The state of Alabama lied. We were told to expect Kenneth to go unconscious within the first few seconds. Smith began to heave back and forth. No one with a conscience could have wanted the entire moment to continue. Fluids shot out of his mouth and caught on the inside of the mask. The concoction looked like a waterfall. His eyeballs protruded out of their sockets. It was like watching a horror movie.

Conversations about nitrogen hypoxia as a method of execution and the death penalty in general followed. Perhaps with wishful thinking, I expected bold leadership from President Joe Biden. Instead, we got a short statement from White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, "The president has long said and has had deep, deep, deep concerns with how

the death penalty is implemented and whether it is consistent with our values. So we are deeply troubled by it, by what we heard by about Kenneth Smith's death."

"Thoughts and prayers?" It's a phrase that has come to define indifference. Whenever tragedy strikes, it's always the auto response. But when do "thoughts and prayers" lead to action? The use of the word "troubled" by Jean-Pierre strikes similarly. There was a time when use of the word "troubled" meant that you would be stirred to do something. Not today. Jean-Pierre speaks for an administration that is so "troubled" that it has done, and seems aimlessly determined to do, absolutely nothing.

This isn't what we were promised. Back in 2020, President Biden declared on his campaign website that he would, "work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example." He's done neither.

Far from offering leadership of any kind, executions are happening regularly. The U.S. Justice Department continues to seek new death sentences. Now, we even have a new execution method that allows the government to suffocate someone to death. These are not all federal issues that Biden has direct control over, but he promised effort and we have seen none.

President Biden's inaction is not theoretical. As a spiritual advisor to people on death rows throughout

the nation, I provide comfort to those who are to be executed by their government. I work to end such moments because they're completely unnecessary, a waste of resources, and contrary to my faith. Executions are also bolstered by unfair systems and generally morally repugnant. But these conversations about President Biden and capital punishment go beyond basic objections and extend to fair and timely questions of failed governance.

On April 4, the State of Oklahoma is scheduled to execute Michael Smith. If the execution proceeds, I will be standing next to him doing my best to provide him comfort. That's my job. President Biden promised to take on the death penalty, and he is not doing his job.