The Penalty is

Death

The 2022 Writings

Jeff Hood

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January 7, 2022

The Virus & LRSD

Dear Editor,

These are frightening times. It's difficult to know who to trust. Thankfully, with each wave of the virus, the reporters at the Democrat-Gazette have made sure that people know the facts. Masks slow

down the spread. Vaccines can lessen the chance of serious cases. Numbers are skyrocketing. People continue to die. People deny such facts at their own peril…or to the peril of others…which is why I write to you.

We have five young children. For the last week, we have openly wondered whether our children would be able to go back to their Little Rock School District (LRSD) schools. As numbers continued to skyrocket, we assumed that virtual learning was a foregone conclusion. Then, we received a message to the contrary late last night (January 4). Without many other options, we were forced to take our kids to

school. Only a few short hours later, we were told that LRSD was going virtual.

Honestly, it wasn't shocking when Superintendent Mike Poore made the announcement. This is what should have been done in the first place. What is shocking is that Superintendent Poore exposed all of our children to this wave of the virus so that he could recheck the numbers in real time. Well, if he had just read the Democrat-Gazette (and a whole host of other outlets), he would have known that the current spread of the virus was very dangerous and not conducive to large gatherings of people. Now, our family (along with countless others) is left to sit at home (with our LRSD lessons/computers of

course) and wonder whether or not every runny nose, cough or sneeze is a manifestation of a deadly virus…when Superintendent Poore very easily could have made this decision before they were forced to attend school in the first place.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Little Rock, Arkansas

January 8, 2022

The Police Just Burned a Man to Death

For nearly a decade, I have worked with families whose loved ones have been killed in all kinds of situations of police brutality. In video after video…. I have seen the police suffocate unarmed people to death. I have seen the police shoot unarmed people to death. I have seen the police run unarmed people over. I have seen the police beat unarmed people to death. I have even seen the police tase unarmed

people to death. BUT…. I can unequivocally say that I have never seen a video quite like this…

It sounds like Jason Jones had already had a wild night. In fact, Jones stumbled (clearly impaired) into the lobby of the Catskill Police Department (CPD) because he wanted to confront the police. To say the least, Jones was not in his right mind. Regardless of his belligerence, Jones was not armed…just impaired. Surely, any police could handle a situation like this, right?

Upon entering the CPD lobby, Jones stumbled around for about 10 minutes. There is no doubt that his agitation is growing by the second. Eventually, Jones

decides to rip off his shirt and shoes. Then, he grabs a huge pump bottle of hand sanitizer off the desk of the attendant and douses his entire upper body with the flammable liquid. Immediately after, three officers advance on Jones . One of them pulls out his Taser and fires. Flames shoot up in the air. Screams fill the room. The electricity predictably ignited Jones's body. Surely, at this point the officers rendered aid, right?

Instead of helping Jones, the officers ran out of the room/into a corner. In fact, these chicken shit officers hid until Jones extinguished the fire himself. As Jones laid on the floor screaming in anguish, the officers/heartless assholes actually tried to put

handcuffs on him. These officers offered little to no aid until medics arrived. Six agonizing weeks later (on December 15), Jason Jones died. Surely, these officers have been charged with murder for their actions (either by commission or omission), right?

Turns out, these officers haven't been heard from much since this incident happened…and…of course… they're scared for their safety since this video was released. They should be. They immolated a child of God. While I pray for swift judicial punishment, I also pray that the images of a burning Jason Jones will haunt them until they beg both and God and society for forgiveness. Make no mistake, I am a

man of God. Otherwise, I would be advocating for much much more.

As for the rest of us, I hope that we realize that the police are now burning people to death (amongst a whole host of other atrocities that are committed on a regular basis). Those who remain silent now are inviting the flames to come for them later. We will either stand together against police brutality or we will be their next victims.

Listen to the call of salvation…

Out in the streets, Jesus screams, "Fuck the Police!"

Amen.

For more:

https://nypost.com/2022/01/07/disturbing-video-shows-man-doused-in-sanitizer-burst-into-flames-after-being-tased-by-cops/

January 16, 2022

The Hostage Crisis at Congregation Beth Israel: Shameful Responses from Christian Clergy

Earlier today, a lone distressed gunman entered services at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas and took four hostages (including Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker). Amongst the gunman's demands was the release of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui (a Pakistani woman who was convicted of terrorism charges in 2010). After 11 hours, the situation ended

with the death of the gunman and the rescue of the hostages.

Throughout the ordeal, I watched responses from Christian clergy on social media. Below, I've included some examples. Though many of these prayers are more than appropriate, pay attention to what is consistently missing.

Please join me in lifting prayers for Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville.

Prayers for the release of all Congregation Beth Israel hostages safely!

Pray for our neighbors and Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville!

Drop what you are doing and pray for Congregation Beth Israel!

Please pray for Congregation Beth Israel…

Praying for Congregation Beth Israel and their rabbi.

Holding sacred space and prayer for Congregation Beth Israel…

In times like this, I find myself so ashamed of my fellow Christian clergy.

They seem to have forgotten who we are.

Prayers for Congregation Beth Israel are not enough.

In fact, calls for prayer that didn't/don't include prayers for the gunman are not Christian prayers. We are called to love and pray for our enemies. None of the above prayers do that. In fact, I don't think I saw one prayer from Christian clergy that did.

The responses to the outcome were even worse…

The hostages are free and safe. Thanks be to God.

Everyone at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville is free and safe!

I am so thankful for this peaceful resolution.

The terrorist never had a chance.

Praise God for a peaceful resolution!

Everybody made it out safely!

God did it!

While I too am thankful for the release of the hostages (and pray for their continued recovery), you cannot follow the message of Jesus and unreservedly/even wildly celebrate the violent death of an obviously distressed gunman. Where are the prayers of grief for him? Where are the prayers for those that love him? Where are the hard prayers?

It seems that most Christian clergy would rather just make fleeting prayers/statements.

Love requires so much more.

Amen.

January 25, 2022

Rev. Dwight Lee Wolter: The Church's New Rambo

This afternoon, I was scrolling through Facebook and came across an opinion piece on Religion New Service entitled, "Resisting hate, as people of faith, includes readiness for self-defense." For added measure, the preview picture was of two white guys slinging guns around. Assuming it was more nonsense from a right-wing nutjob, I scrolled by. Then, I realized that it'd been posted in a group for organizers connected to the United Church of Christ.

So, I figured I'd check it out. I regretted it immediately. Throughout his shared opinion, Rev. Dwight Lee Wolter of the Congregational Church of Patchogue, New York (UCC) uses the plight of marginalized and oppressed people to justify his feelings of impotence and desperate need to take up arms/prepare for combat.

From the onset, Rev. Wolters leans heavily on threats that he has received/perceived to justify arming himself/his church. From communications from the Justice Department to threatening messages to a police-issued panic button to church safety trainings to people spitting in his food (that one about put me over the edge) to anonymous

communications, Wolters sets it up as if he is the most targeted minister/and his church is the most targeted church in America. If that wasn't enough, this cat wants to talk about how he is training his people for "combat." This guy thinks he's Rambo. Every time I hear a white minister use such violent language, it never ends well for marginalized and oppressed folk. The powerless are more often than not on the other side of violent aggression from the powerful. So what remotely sounds Christian about readying the powerful for combat?

It's interesting that Rev. Wolters has the nerve to cite Dylann Roof in his analysis. As far as I'm concerned he is creating a church full of Dylann Roofs ready for

“combat.” I’m sure that every racist-ass police department in America would be willing to help with such a project.

To finish off his piece, Rev. Wolters says that he has added to his oath of ordination, “I will, to the best of my ability, protect and defend the people I feel called to serve against real and perceived assaults that come from both within and without the walls of our church community, which we established and maintain as a sanctuary from evil, oppression, injustice and other harms.” What are real assaults? What are perceived assaults? What is within? What is without? How far does his/their mandate for protecting his/their people extend? The

marginalized and oppressed folks in his community better find out…before they are on the receiving end of his platitudes.

While I imagine that Rev. Dwight Lee Wolter is probably a nice guy and a capable pastor, his thoughts (readying people for combat) are beyond dangerous… especially for marginalized and oppressed people.

Jesus explicitly told us that our faith is about loving our neighbors…

So…

How in the hell can you love your neighbor and be preparing for combat against them?

This all sounds like some pretty twisted shit to me.

Amen.

February 11, 2022

Gov. Hutchinson's Bible Must Be Defective: On the Morality of New Prisons in Arkansas

"By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you build more prison cells…" That has got to be how John 13:35 reads in Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson's Bible. That's the only way I can think of that he could claim to be a follower of Jesus and ask our legislature for upwards of a hundred million dollars for new prisons. Well this should be

an easy problem to fix then, right? I mean every version…from the King James to the New International to the English Standard to the New Revised Standard to the Revised Standard and on and on and on… all translate John 13:35 similarly, "By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another…" So, I guess we just need to get a proper translation of the Bible in his hands? If only it was that easy…

The Governor seems to have mixed up what it means to love another as well. Considering the extreme mental, physical and social consequences of solitary confinement, love don't have nothing to do with create more space for it. Considering we are not

doing enough to address homelessness, mental health needs, addiction resources and poverty, love don't have nothing to do with spending upwards of a hundred million dollars elsewhere. Considering that Arkansas has yet to achieve universal access to Pre-K and has countless other educational needs, love don't have nothing to do with taking money from children to build prison cells. Considering love is the first task…not the last.

There is one thing that Governor Hutchinson is right about. Prisons are expensive to create and maintain. So it seems like it would be a better idea to put upwards of a hundred million dollars into spaces that would help us build a society where less people

are required to go there. What does Jesus require of us in such a time as this? "By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another…"

Somebody please go get Governor Hutchinson a proper translation of the Bible and tell him to spend some time reading about love, before he turns the entire state of Arkansas into a prison.

Amen

February 14, 2022

The Moral Bankruptcy of a Violent State…Protesting Prison Expansion& Documenting a Police Beating at the Arkansas State Capitol (including video).

THIS WAS MY FIRST TRIP TO THE ARKANSAS STATE CAPITOL.

Full video of the rally is here:

https://fb.watch/baUb0jA4KT/

The full of the beating is here (skip to middle):

https://fb.watch/bauTSeS7Ic/

Today was an exhausting day. With that said, I wanted to quickly put out a blog with everything that I have. Links to the full video of the rally and the beating are above and below. We undoubtedly live in a police state…Arkansas.

These are the initial words from the press release I sent out for UNITED AGAINST CAGES.

On Feb 10th, Governor Hutchinson announced support for an expansion of 500 new cages to the Calico Rock North Central Unit. This budgetary expense is projected to cost close to $100 million. Surely, budgets indicate what we value. Rather than propping up problematic systems of incarceration, shouldn't we be spending such money on efforts that build and foster community? Imagine…affordable housing…pre-k expansion…pretrial diversion programs…mental health facilities…tuition-free community college…and on and on and on. The possibility of community is why we're UNITED AGAINST CAGES!!!

UNITED AGAINST CAGES

11AM / MONDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2022

ARKANSAS STATE CAPITOL STEPS

On Monday, February 14th, members of decARcerate, Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition and concerned citizens will gather on the Capitol Steps to voice their opposition to a recently proposed prison expansion.

These are the words that I delivered at the rally, UNITED AGAINST CAGES.

The Moral Bankruptcy of a Violent State

Got it. Thank you. Thank you. Well, good morning. I've lived here for six months, six months, six months. We got here in August.

You know what? When we pulled up. And I started hearing people talk about more prisons, more cages, a lot of the racism, a lot of the other things you experienced almost packed up and turned around to find it. Yeah, that's true. But ultimately, I have a firm belief that God calls us to spaces of difference... difficult spaces.

Thank God calls us to spaces that are tough. And this is a tough space. This is a tough spot. That's excuse me. A tough fight for just a second. I want to get everybody involved. We talking about a hundred

million dollars. I want you to think about what you could do with a hundred million dollars.

Hold on, hold on. I'm coming around. All right. One at a time. Hit me with it: social workers, peer support specialists, substance abuse treatment. adequate food, adequate housing, mental health support, free healthcare for everyone, job training. A hundred million dollars could go a long way couldn't it…

Well, you know, we got a lot of Christians, Arkansas, a lot of people that say that Christians in Arkansas, including the. Well, you have heard all of these examples of ways to love your neighbor as yourself, as opposed to locking up your neighbor.

You know, sometimes I worry that our governor left his Bible at home because when you talk about loving your neighbor as yourself, you're talking about providing resources to your neighbor. You're talking about providing education for your neighbor. You're talking about providing mental health services for your neighbor. You're talking about healthcare for your neighbor, but no, our governor seems to think that the best way to love your neighbor. Is instead of helping people instead of educating people, instead of providing a quality of life for people, you get ready to lock them up, what does it say about a society that builds prisons instead of schools? What does it say about a society that builds cells instead of mental health clinics? I'll tell

you what it says…That the society is morally bankrupt.

We are here to create a moral society. It begins today.

Lastly, I got a phone call last night from a member of the news media. The asked me a question I get asked often about these rallies, "Will there be any violence at this rally?" Everybody is always scared of violence. Immediately I responded, isn't Governor Hutchinson's proposal already violent? He's the one talking about locking criminals up that don't even exist yet. It's the bullies/the establishment who always want there to be no violence. Well let me make something very clear… I am a man of peace. But I am also a man of common sense. You can't keep

on putting your heel on the throat of marginalized and oppressed populations and not expect them to respond. So, if you don't want violence...it would be wise to listen to their cries.

Amen. Amen. and Amen.

Full video of the rally is here:

https://fb.watch/baUb0jA4KT/

These are quotes that I gave during interviews after the rally.

"Ultimately the question is why? I mean couldn't we use that money to build up communities, couldn't we

use that money for education, pre-k, mental health clinics," Hood said.

Hood said when the state uses huge funds that go to prisons, they are taking away other opportunities to grow the community.

"When you spend 100 million dollars on new prisons, you are taking 100 million dollars away from our seniors, our kids, and all kinds of spaces and places and communities that need it," he said.

"Wouldn't it be amazing for every child in the state to have the opportunity to get a good start, instead of what the governor is suggesting giving them a good finish," he said.

I was kicked out of the gallery for refusing to stand for the pledge.

I entered the gallery of the Arkansas State Senate. During the national anthem, I remained seated (I pledge to no one but God). Immediately, I was kicked out of the gallery. When I protested that my first amendment rights were being violated, I was told that I could not return to the gallery. Furthermore, the guy screamed at me and said that I wasn't a real minister. I filed a complaint…and then proceeded to Gov. Hutchinson's State of the State address.

During the address…

Members of our group interrupted the State of the State address to protest Gov. Hutchinson's 100 million dollar prison plan.

Then the violence began.

We were all forced down the stairs and out the door. Tensions were undoubtedly high. When we arrived at a tunnel (under the capitol stairs)…where there were seemingly no cameras…the police began to beat protestors. Eventually, we were locked out of the capitol behind an iron gate.

Last press release of the day.

On Monday, February 14th, members of decARcerate, Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition and concerned citizens gathered on the Capitol Steps to voice their opposition to Gov. Hutchinson's recently proposed prison expansion. Later on, nonviolent protesters interrupted Gov. Hutchinson's State of the State address and were removed from the Capitol. Upon forcing the nonviolent protesters into the tunnel, officers (state troopers and capitol police) proceeded to escalate the situation and brutalize protestors in a covered tunnel under the capitol steps. The incident led to numerous injuries and two arrests.

The full of the beating is here (skip to middle):

https://fb.watch/bauTSeS7Ic/

THIS WAS MY FIRST TRIP TO THE ARKANSAS STATE CAPITOL.

February 23, 2022

Food Queeries: Liberating Our Cuisine / Dialogue at The New Theology School: Jeff Hood & Mark Sandlin

Rev. Mark Sandlin 00:02

Hello, and thanks for joining us. This interaction is the introduction to a project that I'm working on with The New Theology School. And we're gonna get into what that is in just a minute. But first, I wanted to welcome and thank Jeff Hood, who is a friend of mine. He's an activist, particularly in areas of the death penalty, but he's also more importantly for

this interaction, the Dean of The New Theology School. So welcome, Jeff, glad to have you with you, man.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 00:31

Thank you, Brother, I appreciate it.

Rev. Mark Sandlin 00:33

Very good. So, my project, ah, the working title for it is, ah, "Food Queeries." I'm looking at subtitle of something like, "Food, Identity, and Justice." And I wanted to introduce everybody to this, it's going to include five other videos where I'll be cooking and talking about queer theology in particular, and how that should impact us in terms of who we are. And.

as we address justice issues, particularly maybe politically, so I wanted to start out with something pretty simple, Jeff, just to think about food in general, to see where how, my thought process to get to why I think this is an interesting and important subject to put together and talk about. So for you, how do you – simple question, how do you experience food? Like what is – what is what is your engagement when you approach food?

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 01:30

Well, of course, I feel like I every time I think about the idea of food, I think about hunger?

Rev. Mark Sandlin 01:35

Yeah, absolutely.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 01:37

You know, I, I used to back in the day, you know, they always used to sing that song. And evangelicals plays, [singing] "hungry I am, desprit..," you know, you remember that, you know, I'm talking about much, but, you know, I remember. Back then, of course, you have this the nature of spiritual hunger. But I also realize, I remember when I heard that song when I was young, I remember thinking that for the first time, what it meant interact with God, based on what I eat, and based on how I eat, where I eat. And, you know, Brother Lawrence, always constantly talked about the practice of the presence of God, it's no

matter what we say, what we do, where we're at. And so I you know, I think that one of the reasons that this project is so interesting to me, is that, while it's easy to say, you know, when food tastes good, you know that that's God. You know, I've even heard this story about some of the Jewish schools in Israel historically having to explain this passage, "Taste, and see that the Lord is good." Some of the young students to open up their mouths, and they put honey on their tongues and say, "take and see that the Lord is good." And all of that, you know, of course, sounds beautiful, but there's also this justice component – like, is in the, in the cards as well. And, you know, so, again, I think that's why this project is of such interest to me. You know, basically say, food

is more than just its taste, it's also its source. It's also it's, it's also, you know, there's also an element of what it empowers us to do.

Rev. Mark Sandlin 02:43

Right. Right and it's the history of it, that builds into it. And we can learn a lot from all of that. And it's more than just taste. I mean, it engages all of our senses in a way that most things don't, I mean, some people experience food deeply through taste, through smell, through – through the hearing of a fajita plate coming out, of the touch of a messy burger running down your hand. And, and ultimately, because it engages us on a personal way so much it informs our identities. Which, I think then

ultimately, we can say, it begins to help you understand how it informs culture and impacts culture when it informs our individual identity that much. And it does that in a way that maybe nothing else does, which is why I find it such a fascinating place to begin exploring theology from and particularly in the United States, where we have so many different types of, of cuisine to look at. And, you know, it's always been important in religion, as you pointed out, you know, Passover meals, the Eucharist, baklava for Ramadan in Islam. They're just so many connections there. And it may – one of the things that that makes me end up considering is, while there are these connections as frequently around laws and rules and regulations. I mean, in

religion, there are certainly very strict guidelines. You got the Hebraic dietary laws, for instance. Which is interesting, I think, particularly for this project, in that the way that we actually experience food in the real world – try as we might, for instance, take French cuisine, and culinary rules, try as we might to define it tightly like religion does – it doesn't – cuisine does not adhere to rules and boundaries and guidelines very well. And matter of fact, it does the opposite. It has almost this need to break those boundaries to go outside of them. And so for this project, I think it's really interesting to look at U.S. cuisine. Because we have so many areas where people have come together and might be bringing with them these expectations and rules, these

guidelines of how things are supposed to be done. But then, when life gets real – I think one of the things that as I've looked into queer theology and began to understand it and recognize all the sources behind it from LGBTQ work, women's theory, liberation theology, is that life is just queer man, life is queer. When we bring all these people together, food ends up being this great entry point to recognize what that statement itself is, "Life is queer," because we see all these combinations of people coming together, bringing their food outlooks together, bringing their histories together, and doing it without even thinking about it. There's no way we can't do that. Because we've never done that we there's no, well, we're we have these rules that don't

allow us to do that. And so I think it's an interesting place to enter into talking about pushing boundaries, breaking rules, standing over and against faults, boundaries, normative constructs, those types of things, because it's something we all sort of intrinsically understand and are perfectly fine with when it comes to the culinary arts. So that's kind of a big, big angle that I think makes this a lovely entry point. Plus, it doesn't hurt that I love to cook. So my, my idea here is, is that as we continue to explore this, I'm going to look at the at about five different areas in the United States, where I feel very strongly they represent within their culinary construct, true, queer approach to life, into food. And a great entry point into considering a lot of pieces of queer theory,

queer theology, as well as what an understanding of those things should call us towards, in the pursuit of justice, and maybe particularly in the political realm.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 08:07

Yeah, I mean, you know, one of the things that, you know, I talked about this project that I've, that I've thought about is, you know, Jesus, Jesus has the Last Supper creates this space of communion and creates this space of, as often, as you gather remember me that, that Jesus is in our food, or that Jesus is in food. And so I think that that should, you know, speak to us and say something to us about what it means to eat that, that eating is an act of worship, to some

degree. And, you know, I've thought about, you know, what is it like to experience God and have beignet. What does it get like to, you know, experience God and some soul food in Memphis? Or, you know, some barbecue in Texas, or, you know, some lobster bisque in Maine, I mean, and you could go on and on and on. And obviously, there are messier, queerer, more colorful, I mean, you know, all of these descriptors, there's all these different dishes all over the place. ["Right."] It does seem like throughout history, food shows up in interesting spaces. You know, a lot of the times, very much a student of the civil rights movement, and a lot of times you hear about, you know, I guess, freedom songs, taking old spirituals and adapting them to this

historic moment, but there's also the the freedom dishes, as well. ["Right, yeah."] That is used to prepare celebrate, [inaduable], push – And, you know, I think that there's a reason that in spaces of just diplomacy and and spaces of great change or great celebration, it's often done around meals, right? This project is more than, you know, what are we going to have for dinner? I think ["Oh, yeah."], I think it's, it's about, you know, what or how are we going to live out this kind of gone a spiritual mandate? How are we going to love our neighbor as ourself based on how we eat, based on how we encounter their food based on how they encounter our food. And I'll say this quick, and then we'll get back to, I guess the way that this is structured. But,

you know, it was a number of years ago, I've been a vegetarian, hopeful vegan, I guess, is a good way of saying, yeah, and sometimes a better vegan than others. But I've been at least been a vegetarian for about 25 years now. And what brought me to this space of vegetarianism, in realizing how much of a problem the meat industry is for, not just not just the ethical consumption of meat, I mean, obviously, that's important the way animals are treated, but, but also this next space of the carbon that the meat industry puts into the environment, and how it is such a driving factor of global warming. And so obviously, that's a that's a part of the conversation. Justice is always a part of the conversation. But more broadly, it speaks to what we put on our plate, how

much it affects other people, and how much our relationship to other people. And so it seems like the play can be a starting point, to the way that we engage – the way the spirituality engages justice in the world.

Rev. Mark Sandlin 12:18

It absolutely absolutely can be and should be. And in a lot of ways, I think, I'm going to go back to queer theology and queer theory in that I think food is this great entry point, this almost embodiment of queerness that we all naturally understand, and can grab hold of. And as we look at different things, for instance, one of the sections that I think we should do is barbecue, which you get to the meat industry,

we immediately get this opportunity to talk about what [laughter] – we immediately get this opportunity to talk about, what, what is just in that and how do we go about caring for each other in the world around us as well as, as the livestock and what we should be considering. So these these wonderful little entry points, I think, into several important conversations that ultimately have political impact. But – but I think that telling the story through food, which we all feel so comfortable with, becomes important, because like I said, I do believe that food in a lot of ways, particularly regional types of cuisine in the United States because of how the United States came together, are in some ways the embodiment or an embodiment of queerness. If we take the lessons

seriously, for instance, one great quote and maybe maybe the cuisine that I'm most feel like does that is the Creole/Cajun food, particularly maybe gumbo, and you've got a rich history behind it that I will get into a little bit because I think it informs how people come together. But Chef Leah Chase, who's one of the probably one of the better known gumbo chefs in – down in Louisiana, known for several styles of it, had this to say. Well, this is a quote, I'm gonna read that I think, begins to tip my hat and how I think this works. She said, "People are like gumbo. It takes all different kinds of people to make a good world. Just like it takes all kinds of things to make a good gumbo." For me, that is a kind of a, a small picture of how this plays out throughout this project, where we

can we can see how things come together and challenge boundaries and borders and pre-established rules, whether that be dietary laws, or just cuisine cooking like French cuisine and then launch into an understanding of how that impacts our lives and how it impacts others. And how queer theology and queer theory can inform us in our move into the political perspectives of them.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 14:56

Yeah, absolutely. I love that. gumbo illustration. I think that you know, whether it's gumbo or other styles of cooking, I mean, you're basically creating something that no, no Gumbo is ever going to taste the same as another gumbo. Right? And Barbie,

Rev. Mark Sandlin 15:16

that's a good, I was just gonna say,

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 15:19

I like that too. I mean, in that, you know, no matter how you cook it, it's not always gonna taste exactly the same.

Rev. Mark Sandlin 15:28

Yeah, I'll go back down to Louisiana on another quote on this Chef Paul Perdomme, who was real popular PBS A while back, he puts it real simple. He says, "You should be yourself when you're cooking." And part of when he says that it's because he doesn't,

he doesn't like following recipes. He'll read a recipe, but he wants you to be yourself and experiment. And for me, that ties back to a queer theorist, Dr. Judith Butler, who does a lot of work on, um, are you performing to fit other people's expectations within their rules within their boundaries, are you truly being who you are. And I think food as a chef's, it calls chefs to be themselves, that's when they're successful, when they're really, really willing to go into these lands in between that aren't defined by recipes, and put themselves into it in their creativity, and risk some things, that's when food truly gets transformed. And that's when life gets transformed. ["That's right."] And that's how we make a difference in the world, is when we're willing to step outside of

these false narrative constructs these false binaries, and, and really put who we really are into it. And, and see that in other people as well and be willing to take risk and step up, and to be transformative in the world towards a more just world where more people can fully express who they truly are.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 16:57

That's right, you know, it's kind of funny. You bring up the idea of recipe. You know, what does it take to create a new recipe? Well, it takes somebody leaving an old recipe. ["Exactly."] Alright, or using no recipe at all. And so such a – such a recipe could be a recipe for disaster, or a recipe for salvation. It could be a recipe for something even more than the recipe. I'll

put it this way. I love thinking about, you know, ways of talking about life as the God beyond God, the very Tillichian thinking, and, and I think what you're going to be talking about and engaging with, is the recipe beyond the recipe. ["Absolutely.] What does it look like to engage the dish? You know, that, that space where the dish is, is unable to be named, but it's stepping our souls is touching our lives. It's touching, the way we send justice and the way we engage the world. And that is when you get to that space, that's the space of God. That's the space where God happens.

Rev. Mark Sandlin 18:20

It absolutely as well. I think that is probably a great way to wrap up the introduction to what we're going to be doing here. So first of all, Jeff, thanks again, for not not only being here to help me introduce it, but for helping guide through the thoughts on how to go about doing this and where it can be impactful. I appreciate you, I appreciate you letting me do this.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood 18:42

Yeah, well blessings, brother. I'm proud of you.

Rev. Mark Sandlin 18:46

Alright, well, thanks to all you tuned in. And we'll be back again with five different videos looking at five

different areas of not just cuisine, but of justice and how we might impact it in the world.

February 23, 2022

On the Theological Ethics of Assassinating Vladimir Putin

Earlier tonight, Russian President Vladimir Putin started an unprovoked war with Ukraine. Missiles started raining down on Kyiv and other parts of the country just seconds ago. For months, Putin has held the world in suspense as he has slowly amassed Russian troops at the Ukrainian border. In the coming days, Europe will experience its' largest

military conflict since World War II. The only explanation is that Putin wants more power over more territory. In statement after statement, Putin has expressed a desire to recreate the strength of the Soviet Union. He sees the innocent as merely collateral damage in the accomplishment of these goals. For months, diplomats have worked tirelessly to pull Russia back from the brink. In rejection after rejection, Putin has made it clear that he has no interest in turning around. Putin intends to kill thousands upon thousands of people to get what he wants. Make no mistake, this is a mad man. The only way to stop Putin seems to be to take him out. Previous mad men (and occasionally women) have brought us to this sort of ethical dilemma before. Do

you assassinate Putin? Do you kill in order to save the lives of countless others?

Surely, God has an answer.

Stepping back from the geopolitical for a moment, imagine a similar scenario playing out at your house. Masked gunmen break into your home. Going room by room, they bind you and your family up. Before long, everyone you love is huddled together in the living room with guns pointed at their heads. Desperate for a way to save your family, you notice that one of the gunmen has set his gun down. Escape is literally within your reach. You grab the gun. Then, time stops. Though the details are different,

the scenario is the same. Do you kill the gunmen? Do you kill in order to save your family?

Surely, God has answer.

God requires that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I don't see how one can ever love their neighbor and kill them.

God requires that we love our enemies. I don't see how one can love their enemy and kill them.

God requires that we pray for those who persecute us. I don't see how one can pray for their enemy while killing them.

Such answers bring us to a deeper question? In the face of Putin, are we to just do nothing? In the face of the gunmen, are we to do nothing? Are we required to simply be slaughtered?

I don't think so. I think God gives us more agency than that.

In the face of an evil empire, God gave God's life so that other might live. We are called to give our lives so that others might live. We are called to stand between Putin and Ukraine in whatever ways we can. We are called to stand between the gunmen and our

family in whatever ways we can. But is that the end of the conversation?

Surely, God has answer.

In moments like this, we can pray. While the scripture says to pray for our enemies, it is possible that there are more ways than one to pray. When we look at the actions of Putin, we can pray to God for his salvation…and if he persists…we can pray that God quickens his demise. When we look to the actions of the gunmen, we can pray to God for their salvation…and if they persist…we can pray that God quickens their demise. I can assure you that God

hears our prayers. Perhaps these prayers might be the most honest that we can pray right now.

God…save the soul of Vladimir Putin…and if he persists in this horror…take away his ability to kill by whatever means necessary. We put our faith in you God to save your people. Amen.

In this geopolitical moment, I believe that God gives us two primary ethical commands: First, we place our bodies between the Ukrainian people and Vladimir Putin in whatever ways we can…to disrupt the horror. Second, we pray for the swift salvation of Vladimir Putin…and if he persists…his quick demise. There is nothing moral about doing nothing.

Though I can't support the assassination of Vladimir Putin, I can pray that the people of Ukraine (and Russia for that matter) to be rid of this mad man very soon.

STAND WITH UKRAINE!

Amen.

March 5, 2022

A Thought Pattern on Fear and War / Within and in Ukraine

In the midst of all that is troubling our souls within and in Ukraine, I decided to construct a thought pattern…which if followed is capable of creating peace.

The root of war is always fear. We fear what we don't know. So we don't speak. We fear what we

don't understand. So we don't think. We fear being wrong. So we don't come to conclusions. We fear. So we don't do anything. Inertia becomes who we are. The world sees us as nothing because we offer nothing. If we desire an end to war, we must find a way to overcome our fear of the other. The other doesn't fear what they don't know. So they speak. The other doesn't fear what they don't understand. So they think. The other does not fear being wrong. So they make conclusions. The other doesn't fear. So they do something. Action becomes who they are. The world sees them as something to fear because they offer something. One operates from a place of scarcity. The other operates from a place of abundance. If we desire an end to war, we must find

a way to become the other. The only way to become the other is to let go of the comfort of fear…to let go of the comfort of saying nothing…thinking nothing… concluding nothing…doing nothing. The only thing that transformation costs us is fear. So why do we hesitate? We think that fear is worth more than the other. We think we are going to lose out if we let go. We are afraid. So war rages. Our only hope is to discover our self in the other. If we can find a connection, we can pull our self to a place beyond war. Turning the other into the self creates space for the true self…and an end to war.

The root of fear is always war. We war with what we don't know. So we don't speak. We war with what

we don't understand. So we don't think. We war with the possibility of being wrong. So we don't come to conclusions. We war. So we don't do anything. Inertia becomes who we are. The world sees us as nothing because we offer nothing. If we desire an end to fear, we must find a way to overcome our war with the other. The other doesn't war with what they don't know. So they speak. The other doesn't war with what they don't understand. So they think. The other does not war with the possibility of being wrong. So they make conclusions. The other doesn't war. So they do something. Action becomes who they are. The world sees them as something to war because they offer something. One operates from a place of scarcity.

The other operates from a place of abundance. If we desire an end to fear, we must find a way to become the other. The only way to become the other is to let go of the comfort of war…to let go of the comfort of saying nothing…thinking nothing…concluding nothing…doing nothing. The only thing that transformation costs us is war. So why do we hesitate? We think that war is worth more than the other. We think we are going to lose out if we let go. We are at war. So fear rages. Our only hope is to discover our self in the other. If we can find a connection, we can pull our self to a place beyond fear. Turning the other into the self creates space for the true self…and an end to fear.

In the midst of war and rumors of war, surely we can find a space beyond fear…without war. In the midst of fear and rumors of fear, surely we can find a space beyond war…without fear. We can be free of that which is holding us back…within and in Ukraine…if we realize that the root of war and fear is fear and war.

Amen.

***Thankful to Thomas Merton for helping to stimulate these thoughts.**

March 14, 2022

A Greater Feast w/ Joe Blotz

Just about two years ago, I began the process of creating The New Theology School. Since then, we've grown to over thirty doctoral students and nearly a dozen doctoral graduates. Presently, I serve as our Dean and as a regular mentor to our doctoral students. Our most recent graduate is The Rev. Dr. Joseph Blotz. A previous graduate of Pacific School

of Religion, Dr. Blotz is a United Church of Christ minister serving as Pastor of the First Church of Christ (UCC) in Mansfield Center, Connecticut. In his doctoral project "A Greater Feast," Dr. Blotz illustrates the beauty of what a wider conception of the Eucharist might look like. "The beauty of love is that we can concentrate on the entire body of Christ...not just the physical body." Below is a transcription (unedited) of a conversation that he and I had about his thoughts on the Eucharist. Enjoy.

Jeff Hood: [00:00:00] All right. Today is March the first 2022. And we are going to be engaging with, gosh, shit. Sorry. I'm messing this up. Okay. A final project here by Joseph Blotz being interviewed by

Jeff Hood. And all right, so let's get started. First of all, you tell this story about the scriptures and with how we have traditionally done that Eucharist. And I think there's this there's real power in talking about your transformation. Do you feel like the church is experiencing some kind of transformation at the moment? And what does that look like?

Joe Blotz: Yeah, I think there's a lot of dissonance actually, because I [00:01:00] think many denominations or congregations that might identify themselves as progressive Christians have sort of rejected traditional understandings of adaptive Jesus, and yet their liturgical practice, their worship practices haven't shifted at all to reflect those moves.

Jeff Hood: And so I think we're at this moment of really needing to re-imagine or revisit. What our sacramental life and our worship life looks like, because I don't think they've kept pace with one another, you know along with those lines terms of it seems like as I, as I kind of engaged your project, it seems like what you're offering.

Shouldn't be all that scary, even for Merck, more conservative Christians. I mean, there's nothing I read. That's like, oh my God, you know, this is going to completely overturn everything. It seems like I said an open invitation. Tell me, tell me about that a little bit. Was that intentional?

Joe Blotz: I [00:02:00] think I want to keep us grounded in some of those well loved well earned traditions of the church.

I think that there's gifts that are there for us to continue to engage and rediscover and, and still do things in new ways. So I know there's some traditions where this will be not feasible in any way. I mean, there's some liturgical traditions. This isn't a possibility, but I do think for a number of communities saying, this is just a tweak to what we're already doing, that might invite us into a more expansive vision of Jesus ministry of who we are called to be and how we might be beacons of hope, justice, compassion, and love in the world.

So, yeah, I mean, I think the pieces of. When I call it institution as the warrant of the sacrament, these scriptural components that have traditionally been [00:03:00] used in the sacramental life of the church, sort of picking new and expanding the repertoire of what those are. I think it is innovative.

Jeff Hood: Wow. Very cool.

I was going to add to kind of, kind of going into that just a little bit. I don't want to go too far down this road because I, I know this is not a, your project is a response, not necessarily a complete critique, but as far as engaging traditional ideas of. Is it necessary to overturn those ideas of the atonement in order to get to your project in order to get to these other ways of doing the Eucharist?

Joe Blotz: I think for some communities those traditional understandings can be helpful, but I think if it's the only way we understand the death of Jesus, it's not helpful. So. [00:04:00] Yeah, I think, you know, there there's work out of central America on torture and Eucharist and how the idea of Jesus' broken body for people whose bodies are also broken is liberative Christ has been there before us Christ is standing there with us.

And yet I think for others who look at that idea of Jesus was broken. So. It justifies my continuing being broken by other abusers. Ah, how do we, how do we overturn that understanding?

Jeff Hood: Would you say that it, would you say that it's contextual?

Joe Blotz: Absolutely. And I think the problem with having one narrative.

That we use within the Eucharist is that it doesn't allow for context. Right. And it just prioritizes that particular understanding. And I think one [00:05:00] prevailing reading of what the death of Jesus means and what that institution heritage means.

Jeff Hood: You know, I Slide this in there. And then we can go on the the different parts of the project. But, you know, one of the things that I've always talked about is that I've always called myself. I reformed Universalist in that, you know, that classic way of viewing The atonement viewing, whatever happened on the cross as sufficient for all people throughout time and eternity.

And you know, I've always said that I think that's the only honest way to be both a Christian I traditional Orthodox Christian and also a Universalist. But I think sometimes when we go down that road And as you can see me surrounded by all my books as we go down that intellectual road.

One of the things that we we neglect is our feelings. And I feel, I [00:06:00] feel, I feel like your project really engages feelings. And I think that that's, I think that because ultimately in Christian theology, so often we've been told that. Not to trust our feelings and, you know and even when we think about you know, we're coming up on land and as we think about you know, what Christ experienced, we're almost encouraged to to think about it.

From an intellectual space, but not necessarily from a feelings space. What does we know? We think about the agony and it's almost like every time I hear a message about the the agony of Christ. Well it goes one of two directions. I feel like. The the more conservative traditions wants you to think about, you know, how bloody and how intense and death, and, you know, they really want you to go down that road.

But on the other hand, I and I, [00:07:00] I won't get, go again too far down this road, but I w I was living in Oxford, Mississippi And I was at old miss. I was teaching, teaching and doing work on a doctorate. I never finished at at old miss, but I remember on a

Ash Wednesday that year, I went to the local United Methodist church.

And I feel like I always poopoo on the United Methodists. So forgive me. But there was a woman who got up and gave an Ash Wednesday service and. I don't remember a lot about it, but I do remember she using a duck call and saying that the duck call was part of God's call and to Lynn and all this kind of stuff.

And it was like, this is absolutely foolish. Like this is absolutely strange and foolish. And I guess to, to wrap it back around or to circle back around, it seems like. What you are doing is is neither strange nor foolish. And I appreciate that [00:08:00] because

it is an invitation to a place that that takes that takes tradition and takes the geology.

Seriously, and I am, I am. Exhausted and tired of progressive Christians thinking that they have to make a mockery of our traditions in order to you know, in order to be accepted in the wider culture.

You know, I am all about like inclusion and I want everyone to feel like they have a part, but at the same time, it's also like, You know, we are Christians and it's okay to be a Christian.

And so I appreciate that about your project. I felt like as I finished, it's okay to follow Jesus. And it's okay to engage, you know, these traditions in ways that are Th that, that understand that that tradition is important.

Joe Blotz: All right. I love Jesus. And I think [00:09:00] that the challenge, I think of traditional theologies of the atonement is this idea of the first person of the Trinity, the father, the creator, whatever language you wanna use as requiring the suffering and the death of.

The second person of the Trinity. So it's, it's that, that I think is, is the linchpin of this. Somehow God requires this pain and suffering as opposed to. Guide was willing to enter into the human experience, the human feelings fully in Jesus and experience the worst of what humanity had to offer towards, towards God and towards its itself as, as a fellow human.

And that God was willing to, to enter into that fully.

Jeff Hood: Yes. I love that. You know, one of the things that I wanted to. To touch on as far as the, [00:10:00] the, the first part of your project goes is, you know, you you've really pressed into this idea that praying shapes, believing, and you know, this idea that what we say at the table matters to how we engage issues of love, justice, grace, mercy ideas of righteousness.

I mean, obviously. Peanut, when, when Christ tells us greater love has no one than this than to give your life for your friends. I mean, obviously that has a lot of different ways of looking at it, but when I historically you know, I was always taught. Well, you know, that's about the blood dripping out and that

lashes, I mean, this real passion of the Christ way of viewing things.

But as I have read through, you know, your projects, I've thought to myself, okay. If I can if I can see what happened [00:11:00] as an act of love, more than an act of violence. Then, then that creates space. That is that is really beautiful and accessible. I mean, we have too much violence in our culture.

But tell me about. When you were creating kind of this praying is believing kind of space. I'm assuming that you thought a lot about what it means to foster love in the space of orthodoxy as just orthodoxy for the sake of orthodoxy.

Joe Blotz: Well, and I think too thinking about it as a parent, right? The language we use around our children matters.

If we constantly tell them that they're bad or naughty or behaving a particular way, they start to internalize that and take on that idea. As I'm bad, I'm not, I'm not a good person. And I think the same works for [00:12:00] Christian communities. If we are formed by a theology that at its core is about an violent act of redemption.

I think it invites us to see violence as redemptive in the rest of our lives. If we are formed by a God. Enters into humanness and enters into creation and invites holiness in the midst of our world. I think it

invites us to incarnate God's presence and God's action in our lives.

Jeff Hood: Hmm. Well, I love that.

You just had a, a word that I love incarnation you know, what does it's interesting that There's this idea historically that Jesus, the body and blood, it is incarnate and in the Ukraine. But at the same time, it seems like your project is placing the whole person of Jesus into the [00:13:00] Eucharist.

I mean, if you're just feasting on bloods, like you're a vampire and you know, just the body you're accountable, but it seems like if you allow the whole person to come into the Eucharist, you're feasting on something that is a little bit deeper than just the body.

Joe Blotz: Well, because I think that's what God invites us to write his guidelines, the whole of our persons to be engaged in the life of faithful living and work of building up the reign of God in our world,

Jeff Hood: you know? You said earlier that similarly I've thought about, you said that this is not necessarily open for you know, folks coming from more conservative traditions, but I do think that there is an argument to be made that you don't have to lose your tradition to engage your project. Like I think that, that there [00:14:00] is, there is space for a confluence.

Joe Blotz: Yeah, I think my, and if I use the word conservative, it was not, not unintended. I think it

was more national traditions or hierarchical traditions that dictate the kind of prayer or words that can be used. And specifically, I mean, you talked about the understanding of Jesus last becoming manifest in the sacrament traditions.

Ascribed to a physical change within the bread and the cup. A lot of those traditions say that the words, this is my body, this is my blood. Have to be present in order for that, that change to be effected. And the proposals I come up with. Largely remove those words from, from Eucharistic rain and the majority of circumstances.

And so I think for those traditions, it could be a stretch, you know, to, to adopt this, this [00:15:00] idea.

Jeff Hood: Could you do both?, Just out of curiosity.

Joe Blotz: I think it's certainly a possibility. I'm not saying it's just another, another way. Yeah, I get that. I just, I guess I'm just a, sometimes I have these tendencies to get to this space of experiment.

Jeff Hood: And anyways, just curious, because, you know, I guess it's, you know, as you talk about in the second part of the project, I mean this whole nature of. Tradition and, you know, history and, and such things. You know, I, I do think that one of the problems I see and more progressive spaces of the church is this fear that they're going to be considered unorthodox that, you know, they, they're trying so hard to be Progress, I guess relevant is I

think is the best word [00:16:00] relevant, but they're also afraid of, you know, being open to critique.

And, you know, I, I was, I've been thinking about this as far as the way people spend so much time on the clobber passages. I realized that for some people that is really important for me, it's kind of like, Maybe they're just wrong. Like, you know what I'm saying? And and it's okay. Like to say, maybe they're just wrong.

But I think also in your project, you do a really good job of saying this can be right. And that's the, like, I don't want to say that's the end of the conversation, cause that's not fair, but it's a. It's almost like you're offering a different path and it doesn't have to spend all of its time arguing with the other paths.

Like I feel, I feel like to, to do this, like to get up and, you know, and do this and create this different practice or engage with different practice. You don't have to spend all this time talking about how terrible the [00:17:00] other traditions are. And I think that's a beautiful thing. It's not really.

Joe Blotz: And I think to say that it has value and can still be maintained as one part of a whole, right.

I'm not saying that we should never say that or recite the story of the last supper or that that text has no value. I think it has immense value, but I think the exclusive use of it. Community and celebration and our churches can have a deleterious effect on Christian community. And especially when Jesus's

ministry was rooted in a multiplicity of meal practices.

And that table fellowship was one way he challenged the status quo. Okay. And multiplicity that's right.

Jeff Hood: I love that multiplicity. Yeah. You know, I was thinking you know, as we talk about de-centering you know, we are like, the goal is to like, be centered on [00:18:00] the work, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and traditional liturgy does seem to center on the death of Christ as opposed to the life and the resurrection.

And, you know, I, I I am one of these crazy Orthodox guys that does believe in a literal resurrection. But when I say that, I've always said does that mean that you could have caught it on camera? Does that mean,

you know, I don't, I don't know. I, I believe in the beauty of. What happened that there was a miraculous occurrence that has changed the world. And I say all that to simply say that it seems like in the, in the Eucharist, we are celebrating the miraculous life of Jesus and the debts in it. That's important. And as opposed to this space that celebrates only. The only violence.

Joe Blotz: But what does the resurrection also mean? You think it has a [00:19:00] lot to say about the goodness of the body, the goodness of creation that God continues to work within these Murphy things. Even in the midst of violence and death and that even they will endure, I think there's real power in that.

Jeff Hood: You know, I was watching earlier in in Ukraine there was a priest giving a communion in a. In one of the bunkers below Keith and I just thought to myself, you know, I don't know what what he was saying.

My assumption is he was using some kind of traditional Orthodox liturgy, but it did make me think we do this too. You know, as the old saying goes afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted and that, you know, there's a multiplicity of reasons that we do this. And I was thinking, you know, as [00:20:00] this priest was performing the Eucharist, he's not doing this, you know, for the theological, you need to believe in substitutionary atonement.

He's doing this to come. The people and it seems like we should, that's one of the main reasons we do this is to provide comfort and I love the way that you are creating a space of pastoral care and comfort. And it seems like it seems like I am when I read through You know, these Eucharistic prayers that you've created and different ways of doing the Eucharist that you've created.

I feel like I'm on, I'm on kind of the couch, like a, you know, I'm being, I can talk, I can engage. You know, instead of feeling like I am being acted upon, it does feel like I'm being active with, and that my needs are being engaged.

Joe Blotz: And my hope is that it does [00:21:00] afflict the comfortable, right? Like the idea that Jesus calls us to share is disruptive to some, to some people.

I think the idea that Jesus overturns the tables and the temple is disruptive and uncomfortable and and it should make us uncomfortable.

Yeah, I don't really like people enough to want to do this all the time. But you know, I was thinking in terms of you know,

Jeff Hood: I think this conversation is really engaging part four and This whole idea that there is, there is a richer space, you know, w we don't have to come at this from a place of you know, destruction.

We can come at this from a space of building and looking to the future and reconstruction. What does

the church look like 2000 years from now? And [00:22:00] hopefully it is a, it is a more vibrant place than simply. Telling people that they got to eat body and blood in order for them to feel better.

Joe Blotz: And that this is all about getting into habits, right?

Like, you know there's a beautiful tradition in the Catholic church. People being given Bayada come right before they die being given communion right before they die.

Jeff Hood: Sort of, as a, as I thought, I thought you, when you said that, for whatever reason, my mind immediately went to Viagra. And I know, I didn't know.

I was thinking, man, I didn't know. I ain't never heard of that, but okay. Sorry.

Joe Blotz: But this idea that it's food for the journey, I think is really powerful, but it's not just food tender journey, right? It's food for the journey of building having here, having this, not this future [00:23:00] experience. I think Jesus' ministry was continually about having been.

Jeff Hood: That's right. Yeah. I love that. Okay. So could we go through the road to a mass Eucharistic prayer? Luke 24 are coming adapted from Luke 24. How about you be one? I'll be too. I feel like this is going to be a Broadway play.

Joe Blotz: (1) / Jeff Hood: (2)

A Eucharistic Prayer Based on the Road to Emmaus

Luke 24

1- It was on that same day… 2- The day of resurrection… 1- When two of the disciples were making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus 2- They had heard the rumors… 1- Listened to the rumblings… 2- But they could not allow themselves to believe… 1- They had seen it, after all… 2- The betrayal in the garden… 1- The agony upon the cross… 2- The body behind the stone. 1- And yet now… 2- Some of the women… 1- Claimed to have seen him alive… 2- Risen… 1- The stone rolled away… 2- The tomb empty… 1- And it was as they were discussing these things… 2- Pouring over them in

their hearts… 1- That a stranger came to join them… 2- A very strange stranger… 1- Who seemed to know nothing of the news… 2- and yet who explained the story… 1- He opened up the Scriptures… 2- Taught of how the Messiah had to suffer and enter into glory… 1- And their hearts began to burn within them… 2- Set ablaze with Divine love… 1- When they reached the place to which they were going… 2- When they thought the journey was over…. 1- They invited this strange stranger to stay with them… 2- They couldn't bear to be parted from him… 1- There was something in his voice… 2- in his eyes… 1- in the way he answered their questions… 2- in the way he spoke their names… 1- As they sat down at table, the stranger broke the bread… 2- He spoke the words of

blessing… 1- And they remembered… 2- Remembered that night in the upper room… 1- the meal shared on the hillside… 2- dinner at Mary and Martha's… 1- lunch with Matthew the tax collector… 2- breakfast with Peter's mother-in-law… 1- It was as if scales had fallen from their eyes… 2- As if they could see, really see, for the first time… 1- It was him all along… 2- Walking with them… 1- Sharing the story… 2- Opening the Scriptures… 1- Jesus… 2- Jesus… 1- Alive… 2- Risen… 1- With them… 2- In the breaking of bread… 1- In that moment, he disappeared from their sight… 2- Yet he was still with them… 1- Always… 2- Forever… 1- In the breaking of the bread… 2- In the sharing of the cup… 1- So come now Holy Spirit… 2- Bless our eating and our drinking this

bread and this cup… 1- May our eyes might be opened… 2- may our hearts be set on fire… 1-and may we recognize the Risen One in our midst… 2- in one another… 1- and in all for whom Christ lived and died and lives again. 2- Amen. 1- Amen. 1 & 2- Amen.

Jeff Hood: Man, man, this shit is beautiful. I love it, man. I do, man. It is. So man, I mean, like I, like, I felt my heart burning is we went through that, man. It, it really is. Joe, this is I think quite the accomplishment I really do. Like, I, I I feel like I just,
it's almost as if I am doing. Like the liturgy sets me down and helps me to see what it was like to see, to hear, to know, to, to experience the resurrection.
You know, in a way that that sticks, I mean, it sticks

with you. And so as we wrap it up, I just want to, to let you know, [00:27:00] and really just Yeah.

Just, just celebrate this project because it really is. It is so important to offer. To offer space as taking a little bit more of a, to likeon approach, to a space beyond space, a beauty beyond beauty, a light beyond light. And for that matter, an incarnation beyond incarnation where we are experiencing Jesus, we are experiencing each other and You know, like I said, I just think this is absolutely a beautiful, is there anything else you want to add?

Joe Blotz: I would just say, you know, I'm grateful for the space, the beauty that you provided and enabling this project to come to fruition. The companionship and journey that you provided over the past year,

I'm not sure that it would have come to birth your midwifing and not to take so well. Well, we got we've got many years to come to do to do more work, my [00:28:00] friend.

Jeff Hood: And I just want again, I want to speak before we go. I've I would feel remiss if I just didn't say. This is absolutely beautiful. And hearing you talk about it you know, it was beautiful before, but hearing you talk about it has taken it to the next level for me, and y'all, this is a good looking guy.

If you could see him and hear these words, man, I'm telling you, but with all of that said thank you so much, Joe. And I'm gonna wrap this up there.

March 15, 2022

Should former Deputy Michael Davis Be Executed?

Thoughts from Lonoke County, Arkansas.

On July 7, 2016, I organized a rally against police brutality. For hours, thousands of us marched through the streets of Dallas. Right before the march was to conclude, I heard shots ring out. Looking up, I saw bullets slicing through the bodies of multiple police officers. The perpetrator was a man named Micah Johnson who claimed to be acting on behalf of victims of police brutality. Before the night was up, five officers were dead. During the hysteria, I will never forget the woman that declared through tears

of joy, “Those officers will never be able to kill our boys again.” Though I obviously don’t believe in killing folk…or celebrating killing folk…I have never been able to deny the fundamental fact that…right or wrong…killing folk does have consequences…though I work for nonviolent ones…such consequences cannot always be guaranteed.

On June 23, 2021 around 3am, Lonoke County, Arkansas Sheriff’s Deputy Michael Davis murdered 17-year-old Hunter Brittain in a parking lot. The reason? Brittain got out of his truck and pulled a container from the back that made Deputy Davis fear for his life. So…let me get this straight…Brittain is dead because Deputy Davis was afraid of a

container? Not long after, Deputy Davis was fired from the Lonoke County Sheriff's Department for not turning on his body camera prior to the incident. So the shooting of an innocent boy was just part of the job? Yesterday, Deputy Davis' manslaughter trial commenced. Though he is facing time if convicted, he will not face the penalty that he gave Hunter Brittian that night. But what if he did?

What if we made it happen? What if we put Michael Davis in a parking lot? What if we made Michael Davis hold the same container? What if we gunned Michael Davis down in a hail of bullets? What if we were all able to just walk away?

While I am sure that there are those here in Arkansas and beyond who would like to take such a path, I'm not interested. I don't think it would change anything. It's been my experience that you can't stop killing by killing…only love can do that. However, those of us who believe in nonviolence can't hold back the tide forever. If Michael Davis isn't convicted and given a substantial sentence…if perpetuators of police brutality keep going unpunished…you can expect more nights like July 7, 2016…more violent reprisals…and you can expect more mommas to be overjoyed that, "those officers can't kill our boys anymore." I it doesn't come to that.

God give us your strength…your justice.

Amen.

March 24, 2022

An Abusive Teacher & A Cover Up at Martin Luther King, Jr. Magnet Elementary School in Little Rock, Arkansas

I share all of this information with the hope that Kiley Lacefield will be able to achieve justice.

This is the statement that I constructed (and provided to the Little Rock School District) not long after the incident happened (initially I thought that

Renarda Kendrick's name was Ms. Kirkland // I also did not find out the name of the young girl (Kiley) until I linked up with the father, Stan Lacefield many days later // furthermore, I didn't realize until later that Kiley has special needs and was in a special needs class like my son):

Earlier today, I witnessed a teacher violently attempt to assault a student.

A little after noon, I pulled up behind Martin Luther King, Jr. Magnet Elementary School to pick up my son. As I exited my car, I saw my son (who is on the autism spectrum) and his aide, Kevin Yancey across the park. After getting in trouble, my son ran past

me to the car (which was parked not far away) and slammed the door. In that moment, I started talking to Yancey about my son's behavior. When, out of nowhere, I saw two children fighting on the other side of the playground (a girl / Kiley Lacefield and a boy). Yancey and the other teachers ran to break up the fight. I followed for a second…while trying to keep my eye on my son at the same time. Once the fight was broken up, the children kept screaming at each other. Then, a Ms. Renarda Kendrick told them to be quiet since, "they'd already got their licks in." The girl then snapped back, "fuck you bitch." Then, all hell broke loose. Ms. Kendrick visibly lost control and rushed toward the young girl with one fist raised. Yancey stepped in to hold Ms. Kendrick back.

As she was being held back, Ms Kendrick screamed, "I'm going to rip those fucking braids out of your head." Ms. Kendrick kept on trying to rush toward the girl. Both Ms. Kendrick's words and her body language indicated that if Yancey had not been there she would have undoubtedly assaulted the girl. After the explosion, Yancey helped get Ms. Kendrick back into the building. One of the other teachers rushed the little girl away…and kept her on the playground while the rest of the class went into the building. Even as Ms. Kendrick was going back into the building, she was still making audible threats. While I was told that the girl's parents came to pick her up later in the day, I was also told that they were not made completely aware of what happened. I

hope that this statement will be shared with the parents…and that appropriate employment and criminal action will be taken. I cannot imagine any circumstance in which Ms. Kendrick is retained as a teacher. I also cannot imagine any circumstance in which Ms. Kendrick is not prosecuted for her actions. I witnessed terroristic threats, child endangerment and child abuse generally defined. Furthermore, I am writing to make it plain that I will consider any further contact between Ms. Kendrick and my son to be to the endangerment of my child.

This is what has happened in the week since:

from LRSD…. NOTHING.

Not long after the incident, I reached out to the office at Martin Luther King, Jr. Magnet Elementary. When I asked to speak with Principal Karen Carter, I was told that she was not on campus. When I gave a little information about the incident that I was talking about, I was told that the situation was already being handled and that the kids that were fighting had already been punished. It was then that I realized that they were trying to pin all of this on the kids and weren't going to do anything about the teacher, Renarda Kendrick. In that moment, I demanded that Principal Carter call me back immediately (I didn't end up hearing from Principal Carter until late afternoon the next day). Though I was unaware of it,

the school had already told the Little Rock Police Department that they didn't need to come to the school to take a report. So LRPD had no idea of the gravity of the situation.

Undeterred by repeated dead ends with the school, I reached out to the Little Rock Police Department. They were completely unaware of the gravity of the situation. After a few calls, I was given the opportunity to file a police report. When it became apparent that Stan Lacefield (on behalf of his daughter) had already filed a police report, my information was combined with his information. By the time the report was ready for pick up, it had almost been two days since the incident.

Immediately following the incident, Principal Karen Carter allowed Ms. Renarda Kendrick to return to work. ie Ms. Kendrick has thus far never missed an hour/day of work after threatening to rip Kiley's, "fucking braids out" …and Kiley was simply expected to go back to school and act like nothing ever happened.

Interestingly, when Principal Carter contacted me she wanted to know if I had the incident on film.

Based on the differences in stories that came out of the school and what I saw, there was a cover up of this incident…and I think they thought they were

going to get away with it…that is until I used the number on the police report to contact Stan Lacefield. When I told him what I saw, Mr. Lacefield was shocked. The school hadn't told him anything that I had witnessed. In fact, they hadn't even told him that there was a witness. So, he was left to believe that the whole situation was "escalated" by his daughter Kiley. Though his daughter was not innocent, I assured him that the primary aggressor was Ms. Kendrick.

Amid all of this, I reached out to everyone from the superintendent down. Every conversation made me realize something, they all trusted in an investigatory process that I already knew had

broken down. I feel certain that Principal Carter had to have simply believed all of the other teachers who lied on Ms. Kendrick's behalf. I think everyone thought that the start of spring break would put an end to all of this.

Mr. Lacefield and I have made sure that wouldn't be the case. Just yesterday, at the Prosecuting Attorney's Office of Pulaski County, we started the process of filing charges against Renarda Kendrick for her behavior. We were assured that she would be held accountable for her behavior. We were also made aware that anyone who tried to cover up what happened would also be in legal jeopardy. Various child welfare services were also contacted. We held

a press conference after these meetings and made sure that the entire Little Rock region was aware of what happened. I am writing this blog to make sure that there is a permanent record of how this was handled. Every level of the Little Rock School District has failed Kiley…but thankfully there are other legal avenues to make them do the right thing.

Now, we wait. It seems obvious to me that any teacher that threatens a child…especially one with special needs…shouldn't be teaching. What I saw Ms. Kendrick do was disgusting…but the cover up of her actions by employees of Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary was just as bad. This is how abusers are allowed to remain in our schools…by those who are

given charge to protect our children just sweeping

the dirt up under the rug.

Amen.

April 2, 2022

The Fight

Seek!

That's what you said.

I sought.

And!

That's what you said.

I tried to pull it all together.

You!

That's what you said.

I'm right here.

Will!

That's what you said.

I heard the promise.

Find!

That's what you said.

I didn't find anything.

You said there was something.

You said it would matter.

You said so much.

You said.

I can’t see.

I can’t breathe.

I can’t think.

I can’t move forward.

I can’t go back.

I can’t do anything.

I’m stuck.

I’m stuck because of what you said.

I can’t break free.

Maybe you will help.

Maybe.

Maybe you will seek.

Maybe you will and.

Maybe you will you.

Maybe you will will.

Maybe you will find.

Maybe you will follow your own advice.

Maybe.

I’m still out here.

Choking on hope.

I’m still out here.

Clinging to words.

I’m still out here.

Waiting on you.

Between the promise…

You are strangling me.

and the reality…

You are strangling me.

Stop.

I can’t shake it.

I’m tormented.

Get this image out of me.

I didn’t ask for this.

Stop.

Something doesn’t feel right.

There seems to be no response.

There seems to be but a promise of nothing.

I didn’t believe.

I don’t believe.

I won’t believe.

I can’t believe.

I might believe.

I believe I believe.

Not again.

Death is delayed.

There was supposed to be faith here.

There ain’t no belief here.

There ain’t nothing here.

There was supposed to be hope here.

There ain’t hope here.

There ain’t nothing here.

There was supposed to be love here.

There ain’t love here.

There ain’t nothing here.

Maybe there is more than nothing.

Maybe there is more than maybe.

Maybe there is more than us.

Maybe there is more…

The insanity continues.

For thine is the something

…and the something

…and the something.

There is nothing more than this.

April 3, 2022

Silent Genocide.

Silence is horrifying.

Why?

Fear.

Of.

What we will hear.

Or.

Maybe we are afraid.

Of.

What we won’t hear.

Does God dwell?

In silence?

In darkness?

In nothing?

Strange.

Strangers.

Strangest.

Strangers.

Rooms full of silent strangers.

Is this what one calls a day?

Hours spent in silent longing?

Perhaps there is nothing strange about the silence.

It is what makes us…us.

Does our humanity speak?

Is it our breathe that breaks the silence?

Is this what connects us all?

Breezes we cannot see.

One gust of wind is all that we are.

The older breathes too hard.

The younger breathes too much.

They couldn’t be quiet if they wanted to.

Why do we demand their silence?

Only the able can be silent.

Birds chirp with no end in sight.

Animals can’t be quiet.

Silence seems exclusive.

Only the right species can be silent.

There is a schism.

There are the haunted.

There are the saved.

In the end, the noises survive.

What value is there in silence?

Noise is our greatest gift.

Or perhaps our greatest curse.

How does God speak without noise?

Are we saying that God doesn't have a voice?

Is God silent?

Justice chokes out the silence.

Justice speaks up.

Justice demands noise.

Justice yearns for noise.

Justice is not silent.

Silence is not spiritual.

Silence is convenient.

Silence is for the privileged.

Questions demand noise.

Questions lead us to God.

Questions are the spiritual practice.

God exists in our questions.

The soul is shy.

Shyness can’t dissipate without noise.

Loneliness is often silent.

Words speak.

Words free.

Words matter.

Noises.

Questions.

Communities.

Power.

Don’t silence it.

Within.

Without.

Voices.

Identify.

Evil requires identification.

Silence allows evil to continue.

Push back the evil.

Loudly proclaim righteousness.

Holiness is loud.

People are desperate.

For noises that matter.

Silence kills matter.

Holiness is loud.

Actions speak.

Hesitation kills.

Silence is always the accomplice.

Stop discerning.

Do something.

People are dying.

Speak.

Stop the genocide of the silent.

Love the noise.

You are not bored.

You are not guilty.

You are not a murderer.

Speak.

Make it end.

Light is a symphony.

Noise is the chorus.

Guide us dear sounds.

Guide us to the light.

The noise goes on forever.

Light perpetual shine upon us.

There are many directions.

We need directions.

Noise beyond noise.

Make it so.

April 4, 2022

The Color of the Hand: Genocide in an Age of Identity

Earlier today, I received a phone call from a dear theologian friend. For a short time, we discussed the horrors of what's happening in Ukraine. We talked about what it would be like to have to live in such horror. The questions for discussion were endless. How would you escape with your family? Would you be willing to fight back? Where is God during all of this? What can we do? While I'm sure we didn't get to every question of significance, it seemed that we

had covered a tremendous amount of ground. Before we finished up, my friend made a direct remark, "The only thing that would be worse for them is if they were black." Though the comment certainly gave me pause, I knew that my friend had to go. I also knew that we would come back to the comment.

A few hours later, I received several difficult photographs from one of my Latvian students. This student is a pastor that spends a tremendous amount of time with refugees. In the message, he revealed to me that he used to live in Bucha (where the first evidence of a genocide in Ukraine have appeared). Cautiously, I opened them up. Though I knew they

would be horrific, I didn't feel like I could be a follower of Christ and just turn my head. Every expectation of brutality that I had was exceeded. Mass graves. Dismembered bodies. Evidence of torture. Dead children. The entirety of the photographs combined proved to be nothing short of genocidal.

Through tears, I focused on one photograph. It was the image of a dead woman's outstretched hand. That might or might not be still attached. Her fingernail polish reminded me of the shade that my grandmother used to wear. One of her nails was blown off. I imagined… Who was she reaching for? Who is it that she loved that will never be touch her

again? That shade of red and that blown out nail hasn't left my mind all day. The tears have stuck around.

This evening, I found myself thinking about what my theologian friend said earlier. Is it true that this dead woman should be glad that she's not black? Such a comment sounds absurd. But then again, isn't it always absurd to think that one kind of human life matters more than another? Unfortunately, I hear variations of such comments all the time. Thus is the nature of living in a time of identity. In the midst of such, let me make something very plain…the color of the hand should make no difference with regards to our reaction to it. That hand belongs to a child of

God. Our hearts must always break at the sight of injustice if we are to maintain our own humanity. Plus, let's not forget that the politics of identity is what caused the ongoing genocide in Ukraine in the first place.

Amen.

April 7, 2022

Melissa Lucio is Innocent But Her Supporters Are Not…ie Carl Buntion

***For many years, I've served as a spiritual advisor on Texas' Death Row. For all my guys that were executed, there were very few people fighting for them. In fact, most executions in Texas are rarely publicly challenged at all.**

Every couple of years, a death penalty case arises that draws the interest of the wider public. Most of these cases don't get any attention until months (sometimes even days) before the actual execution is about to take place. In that short amount of time, supporters seek to galvanize the public to stop the execution. In most of these cases, innocence is claimed. Families are marched out in front of the cameras. Attorney's claim new evidence. Organizations are launched. New witnesses pop up. Celebrities speak out about the case. Leaders of these moments promise to do whatever it takes to stop the execution. Final interviews with the condemned take place that are broadcast incessantly. Posts, editorials, signs, marches and

rallies are all utilized. Everyone demands an answer to the same question, "Are you going to stand by as the state executes an innocent person?" Unfortunately, most of the time these efforts are not successful. In time, the executed person is forgotten, and the state goes on about the business of executing other people. When asked about the case later, those involved always declare that they did all that they could do. I often doubt such words.

Melissa Lucio is innocent of the February 2007 murder of her daughter, Mariah. The death was an accident. The confession that Lucio gave police was coerced. The state presented no evidence that Lucio had ever abused any of her children. Lucio had

terrible representation at trial. The Cameron County District Attorney who prosecuted the case was later sent to prison for corruption in similar cases. Other key pieces of evidence have been called into question. If Melissa Lucio is executed, it won't because of any of this information. If Lucio is executed…and those on death row who come after her…it will be because most of her supporters have only gotten involved in this case as it has garnered public attention. Knowing this, state leaders just ride these types of cases out…because they know they will only have to endure such pressure every couple of years…and my fear is that's what's about to happen in this case.

Since 1982, 573 people have been executed in Texas. With that in mind, easily less than 10 have received the type of attention that Melissa Lucio's case is. Imagine if all 573 had. Would we still be sitting here talking about this? I doubt it.

Less than one week prior to Melissa Lucio's scheduled execution on April 27, convicted cop-killer over 80 year-old Carl Buntion is scheduled to be executed. Why isn't anybody talking about Buntion? Because…unfortunately Lucio's supporters only seem to care about their moment…and not the wider death penalty abolition movement. If people continue coming in and out of the movement like

this, there will be plenty more Melissa Lucios and Carl Buntions.

Amen.

April 11, 2022

The Failure of Theological Education & an Experimental Response: The New Theology School

There is profound beauty in the pursuit of God. Perhaps, there is nothing more beautiful. Surely, at the core of every being is a spiritual being. Someone or something that is waiting to explode from within. Unfortunately, modernity doesn't seem to have much use for explosions. We want to know what is

coming. We want to be prepared. We think that we can outlast fate. How can one be prepared for God? It seems to me that God is something that happens whether we are prepared or not? So why do we try so hard to manipulate the unmanipulable? Such attempts are absurd…yet we pursue such absurdity all the time. Our efforts have amounted to nothing… empty buildings filled with empty souls doing empty things. In fact, our institutionalizations of God have been the death of God. Surely the confinement of spirituality is nothing more than an extermination of spirituality. Our belief in such efforts perpetuate the suffocation of our souls. Our acting on such efforts the destruction of our societies. Current forms of theological education are evil. Not because they are

always wrong…but because they are always trying to control what is right. Surely theological education can be so much more than constant efforts at resuscitating Gods long dead? There is life in the pursuit of spirituality. We must stop letting institutionalists convince us that we must settle for death. We must make room for unreal explosions of the divine within. We must be filled…so that we might fill others. We must destroy anything that would hold us back. We are free to know God. We are free to be beautiful once more. We are free to create the theological education that we desire…and deserve…movements that can set the world free.

But how? How could a revolution of such magnitude ever come about? Institutionalism is so ingrained in all that we are. We believe that education is a commodity to be bought. We believe that education is supposed to be standardized. We believe that education doesn't have room for radical practitioners. We believe that education is for bolstering what is normal. We believe lies. But how? How could we've been so fooled?

Just like in many other disciplines, theological education often begins with an illusory promise of a job. There is this idea that if you believe and behave then there will be a position waiting for you on the other side. In the meantime, students are left to

accrue astronomical amounts of debt. In the process, theological education becomes an exercise in indentured servitude. If the student wants a job, the student is expected to keep their contrary convictions to themselves. In turn, theological education becomes a means of theological confinement…not liberation. So, if theological education is to be beautiful again…it mustn't be for sale…it must be free.

Most often, purveyors of theological education promote answers…or at least certain arenas of answers. If you want a particular slant, then you choose a particular school. At that school, your theology loses all semblance of individuality. You

become an answer…or perhaps even pledge loyalty to a set of answers…and forget all the questions that made you seek theological education in the first place. In the end, current theological education perpetuates a world of haves and have nots. Those who are left on the outside are believed to have little to nothing to offer the theological conversation. How can such things be said of beings that are all ultimately spiritual at their core? Each one of us has so much to add to the theological conversation. We should be encouraged to pursue the questions…and if those questions only lead to more questions…then theological education is working exactly how it should. Spirituality has no limits. Theological education shouldn't either. So, if theological

education is to be beautiful again…it must be intellectually unrestrained.

Theological institutions are notorious for incessantly reproducing the same types of graduates. They are a sort of factory. Graduates just fall off the standardized assembly line at the end of every semester. With regards to doctoral students, their assembly lines are just a little longer. Ultimately… however…they do what all the other graduates do… the same thing. They become professors of theology that offer the same worn-out teachings as all their other colleagues. They can't help it really. They are just doing what they have been trained to do. If things are to change, the assembly line way of

creating professors must be destroyed. There must be new processes developed…that are outside of traditional institutions. So, if theological education wants to be beautiful again, it must start creating professors in the wild.

Let all who have ears to hear…hear. While I'm sure there are countless ways of manifesting a beautiful resurrection of theological education, I can only speak directly to one.

For years, I'd placed the entirety of my body into the fight for justice. I wrote. I spoke. I dreamed. I marched. I bled. I guess I died too. Through it all, I became a theologian…a great liberator of words and

worlds. Ultimately, I realized that it wasn't my six graduate degrees that got me there…it was the freedom to write…to speak…to be exactly who and what God created me to be. I realized that one of the great desires of my heart was to help others find such liberation…such space. It was in those exact hours that I started to gather other theologians. Together, we dreamed about a new tomorrow…a place where theological education was beautiful again.

In the dream world, The New Theology School was born. While certainly not perfect, we offer theological education for free. There should never be a financial barrier to knowledge of God.

Furthermore, we believe that students of theology should have the ability to study broadly. So, our students choose their own path of study. Lastly, all our graduates become professors at the school upon graduation. So not only are we doing theology in the wild…we are also creating professors in the wild. We call our degree a Doctorate of New Theology (NThD). Already, we have seen dozens of students come to study with us from throughout the world (including Buddhists, Muslims, Catholics and more)…and I have no doubt that we will see dozens and dozens more. The reason that we can be so confident is because we know that we are the vanguard of a new wilder form of theological education…a much more beautiful

one. The resurrection of theological education is upon us.

Come and see.

www.thenewtheologyschool.com

April 12, 2022

The Economy of Jesus and The Impending Execution of Carl Buntion

In Matthew 25, Jesus didn't give a caveat with regards to guilt or innocence when he said, "For, I was in prison, and you visited me…". Instead, Jesus declares the he is the prisoner. Jesus always instructs those who follow his way to stand with those at the bottom…the most helpless…the least of these.

Carl Buntion was convicted of sexually assaulting a child before he ever killed anybody.

Sounds like a sick piece of shit to me.

>>>>The name James Irby is important to this conversation. He didn't deserve to die. Jesus was with him too.<<<<

On June 27, 1990, Carl Buntion was in the passenger seat of a vehicle that was pulled over Houston PD officer James Irby. Buntion jumped out of the car and shot Irby in the head. Then, after he fell to the ground…Buntion stood over him and shot him twice in the back.

Sounds like a sick piece of shit to me.

To make matters worse, rumor has it that this guy was also a member of the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas at one point.

Sounds like a sick piece of shit to me.

At trial, Carl Buntion was convicted of Irby's murder and sentenced to death. Buntion has been on death row just over 30 years. By all accounts he is the oldest person on death row in Texas…and perhaps… even in the world. Over the last few decades, Buntion's health has declined and he is now confined to a wheelchair. I've been told (and I believe) that Buntion is a changed man…who has repented of his crimes…

Next week…April 21, 2022…Carl Buntion is scheduled to be executed. When Governor Abbott

wipes his hands of the situation…. This man…who is nearing 80…will be rolled into the chamber…he will be strenuously lifted onto the gurney…his old arms will be strapped down…his elastic skin will be pulled tight so that it can be stabbed with a needle…and he will be pumped full of poison until he is dead. When the old man lays dead on the gurney, the Governor will tell everyone that justice has been served. This is a man who scores political points based on killing defenseless people.

Who's the sick piece of shit now?

According to Matthew 25, Jesus stands with the killed (the least of these)…not the killer (the powerful).

According to Matthew 25, Jesus stood with James Irby…not Carl Buntion.

According to Matthew 25, Jesus stands with Carl Buntion…not Governor Abbott.

In the economy of Christ, it seems that Governor Abbott is the odd man out.

Amen.

April 13, 2022

The Execution of Christ is The Execution of Patrick Lyoya.

Growing up, our youth group regularly watched depictions of the passion of Christ. Imagine, terrible white actors covered in fake blood. In the midst of it all, we were always encouraged to manifest emotion. Our leader would shout out…. "Feel what Christ has done for you!" On multiple occasions, I remember pushing my eyelids as hard as I could to make myself look like I'd been crying. As everybody manifested

the expected tears, I didn't want to be left out. Earlier today, I didn't have to press on my eyelids. The tears came quite naturally as I watched a video of the most recent passion of the Christ…the execution of Congolese immigrant Patrick Lyoya by an officer from the Grand Rapids (MI) Police Department.

You see…

Early last week, Christ got into his car. Driving down the street, Christ noticed an officer pulling up behind him. After tailing him for a moment, the officer pulled Christ over. Unsure of why he was being pulled over in the first place, Christ struggled to

figure out what was going on. The officer declared that his license plate didn't match the car. He never said why he felt the need to run the license plate in the first place. Christ knew very well why he ran it. Officers were always looking to pull over folks like Christ. After some verbal back and forth, Christ tried to find his license. The officer kept escalating the situation with his words and body language. Afraid for his life, Christ ran. The officer chased him. When the officer caught up, he began to struggle with Christ. Over and over again…afraid for his life…Christ fell to the ground and got back up. The officer called for more officers. This only made Christ more frightened. "Stop resisting!" The anger in the officer's voice only escalated the situation.

When the officer pulled a weapon, Christ swatted at it to try and save his life. The officer fires. Now on top of Christ, the officer keeps screaming and pushing. The situation just keeps growing more and more violent. The officer seems to be generating an excuse to use even greater force. As Christ squirms for his life, the officer pulls out his gun and fires one shot into the back of Christ's head. There in the grass…Christ bled out.

I saw it all.

In the midst of the holiest days in the Christian year, we can equate Patrick Lyoya with Christ based on Christ's declaration that he would most viscerally

dwell "…in the least of these." So, as we remember the execution of Christ…let us not forget the execution of Patrick Lyoya…because if we do, we have forgotten Christ.

Amen.

April 14, 2022

Historia Divina.

I created Historia Divina to be a mystical revelation of the juxtaposition of history, Christ and self. Since Christ has existed throughout all of history, it makes sense that one would be able to find Christ in history. Thus, Historia Divina is the process of engaging Christ with the expectation that Christ will guide you to deeper historical and spiritual truths. It is imperative to remember that this process guides you

into the account rather than just simply reading the account. Since you are journeying with Christ, the process is just as much about learning more about Christ as it is learning about a historical account. The process concludes in deeper historical revelation of Christ…Historia Divina.

Historia Divina has six steps.

Read

Meditate

Pray

Contemplate

Envision

Record

Read.

Pick a historical account that has spiritual significance. Then, slowly read through the account. Now, close your eyes and rest your mind. In the stillness, offer thanks for the creation of the account.

Meditate.

Keeping the mind clear, breathe slowly for a short period of time. Then, allow all that you remember from the account to slowly come flowing back. Sit

for a while with whatever you retrieve. Ultimately, you will create a mental synopsis of the account.

Pray.

With the eyes still closed, acknowledge that Christ is present. In these moments, ask Christ to guide you. With expectation, thank Christ for preparing you for what's ahead.

Contemplate.

Listen. Hear what Christ is saying to you. Engage the depths of what Christ is saying.

Vision.

Restore the mental synopsis you created in your mind. Feel it in your spirit. Let Christ lead you back through the details. Give your being fully to the journey. Pay close attention to all that is revealed. There is no detail that is insignificant. Remember.

Record.

Hold tight to all that you have seen. Create a new mental synopsis. Find a place to preserve it. Give thanks.

April 15, 2022

Melissa Lucio, Texas and Life on Good Friday

Do you remember?

Word spread quickly. The crime was unspeakable. The reward for his capture was great. The government was desperate to get him off the streets. Nobody knew what he was capable of next. Considering him to be exceedingly dangerous, law enforcement planned carefully. For some time,

they'd practiced and discussed the take. When the moment arrived, one of the fugitive's confidantes revealed his location. As authorities made the arrest, those closest to him pushed back. It was no use. It was as if he knew his fate.

Government officials repeatedly declared that a monster had been taken off the streets. Everyone wanted justice. Believing some level of due process was necessary to keep from giving their power over to the mob, local officials restrained themselves. Everyone knew that this was a big one. Insult after insult flew. Then, the time came.

When the doors opened, he immediately became aware of how public his case was. Though he'd seen reports and heard rumblings, he just wasn't aware of the magnitude of the hate. The weight of it all was almost too much to carry. Weak in the knees, he determined to keep moving. The people kept calling him a monster. The words were painful. However, it was more painful to realize that they were calling everyone he loved monsters, too. When the walk didn't seem like it could get any longer, he was there.

There was no question what everyone wanted. Death was in the air. The authorities gave him a chance to save his life, but he didn't take it. Nobody could believe it. Who wouldn't take the opportunity to save

his own life? He was subjected to further punishment and then offered the chance at life again. He declined. Death it was.

The path was long between the place of judgment and the place of execution. At every step, the cries of "monster" overwhelmed his brain. The religious people seemed to be the ones shouting the loudest. In the midst of it all, he stumbled a few times. I guess that's the nature of all difficult paths.

As the place of execution approached, the governor had one last chance. Citing his faith, the governor let the killing continue. Waiting for death, the man prayed. Slowly, he was strapped in. His great crime

was raised up for all of the world to see. God felt so far away. How could he have been so forsaken? His final words echoed in the beings of all who heard them, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." Death came with a rush. In great agony, he took his last breath. It was finished.

Do you believe?

The message of Jesus is that his execution is enough.

Do you see what is happening?

Melissa Lucio is being marched to her execution.

What will you do to stop it?

If you do nothing, you will be denying that the execution of Jesus is enough.

Did you not realize that the offer of life is on the table?

Texas, surely, you're smart enough to take the deal.

April 17, 2022

The Death of Certainty and The Resurrection of Wonder: A Short Easter Homily

The room was electric with anticipation. Every eye was glued to the stage. Everything but the speaker was a waste of time. We were about to hear one of the greatest liberal theologians of all time. Finally, he arose. I couldn't believe how old he was. The pictures made him look so young. I guess that's a trick of publishing. Keep recycling an old picture to make the writer appear relevant. When he started

speaking, I wasn't surprised to hear a bunch of church jokes. I was surprised that they took so long. I was ready for the meat. Then it hit. For multiple hours, I listened to John Shelby Spong (God rest his soul…) ravenously deconstruct everything he could think of. By the time he was finished, everything was figured out and there was nothing left to believe in. Jesus was dead and that was it. No hope. Just death.

I work with an eclectic guy on death row. Since I've been a spiritual advisor to him, he has undergone a variety of faith transformations. At one point, he was a Wiccan. At another point, he was a Muslim. At yet another point, he was a Pentecostal. Now, he is exploring the Bahai tradition. I never try to steer

him one direction or another. I've never felt like that's my job. I just listen. Whenever I ask him why he keeps engaging all these traditions, he always tells me the same thing, "Wonder always leads me to something beautiful…"

Surely, Easter is a time of wonder…not death. There is really nothing to figure out. There is only something to experience. If you can describe it, you've missed it. If you can't describe it, you've found it. The path of certainty will never get you to the beauty of it all…only wonder can do that.

Amen.

April 21, 2022

Lamentations: On Carl Buntion & Oscar Smith

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director Abraham Bonowitz and national Death Row Spiritual Advisor the Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

Death row is quickly becoming a nursing home. Don't believe it? Think about the two guys who are facing execution today. Carl Buntion is 78. Oscar Smith is 72. Both are in terrible health. Both need help to complete many basic tasks. Both are going to require significant assistance to even get to the execution chamber…let alone up on the gurney. So, who picks up the slack? State workers of course.

You go in to make sure that your patient is cleaned up. You go in to check the vital signs of your patient. You go in to feed your patient. You go in to help your patient into their wheelchair. You work hard to keep your patient calm. You steady your patient so that they don't fall. You encourage your patient to

keep them moving. You use all your strength to lift your patient. You create a line to run fluids into your patient's veins. You do all that you can to help your patient…be executed?!?!

Be they doctors, nurses or any sort of technician…we can't imagine that any state worker did all that schooling for the opportunity to kill old people. Surely there is freedom from all this madness? Yep, we can stop killing people…we can stop creating new classes of victims…we can end the death penalty. But in order to do that, we are going to have to help people realize that the rhetoric around the death penalty needs to include the experiences of everyone who is victimized by it.

We lament that Texas is executing Carl Buntion. We lament that Tennessee is executing Oscar Smith. We lament the role that state workers play in the process. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

April 23, 2022

Open letter to Gov. Gregg Abbott: Melissa Lucio is Not Innocent…But She's Not Guilty of Capital Murder…and She Damn Well Shouldn't Be Executed.

***Melissa Lucio is innocent of the February 2007 murder of her 2-year-old daughter, Mariah. The death was an accident. However, innocence in one regard does not mean innocence in all regards.**

**** Melissa Lucio's daughter…Salena…has called the infamous documentary, "The State of Texas v. Melissa Lucio" misleading. In fact, Selina declares her mother guilty of abusing Mariah.**

Some of her statements on social media include…

"She yelled at us all the time."

"All of her kids were taken away by Child Protective Services at one point."

"When we were all back in the same household… that's when she became abusive…not to all of us… just to my sister, Mariah."

“Bites.”

“Ring marks on Mariah that matched my mom’s rings.”

“Bruises.

“The only person who abused my sister was my mother, Melissa Lucio.”

“Everybody was trying to save Melissa at the expense of the truth.”

“My siblings who are most vocal about this case weren’t there.”

***** I have chosen to believe Selina…that Mariah was abused by her mother Melissa Lucio. Of course, these statements are bolstered by the admitted facts that there were drugs in the house and that neglect was observed on multiple occasions.**

Dear Gov. Greg Abbott: An Open Letter on the Guilt & Innocence of Melissa Lucio

Dear Gov. Abbott.

Melissa Lucio's daughter was named Mariah. In the midst of all of the media attention around this case, that name is probably the easiest to forget. The past few days have made me realize that advocacy…my advocacy…on behalf of Melissa Lucio would benefit from honesty about the nuances that exist in this case.

You see, there are parts of this case that I just can't ignore. The drugs. The negligence. The incriminating statements from some of Lucio's other

children. It just seems to leave no doubt that Melissa Lucio failed as a mother. Every time I hear the word…innocence…it just doesn't seem to fit. I think it's important to make it plain…that Melissa Lucio is guilty (either by commission or omission) of abusing Mariah…full stop.

But…the world is a complicated place.

Guilt in one regard does not mean guilt in all regards.

Melissa Lucio wasn't found guilty of abuse…she was found guilty of capital murder.

Even those with the most rudimentary understanding of the law can see that the videos of her interrogation…the lack of due process…the inadequacies of the supposed expert testimony…and a whole host of other less obvious aspects of this case…all betray fundamental principles of our criminal justice system. The reason that this case is drawing so much attention is that there is (beyond assumptions, innuendos and fabrications)…

NO PROOF THAT MELISSA LUCIO ACTUALLY KILLED MARIAH.

The nuance of this case mustn't obscure this fundamental fact.

In the next few days, the State of Texas will be looking to you to guide them in this moment. If given the opportunity, I pray that the nuance of this case (that Melissa Lucio might have been a bad mother but she didn't kill Mariah) won't keep you from doing the right thing…saving Melissa Lucio's life.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Polunsky Unit, Texas' Death Row

April 26, 2022

The Tragedy of Carl Buntion: Dr. Barbara Laubenthal and Dr. Jeff Hood on The Movement to Abolish the Death Penalty, Melissa Lucio and Indifference

On June 27, 1990, Carl Buntion killed of Houston Police Officer James Irby. There is no denying this fact. For his crime, Buntion was sentenced to death. After waiting almost 32 years in prison, Buntion was executed. This is a short analysis by Buntion's dear friend, Dr. Barbara Laubenthal and national death

row spiritual advisor, Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood on the tragedy of Buntion's final days.

Indifference might be the greatest of all evils. In the face of tragedy, the human experience seems to demand that we feel something. In the case of Carl Buntion…for many…there was nothing. In fact…in the State of Texas…executions have become so routine that most people don't even notice. I guess in a State where killing has become so common one might expect such indifference. But, when indifference comes from fellow activists…the tragedy is made all the more tragic.

Let there be no doubt, that we are overjoyed that Melissa Lucio received a stay of execution and hope that she will be free very soon. This article is less about Melissa Lucio and more about the culture of death penalty activism that far too often prioritizes some cases over others…sometimes even at the expense of others.

In his final days, Carl Buntion regularly prayed for Melissa Lucio. Unfortunately, he was left to wonder if anybody was praying for him. You see, when one death penalty case is prioritized of other cases… there is a spiritual tragedy that plays out. Can you imagine sitting in a cell being encouraged to pray for someone else's case when you are about to be

executed? It would be very easy to think that one has been abandoned by God when everyone is claiming God for someone else. Just last week, one wouldn't have had to search social media too long to have seen that the prayers for Melissa Lucio far outweighed the prayers for Carl Buntion. This is a tragedy.

In is final days, Carl Buntion regularly declared that Melissa Lucio shouldn't be executed. Unfortunately, he was left to wonder how many people were making the same declarations about him. The campaign around Lucio was based around a declaration of innocence. Buntion was guilty. Does this mean his case mattered less? Multiple commentators on

social media seemed to think so. We can't end the death penalty by prioritizing claims of innocence… abolition will only happen when our priority is prioritizing the lives of all people. Our demands for the lives of those on death row should never be conditioned on innocence. Doing so devalues human life and hurts the cases of those who are not innocent. This is a tragedy.

In his final days, Carl Buntion often spoke about his concern for the family of his victim, James Irby. The campaign of Melissa Lucio took attention away from the Irby family. By prioritizing one case over all other, tremendous indifference is shown to the victims in all the other cases. The failure of

campaign models of activism are that they don't foster a holistic approach to all of these cases. This is a tragedy.

In his final days, Carl Buntion dreamed of a day when the death penalty would be no more. Multiple people have argued that the case of Melissa Lucio has brought new people into the movement. If the attention paid to the execution of Carl Buntion in the middle of the campaign to free Lucio is any indicator, such a statement could not be further from the truth. In fact, it seemed that more new activists showed more indifference than ever before. This is a tragedy.

Campaigns that prioritize one human life over another are always going to end in tragedy. Carl Buntion's dead body is a direct testament to such a fact. So, is Carl Buntion a victim of the campaign to save the life of Melissa Lucio? You can answer in one way for certain…Buntion is certainly not a survivor of it.

April 30, 2022

A Tale of Two Pictures: An Interaction with Carman Deck, Scheduled to Be Executed in Missouri on May 3, 2022

For years, I believed that people don't change. Until, I started to change. Now, I know people change.

In what can be described as an act of pure evil, Carman Deck brutally slaughtered James and Zelma

Long of De Soto, Missouri. Of this, there is no doubt. In fact, Deck has admitted to what he did.

Under the guise of asking for directions, Deck knocked on the Long's door. In an act of compassion, Zelma invited him (and his codefendants) in. When inside the house, Deck pulled a pistol and ordered Zelma and her husband James to lie face down on their bed. For 10 minutes, Deck listened to the couple beg for mercy. Then, he shot and killed them. Lies. Greed. Torture. Murder.

For whatever reason, time didn't stop there. Deck continued to live. Those who remained, were forced to figure out what to do with him.

During his initial sentencing process, major mitigating factors were left out. Including, the fact that Deck was abused and abandoned during childhood. Such mitigating factors are presented to give juries information that might contribute to a propensity to exercise mercy during sentencing. Based on repeated process deficiencies, Deck's death sentences have been overturned three different times. Presently, Deck is about to executed largely based on the procedural fact that much of the mitigating evidence that was available multiple decades ago is no longer available to stop the execution. To say that the process has been legally deficient would be an understatement.

Now, we are left with another moment of reckoning. I guess we are defined by such moments. Next Tuesday, Carman Deck is scheduled to be executed. Those of us who remain, are forced to figure out what to do with Deck. How will we choose to proceed? The answer to that question will say more about us than it does Deck.

Which brings us back to the original line of thought. Do people change? I guess only you can answer such a question. Have you ever changed?

While I don't know Deck, I can look at two pictures. Do you see any change between the initial prison

shot and the latest prison shot? There appears to be great change. Maybe that which we were is not always definitive of that which we are.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Dean

The Rev. Charles Moore Professor of Public Theology

The New Theology School

Spiritual Advisor, Multiple Death Rows

April 30, 2022

Lamentations: On Carman Deck

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director Abraham Bonowitz and national death row spiritual advisor Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

“…abandoned for days at a time.” “…around age 5, was forced to find food for his siblings.” “… sometimes all the kids had to eat was dry dog food.” “The child was so hungry that he ate all of his food, threw it up on the table and started eating his vomit…before he could be stopped.” “…and when they had a bowel movement…their stepmother would rub the feces in their face and laugh hysterically while taking pictures.” “Gang-raped.” “Despite numerous attempts to help the children from community members…authorities constantly returned the children to the abusive care of their parents.”

These are just a few descriptions/quotes regarding the abuses that Carman Deck endured before he brutally murdered Jim and Zelma Long (during a robbery with multiple codefendants). While two wrongs don't make a right, certainly the initial wrongs go a long way in explaining the subsequent wrong. The State of Missouri was charged with keeping Carman Deck safe (and had the opportunity to on multiple occasions) …and obviously failed miserably. By failing Deck, the State also failed the Longs. Yet, it is Deck who is being required to pay for all of the crimes…both done to him and those done by him. While Carman Deck deserves to be punished for his crimes, it would seem that the State that failed him so badly as a child could show him a

little mercy…and spare his life as an adult. Unfortunately, we don't expect that to happen. It seems that people would rather kill their mistakes than have the courage to confront them.

Sign the petition to stop the execution of Carman Deck:

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-carman-deck-in-missouri

We lament the abuse that Carman Deck suffered as a child. We lament the senseless deaths of Jim and Zelma Long. We lament that Missouri is executing

Carman Deck. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

May 2, 2022

Clergy United Against the Death Penalty: An Announcement & Invitation to Support

Not too long ago, I sat down with a young man on death row. I didn't know anything about the guy. This was not uncommon for me…as I had been ministering death row for a long time…and often engaged inmates that I'd never met before. After exchanging initial pleasantries, I went on a rant about how I couldn't believe that all these employees would either just stand aside or participate in the

killing of another human being. Immediately, he looked me dead in the eye and said, "They're just doing their job…and some of them actually do resist in their own way. But your people ain't doing nothin'." Taken aback, I questioned, "Who are you calling my people?" To which he replied, "I ain't tryin' to offend you…but you know that it's the clergy that are the ones responsible for all of these executions continuing. Hell…if even half of the clergy would stand up and demand a stop to these executions…the politicians would be shaking in their boots and end the killing overnight." When I protested that there were some of us working hard against the death penalty, he chuckled and declared, "Obviously, not hard enough."

That conversation haunts me…because I know he's right. Clergy have never organized in mass against the death penalty. While there has been involvement in individual campaigns, denominational statements, press releases and a wide variety of other activities, there has never been an organizational home for clergy with regards to the death penalty. I tried to ignore the tugging on my heart to do something about it. I guess I figured I was too busy. That's a sad thing to think when people are dying. So, a few months ago I began to create space for conversations with fellow clergy about what it would look like to create an organizational home for clergy against the death

penalty. Throughout numerous conversations, it was decided that we wanted to create a minimal structure with which to engage the work of abolition. Such structure seemed best equipped to engage the fluidity of the movement. Just this last weekend, the conversations came to a head. Together, we decided to launch, Clergy United Against the Death Penalty. We have one goal…and one goal only…the abolition of the death penalty.

Join us.

For clergy…the quickest way to join us in our efforts is to send a quick email to clergyagainstthedeathpenalty@gmail.com that

includes you full name & contact info so that we can include you in our organizing efforts.

For everyone else…the quickest way to support us is to like our Facebook page @ facebook.com/clergyagainstthedeathpenalty & keep up with what we're doing.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Convener, Clergy United Against the Death Penalty

May 3, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (1. There is…): Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Ohio Death Row philosopher Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of

particular consequence, is Hood's consistent interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

This is the 1st of 7 short chapters/ruminations.

Let's reset. Let's breathe. Let's love.

There is a need to breathe.

What does love look like? Visualize. Love.

There is a need to think.

Love comes to us in the earliest of places. Love comes to us in our villages. No matter where we move or where we go…love is there. We take our villages with us. Love is community. Love is acceptance. Love is us.

There is no love without us.

Love is a place for us all to begin. Love is a place to build a community. Has such a place ever existed? It can. We are all connected. We are all responsible for each other. Your child is my child. Your mother is my mother. Your hope is my hope. The beginning of the loving community is to realize such things…

and work to make them more real every day. Our realist reality is love…everything else is fake.

There is nothing real besides love.

Love is the only freedom. Love is our only freedom from the fake. Love is not easily achieved but it is always better than the alternative…denying truth. When we choose to other people we are choosing to deny who they are…their truth. That's why we got so much hate in this world…so many prisons. The goal of love is to be free and to make others free. Love is freedom's oxygen. Without love there is no ability to breathe. So, it makes sense that it is also true that love and freedom are one and the same. So, when

you have love you have freedom. That's why nobody can imprison you…you're always the one who imprisons yourself. Our primary desire must always be to cling to our only freedom…our love.

There is no way out without love.

There is freedom in learning to love yourself… perhaps that's where all freedom begins…or ends. The problem is that we got so many people running around talking about love and freedom who have never taken the time to think about love and freedom. How can you talk about love and freedom when you spend every day talking about hate and

bondage? Love is freedom from the hate and bondage within.

There is no way in without love.

Love is also change. In fact, it speaks to our stamina with regards to change. Do we love enough to work to find the truth? Do we love enough to work to uncover the truth? Do we love enough to work to be the truth? Do we love enough to change? Do we love enough to fight for freedom…for love?

There is no way without love.

May 9, 2022

Lamentations: On Clarence Dixon

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director, Abraham Bonowitz and the Convener of Clergy United Against the Death Penalty, the Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

Anyone who follows the implementation of the death penalty in the United States, knows that the final stages of every execution is filled with a variety of last second appeals. Sometimes appeals focus on the method of execution. Sometimes appeals revolve around the drugs. Sometimes appeals center on claims of new evidence. Regardless of the subject of the appeal, there is one goal…to delay the execution as long as possible. You see, the job of the appellate attorney is to keep their client alive. Some final appeals are more successful than others.

Take for instance, two recent cases in Texas.

Out of options, appellate attorneys David Dow and Jeff Newberry tried to appeal to perceptions of cruel and unusual punishment in their final arguments on behalf of Carl Buntion, "Having lived under a sentence of death for over three decades in a state which keeps its death-row prisoners in solitary confinement, Buntion has been punished to a degree exceeding that inflicted on anyone else outside of a very small number of death-row prisoners…No legitimate purpose for the death penalty would be served by carrying out his execution." This appeal was not successful.

Not long before her execution, Melissa Lucio raised nine issues before the Texas Court of Criminal

Appeals. Of those, the court ruled that four of those issues are valid and sent the case back down to the trial court. Such legal action by her appellate attorneys saved Lucio's life...and now she has a real chance of never being executed, and she may even be exonerated and freed via that appeal, or if the efforts of the FreeMelissaLucio.org campaign are successful in getting the charges against her dismissed without further litigation.

In the coming days, Clarence Dixon is scheduled to be executed. Presently, Dixon's appellate attorneys are desperately trying to save their client's life. Their primary argument was regarding Dixon's

severe mental illness. That was dismissed last week, so now their efforts are centered on the viability of the drugs to be used in the execution process. However, time is running out. Recently, U.S. District Judge Diane Humetewa told Dixon's attorneys, "I just do want to remind you that the window of opportunity here is closing…I do ask you to be mindful of that." Will there be other types of appeals pursued in the coming days? Will that window of opportunity be filled to the max? Will they seek for the window to be expanded? Only Dixon's attorneys know the answer to these questions. If they are doing everything they can to help their client, it seems like the answers to all such questions should be yes.

There are those who call these last-minute appeals stalling tactics. They're right. Clarence Dixon's attorneys are simply throwing everything they got up against the wall to see what will stick. We hope something does.

Urge Governor Doug Ducey to stop the execution of Clarence Dixon @

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-clarence-dixon-in-arizona/

We lament the difficult life that Clarence Dixon has endured. We lament the senseless death of Deana

Bowdoin. We lament for the victims of all of Clarence Dixon's crimes. We lament that Arizona is executing Clarence Dixon. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

May 15, 2022

Complicity: A Letter to White Christians from Buffalo, New York

Fellow white Christians.

Yesterday (May 14, 2022), a young white heavily armed man named Payton Gendron drove 200 miles from his home to Buffalo, New York…and killed 10 people and wounding three others in a mass shooting at a supermarket. The vast majority of the victims

were Black. Gendron has made his racial motivations for the attack clear.

Life is busy. Right after dropping the kids off at an event at church, you decide to make a quick run to the grocery store. Pulling into the parking lot, you see a spot up front. Pressing the gas a bit, you race to get it. Then, somebody cuts you off and gets the spot that you'd already determined was yours. Pissed off, you shout an obscenity and stare down the driver. Then you drive around and get a spot in the back of the lot. As you are walking up to the store, you grab a cart and then see a guy exiting the car that cut you off. Not intimidate, you give him a piece of your mind. He gives you a piece of his too. Deciding it

was better to just drop it, you go inside and turn toward the produce aisle. Picking up an apple to examine whether or not it was as fresh as you wanted it to be. You notice out of the corner of your eye that the man had returned. Fearing another confrontation, you put your head down. To your surprise, the man apologized for cutting you off. Liberated, you apologize too. In that moment of grace…reconciliation…and love, the two of you embrace. Then…out of the corner of your eye…you see a heavily armed young man enter the store. Pointing in your direction, he starts to fire. You dive out of the way and the man you were embracing is riddled with bullets. Rapidly, it becomes clear who he's targeting. Eventually, the shooter makes it over

to you. Instead of firing, he remarks that he's not interested in shooting white folk.

Though this is obviously not a recounting of exact events in Buffalo, New York yesterday, it does capture the demands of the world in which we currently live. There are moments of grace. There are moments of reconciliation. There are moments of love. Yet…despite such moments…there are still these moments of tremendous racial violence and hate. Most white Christians keep jumping out of the way. This is why simple moments of grace… reconciliation…and love are not enough. We are called to do more. We are called to place our bodies into the conversation. We are called to place our

body between the shooter and the targets. We are called to give our lives. In our society of perpetual racial violence and hate, to do anything else is ultimately not graceful…reconciliatory…or loving. In fact, it is complicity.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Dean, The New Theology School

Convener, Clergy United Against the Death Penalty

May 16, 2022

Lamentations: On Virgil Presnell

Lamentations: On Virgil Presnell

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director, Abraham

Bonowitz and the Convener of Clergy United Against the Death Penalty, the Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

Nearly 46 years after his crime, intellectually disabled murderer Virgil Presnell is scheduled to be executed at 7pm on Tuesday, May 17, 2022. What does society gain by executing a nearly 70-year-old man more than four decades after his crime? We contend… nothing. In fact, it seems to us that we have much more to lose than Presnell (he is aging and living in a large box)… the moral health of our society.

While the description (below) of the Virgil Presnell's crimes is graphic, it illustrates why he was re-sentenced to death after his first death sentence was

thrown out on appeal. For those who support the death penalty, this man's crimes are certainly such that he stands out as one who is particularly deserving. The question is…. What is the consequence of having a death penalty in the first place? You see, even though these executions might be less awful or prolonged then the way the victims have suffered, at the end of the day, government employees are still conducting the killing of a defenseless person. In the case of Virgil Presnell, add to the mix his demonstrable intellectual disability and the fact of the abuse he suffered as a child and even before his birth – his mother drank heavily while pregnant with him.

So, it's not so cut and dry. We ask again… Do you want to be included in the same category as Presnell? Are we willing to take on the burdens of premeditative murder? These ongoing executions make sure that we all are guilty of moral corruption. How can we claim to be making our communities safer by making killers of us all? You can't heal and kill at the same time.

We don't normally publish the details of the crime, because such is readily available in the media and various lurid pro-death penalty web pages. But it is precisely because we oppose the fact of executions in all cases that we feel it is important for those of us saying that executions are wrong to know exactly what offense is being punished. Should Virgil

Presnell be severely punished and society held safe from him? Of course. Is it enough that he should suffer death by incarceration rather than by execution? Yes.

TRIGGER WARNING – The following detailed description discusses crimes of physical and sexual violence against children.

Virgil Presnell sat in his blue Plymouth Duster for most of the day outside of a Cobb County, Georgia elementary school. The date was May 3, 1976. In the distance, he saw a 10-year-old girl walking alone on a wooded trail. He knew he'd found his chance…but he needed a plan. At home, Presnell got his gun, found the perfect rug and packed a jar of lubricant.

The next day Presnell positioned himself along the trail and waited. When the 10-year-old girl came down the trail she was followed by 8-year-old, Lori Ann Smith. Presnell grabbed both girls, taped their mouths shut and abducted them. He also claimed to have a gun. While driving, he repeatedly forced the 10-year-old to orally sodomize him. When they arrived at a secluded area, Presnell got out his rug and jar of lubricant and walked the girls into the woods. After he brutally raped the 10-year-old, he told her to stay where she was…and that he was going to take the younger girl, Lori Ann Smith back to the car. On the way back to the car, Lori Ann tried to run away. Furious, Presnell slammed her face into a creek and held her there for several minutes…

until she was dead. Returning to the 10-year-old, Presnell again forced her to sodomize him. Then, he took her back to the car and locked her in the trunk. Driving away, he got a flat tire on his Duster and was forced to drop the 10-year-old in another secluded area. After forcing her to sodomize him again, Presnell left to change his tire. After hearing sounds from a nearby gas station, she ran for help. When police arrived, she was able to give them a description of Presnell and his car. Police located him in a parking lot changing his tire. Eventually, Presnell led them to Lori Ann Smith's young body. In his apartment, police found child pornography depicting the young girls.

May 23, 2022

Southern Baptist Life: Rumors of Abuse

Throughout my experiences in Southern Baptist churches, I encountered at least six different situations of significant sexual abuse. Most were from the church I grew up in, The Rock Baptist Church. While at least one other was from a church that I worked at

“One of the ministers used to take boys on special camping trips.”

- **From the 1970s at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia, abuse resulted in multiple tragic circumstances.**

“He just likes to dress up like a clown and spend time with the boys.”

- **From the 1990s at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia, abuser was ultimately convicted of multiple sex offenses.**

“Hell, I was 14 when I got married. What’s wrong with that minister kissing that girl?”

- **From the 1990s at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia, abuser repeatedly victimized young girls.**

“Take a picture of your privates with that underwater camera…it would be so funny.”

- **From the 1990s at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia, abuser disappeared.**

“The minister loves spending time mentoring the boys alone.”

- **From the early 2000s at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia, abuser was ultimately convicted of multiple sex offenses.**

“I love taking pictures of all the boys.”

- **From the late 2000s at Cloverdale Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, abuser was outed as a serial sex offender.**

Goring up at The Rock Baptist Church, there were constant rumors of abuse. However, there was always little action.

May 31, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (2. Beware): Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Ohio Death Row philosopher Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of particular consequence, is Hood's consistent interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

This is the 2nd of 7 short chapters/ruminations.

“Since I’ve acquired love, I feel free right here where

I am right here on death row…”

-Keith Lamar

“The more I love the freer I feel…”

-Jeff Hood

Let’s pause for a second to catch our breathe.

Breathe in…

There are obstacles out there on the path to love.

What should we beware of?

Let's take a second and allow those answers to fester inside of us…

Love shouldn't make you feel like shit. Love shouldn't make you feel like you're worthless. Love isn't abusive. If love makes you feel such things…it isn't love. You better get the hell away from it

quick. It's a trap. Indeed…that fake love will destroy you quicker than anything else you could imagine… because it destroys you from the inside out.

Beware of fake love.

There is no love in simply believing. You can believe all you want…in whatever you want…but if you don't have love you are nothing. The problem with believing is that sometimes it takes you away from loving. You work so hard to believe right that you forget to love right. Believe in doing love…or being loving. Surely there is no other reason to believe? Belief without love is abusive.

Beware of belief without love.

Love should always be our hope. Don't trust nobody who hasn't placed their hope in love. The future is always going to be bleak without love. Relationships are always going to be terrible without love. There will never be a future worth living in without love. Our hope should be love…and love should be our hope.

Beware of hope without love.

The future should be about love…because if it's not… then the future is not worth working towards. Our highest aspirations should be love. Our greatest

dreams should be love. Our most lofty expectations should be love. The temptation is to think of something a little bit better and work for that. Don't settle for less. Set your sights on the fullness of love…the fullness of you…the fullness of the future. When you set your sights right…then your love will be right.

Beware of a future without love.

There is no abuse in love. Perfect love casts out abuse. Love should be constantly purging abuse. Love should be constantly refining itself. Love should demand perfection…and work until it is achieved. Throughout life, we face moments of

abuse. Love is not about how we endure those moments…it is about what we turn those moments into…love or more abuse?

Beware of any abuse that claims to be love.

Love is love.

Beware of anything that isn't love.

Now…let's sit right there for a moment.

Breathe out…

June 1, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (3 of 7. The Future): Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of particular consequence, is Hood's consistent

interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

This is the 3rd of 7 short chapters/ruminations.

3.

"Love is the only freedom."

-Keith Lamar

"Love is either free or it is not love."

-Jeff Hood

Reset.

Breathe.

Love reveals the truth that there is more than just all of these bad things happening all around us. Pain is but a reminder that there is something more. It's a reminder of how deficient what is actually is.

Love is future.

Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes we fuck up. Sometimes we just can't get it right. When such things happen we have difficulty seeing beyond what is. Love is the reminder that the future is there even if we cannot see it.

Love is the future we cannot see.

Love demands that we let go of what was. Many of us spend are whole lives holding on to things that have happened. When we go to bed, we are consumed

with nightmares. When we wake up, we allow memories dictate how we are going to spend our days. When we exist through our waking hours, we allow ourselves to be haunted. Love is about loving yourself enough to work to let all of that shit go.

Love is a future beyond the present.

Like it or not, we're all connected to each other. Your pain is my pain. Your failure are my failures. Your triumph my triumph. The reason such statements sound so scary is that we have sold a lie… we have been sold the lie that we are doing all of this on our own. You are never alone. We are one

organism with my parts. We are only as successful as we are all successful.

Love is the belief in us.

We cannot connect with the whole without bringing our whole to the table. You can't love someone until you love yourself. Our present is not our past. Our present is not our present. Our present is not our future. Love is so far beyond all of that. Love is about bringing all of the beauty of us to the table… even beyond all that we can conceive of in the present. Love is believing in the brilliance of us

beyond what we can describe. Love is believing in the brilliance of us beyond what we can see.

Love is the belief in the brilliance of us.

We have to continually elevate our thinking to keep up with what love is doing. If we stop for a second, we will start missing things. We must open our mind and heart. We must travel further faster both inward and outward. There is so much we can know if we have the courage to keep up. Reality is always moving and so must we.

Love is the belief in the expanding of our consciousness.

Love is about our responses to reality.

One way or another we are going to respond.

Why not concentrate on making it good?

Why not concentrate on making it love?

Breathe out.

Jun 2, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (4. The Is): Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Ohio Death Row philosopher Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of particular consequence, is Hood's consistent

interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

This is the 4th of 7 short chapters/ruminations.

4.

"Love and abuse shouldn't even be mentioned in the same sentence…"

-Keith Lamar

"You can't abuse somebody with love in your heart…"

-Jeff Hood

Full stop.

Open your lungs.

Breathe in.

We think that love is about being right. We think love is about winning. We think that love is about emerging victorious. We think that love is about coming out on top. We think wrong.

Love is humility.

There is no freedom in hate. There is no freedom in judgment. There is no freedom in discrimination. There is no freedom apart from love. There is only one true freedom.

Love is freedom.

When we encounter love we are encountering who we really are…we are encountering the antidote to our false self…we are encountering the realest possible reality. We are encountering the one true us. We are encountering the us beyond us. We are encountering everything.

Love is everything.

There is nothing wrong with condemnation. Injustice should be condemened. Injustice should always be condemned. But you will die if you stay in condemnation forever. When you love someone rightly…you are loving them into a higher way of being…you are loving them beyond condemnation… to a higher place of justice.

Love is justice.

One of the greatest problems with our society is that we assume that love is always going to look the same. Make no mistake…love always exists…beyond

our borders…beyond our categories…beyond our lines.

Love is unrestrained.

There is one standard by which to measure the success of a life…love. There is one standard to measure the fullness of a life…love. There is one standard…

Love is the standard.

When people oppress us…we can either listen to them or we can live beyond them. When people hate us…we can either listen to them or we can live

beyond them. When people wish us harm…we can either listen to them or we can live beyond them.

Love is transcendence.

There is a transformation available to us all.

We can either choose it.

Or…

We can allow hate to choose us.

Love is the only freedom.

Breathe out all that is not love.

Reset.

Rest.

June 4, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (5 of 7. Maximum):

Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of particular consequence, is Hood's consistent

interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

5.

"Love ain't real until you learn how to love yourself."

-Keith Lamar

"Only a mindless dumbass would try to love somebody without first loving themselves."

-Jeff Hood

Clear your mind.

Breathe.

Who do you give your heart to? Where do you give your heart? How do you give your heart? When do you give your heart? What do you give your heart to? Why do you give your heart?

Love is a question.

Love explodes our expectations. Love destroys everything we think we know. Love moves our

realities. Love rattles our souls. Love changes everything. Love is a new start. Love is a new reality.

Love is a transformation.

The opposite of love is not hate…it is indifference. It is seeing injustice and not caring. It is seeing hunger and continuing to eat. It is seeing thirst and continuing to drink. It is watching someone die and then acting like nothing happened. It is seeing pain and turning one's head. The opposite of indifference is not hate…it is love.

Love is a concern.

Too often we tie love to what is. We fail to see the possibilities beyond our realities. There are few things more evil than to allow love to be shackled to what is. Love is always moving forward. Love is always moving stronger. Love is always moving faster. Love is always…

Love is a potential.

We all have trauma in our lives. Some have more than others. Regardless, there can be no love unless one is addressing their own trauma. Unaddressed trauma is always going to come out in relationships.

Love and unaddressed trauma don't mix. In fact…

love is the only thing that can treat trauma.

Love is an antidote.

When you love someone on a minimal level…you're not really loving them…you're controlling them… because on a minimal level you're not able to understand that love is about freedom. On that minimal level you are allowing your fear to control your love…instead of love controlling your fear. There is no minimum with regards to love.

Love is a maximum.

Love can't exist alone. You got to learn to love the inward. You got to learn to love yourself. You got to learn the outward. You got to learn to love everyone…everything…else. Love isn't a vacuum.

Love is a relationship.

We exist on Planet Earth.

But.

That don't mean we exist on Planet Love.

You've got to worker a little harder for that.

Hold it all in your mind.

Breathe out.

June 4, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (6 of 7. Free): Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of particular consequence, is Hood's consistent

interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

6.

"We are responsible to love and that's it."

-Keith Lamar

"Love is the only judge."

-Jeff Hood

Let your mind go.

Follow it.

You can't be healthy without love. You can't function when you don't have love in your heart. Existence without love is death.

Love is alive.

The word love is the only word that matters. All other words flow from that word. If you can't define love…you can't define life. You must get the definition of love right before you can grasp it… before you can hold it.

Love is defined.

There is always a love beyond love…a greater love to work toward…a greater love to believe in…a greater love to aspire to. So often love is a vision of tomorrow…a hope. When we put our faith in things hoped for…we discover love…the love beyond love.

Love is beyond.

Even in the partial love is perfect. For the partial is about waiting for the perfect…the expectation of the perfect…the belief that the perfect is possible. There is a perfection in engaging the partial. Love is not a

treadmill…love is perpetual growth. We must place our hope in hope….in love.

Love is process.

Belief is an act. Belief is work. Belief is movement. Belief is change. Love is about belief. Love is active. Love is about doing the work to discover the truth. Love is about knowing truth. Love is about letting truth wash over you. Love is about letting truth set you free.

Love is belief.

There is no spirituality. There is no prayer. There is no practice. There are no sacraments. There is no communion. There is nothing without love.

Love is religion.

We are so distracted. We think that everything matters so much. We become blind. The world is deadly really. Love makes us stop and think about what it means to see…what it means to live. Love makes us put up or shut up. Love keeps us from running into all sorts of bullshit. Love keeps us from getting destroyed by a world that is determined to destroy us. Love helps us to open up our eyes…to survive.

Love is sight.

Love does not indoctrinate. Love frees the individual to think…feel…experience…for themselves. Love is the only way that we can honestly connect with people…by bringing our full self to the table. A bunch of robots aren't capable of love. We must be free in order to know each other… to know the world.

Love is free.

Love is the most important thing we can do with our lives.

Breathe in.

Go do it.

June 4, 2022

A Concise Theology of Love. (7 of 7. Love is not…):

Death Row Ruminations (Thoughts from an Extended Dialogue with Keith LaMar)

This concise theology of love was constructed by The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood (Dean, The New Theology School) after a recent night of dialogue/conversation with Ohio Death Row philosopher, Keith LaMar. Of

particular consequence, is Hood's consistent interaction with Lamar's slogan, "Love is the only freedom."

7.

"You can't have a life while carrying hate…"

-Keith Lamar

"Love is the liberation."

-Jeff Hood

Remember.

What have you longed for your entire life?

Feel the love.

Do you love me? This is one of the most misused questions in all of human existence. People ask such a question in order to demand an answer that they should already know. You see, if someone loves you their action will show it. i.e. You shouldn't have to ask. If someone's actions don't show love, then any affirmative answer to such a question would be a lie.

Love is not a lie.

For love so loved the world…that love gave love's only begotten love…that whosoever believes in love shall not perish…but have everlasting love.

Love is not temporary.

Religion is about control. Love is about freedom. One's encounter with the spiritual should always be free. If one's encounters with the spiritual are not free…then they are not loving. There is no spirituality without love.

Love is not religious.

Love is energy. Love is electricity. Love is the life force. Love is always changing. Love is always moving. You know when you plug into it. It is the breathe of life.

Love is not static.

Love is awake. Love is seeking to understand. Love is seeking to know. Love is seeking to see. Love is scary because it requires that you respond to what you see…experience…encounter…know…come to believe.

Love is not asleep.

Love does something. Love moves something. Love is something.

Love does not sit still.

When one is joined together. When two are joined together. When three are joined together. When the entire world is joined together. Hell…when all of the universe is joined together. Since all of these things are true whether we realize it or not.

Love is.

There is power in saying that love simply is. There is tremendous freedom in knowing that love is. No

matter what we do…love is. We don't have to create it. We just have to embrace it. We just have to live it. We just have to love.

Know love.

Feel love.

Experience love.

Be love.

…and you will never die…

For love is the only thing that is eternal.

Breathe out.

Love.

June 5, 2022

The Black Pentecost (w/ Yoel Omowale)

By record of the New Testament and the testimony of believer's in antiquity, the indwelling, outwardly manifesting Holy Spirit; was and is capable of performing nature-bending miracles on request. This was intended to making the believer righteous… but our contention is that The Black Pentecost is what makes us whole.

Jeff Hood:

So, it seems to me that what is going on in the world…what Blackness is doing in the world…is that Blackness is constantly bringing out the flavor in the world. It's constantly drawing us back to spaces of excitement…spaces that allow us to be different in order to make a difference…a true fullness of life. During Pentecost, the Spirit of God comes down and people are speaking all different kinds of languages and doing all different kinds of things…and so it is with Blackness. Blackness has touched the entire world…it is a spirit going throughout all the world… and we're witnessing the miraculous. We're hearing the Spirit of God, move and shape and go, inhale,

exhale, do all these different things. And it shows just how if we are willing to embrace Blackness, how much our lives can change. I mean, you know, Jesus says, "In those days, as you embrace the message, as you embrace Blackness, you will see greater things than these." And so I feel like Blackness is constantly showing us these greater things. These more exciting things...these more flavorful...these more divine things.

Yoel Omowale:

I think that's a really interesting way of interpreting the meaning of Pentecost. It takes us outside of just a traditional rendering of that story, extrapolating a

broader meaning of the passage through the lenses of Blackology. Part of the tragedy is that Pentecost has often been reduced to a religious event in certain Christian circles, where it's exclusively reserved for a small subset of initiated believers called Pentecostals. It's a bit of a shake, shuffle and shando, a hyper-emotional experience thought to be empowering for ministry. But what if there was something so much more magical, so much more expansive and inclusive, that it was inviting humanity, to taste and see. What you describe sounds like an expansive, beautiful awakening, that began like a Pentecost event, an outpouring restoration of Blackness and in its fullest extent, that we are invited to be baptized in. So as you said, we

are to embrace the diversity, embrace the power of the creativity, that it rekindles and invites us to encounter afresh again and again.

June 8, 2022

Lamentations: On Frank Atwood

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director, Abraham Bonowitz and the Convener of Clergy United Against the Death Penalty, the Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

The 8th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States prohibits the infliction of, “cruel and unusual punishments.”

Vicki Lynne Hoskinson disappeared from her neighborhood on the afternoon of September 17, 1984…never to be seen alive again. She was 8 years old. Frank Atwood was convicted of her murder and sentenced to death. Over 35 years later, Atwood is scheduled to be executed at 10am Pacific time this morning. Atwood has consistently proclaimed his innocence. Repeatedly, appeals of his claims… and even the ability to investigate such claims… have been denied in court.

Is Frank Atwood guilty of murdering Vicki Lynne Hoskinson? The world may never know, but respectable lawyers have been arguing it, and the courts have repeatedly denied Atwood the opportunity to have the evidence examined in open court. Most compelling to us is evidence that Vicki Lynne Hoskinson was seen alive with another suspect hours after Atwood could have been in proximity. The fact that Frank Atwood and others are denied the opportunity to present evidence of actual innocence might be the most cruel and unusual part of it all.

Frank Atwood was baptised in the Greek Orthodox Church and took the name, Anthony. Yesterday (June 7, 2022), Frank went through a religious process

within that church and took a new name, Ephraim, which is how we will refer to him going forward.

During the last 35 years, Ephraim's body has deteriorated. In fact, his spine has deteriorated to the point that he is permanently confined to a wheelchair. Can you imagine living with an irreparable spinal condition in prison for decades? Due to the state of Ephraim's spine, he is unable to lie down. Perhaps better said, it creates excruciating pain for him to lie down. Yet, the State of Arizona has won legal arguments in federal court to proceed as usual, with a judge declaring that there is "no constitutional right to a pain-free execution."

This case forces us to ask the question: Sometimes mental health precludes capacity for execution, but should the physical condition of the condemned factor into whether they are healthy enough to be executed? It seems that the execution of some prisoners, like Ephraim, are going to be more painful than others, so should such a condition save their lives?

These questions illustrate the lunacy of the death penalty. Courts are litigating whether someone is healthy enough to be executed, as if there is something ever not cruel or unusual about strapping someone to a gurney and killing them. With the appeals taking as long as they do, and executions becoming more infrequent based on several external

factors, we are going to continue to have persons scheduled for executions who are going to have to be wheeled into the execution chamber for their execution. Killing someone in such a physical condition seems to inflict a cruel and unusual punishment on all parties involved, including the state workers whose job it will be to lift a disabled man from his wheelchair and kill him.

Recently, the United States Supreme Court ruled in Shinn v. Ramirez that federal judges can't consider certain newly developed evidence of wrongful conviction, even if there are compelling facts of innocence undeveloped by incompetent attorneys at the state level. Such a ruling is only going to increase

the frequency of executions like that of Ephraim, executions in which an additional cruel and unusual punishment is inflicted.

In the light of the execution of Ephraim (Frank Atwood), the 8th Amendment seems to be dead. Or at least, the 8th Amendment of the United States Constitution is scheduled to be executed relatively soon.

June 12, 2022

A Confrontation w/ a White Priest // BLACKOLOGY (w/ Yoel Omowale): The Foreword

+ an excerpt from BLACKOLOGY: The Theological Dexterity of Blackness…a recent work by the Dean, the Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood and the James Baldwin Professor of Practical Blackology, Dr. Yoel Omowale of The New Theology School.

Foreword.

May 22, 2022

Fellow seekers.

“Fuck your Jesus.” At first, I just blurted it out. In reality, I think it was more of a reflex. I didn’t go into the encounter expecting it to get that heated. I wasn’t the fiery tongued theological activist that I am now. I was upset but not enraged. In fact, I was on my best behavior. I simply told the priest that I thought the huge stained-glass depiction of a white Jesus was contrary to the loving inclusive message of the real Jesus. To my surprise, she replied, “Well, that Jesus is my Jesus…and my Jesus is the real

Jesus." Something came over me. I lost control. Zeal for the inclusive message of Jesus…the love of God… consumed me. I started saying it over and over again, "Fuck your Jesus." When I was asked to leave, I kept saying it, "Fuck your Jesus." When they started pushing me down the aisle, I kept saying it, "Fuck your Jesus." When they pushed me out the door, I kept saying it, "Fuck your Jesus." When the door slammed behind me, I kept on saying it, "Fuck your Jesus." When all of my 'liberal' friends came to me and questioned my approach, I kept saying it, "Fuck your Jesus." Honestly, I don't know when I stopped saying it. But when I did, I had a vision that has remained with me ever since.

The priest (I guess you could call her Karen) was standing in front of the gigantic stained-glass depiction of a white Jesus. I was standing across the street with a coconspirator. Together, we were praying with all of our might that God would come down and destroy this enormous symbol of white supremacy. Then, all of a sudden, a rumbling commenced. The Rev. Karen felt it to. Just as she looked up, the face of the white Jesus exploded. Glass went everywhere. My coconspirator and I cheered. The Rev. Karen collapsed and grieved her loss of faith.

Ever since I had that vision, I have measured potential collaborators by it. I want to work with

people who would join me…cheering…across the street while the white Jesus exploded. When I founded The New Theology School a number of years ago, I did so with the idea of training and fostering community amongst people who were willing to stand up to the false Gods of traditional religion… who were willing to boldly stand on the side of justice. In time, the community started to grow. In such a space, I met Dr. Yoel Omowale. After hearing his yearning for a world beyond white spirituality and all its' erasures, I knew I'd found a coconspirator. When we started talking about creating theology together, we constantly talked about what it would mean to make the world more colorful…not less. In our conversations, it became

apparent that God was doing something different. God seemed to be providing us with some dynamite to blow the face off of the stained-glass Jesus. The explosive result is this book…Blackology…a beautiful theological treatise of a world beyond the white Jesus…a world made whole by color.

To all who would question our audacity to create such a work…based on all of their addictions to the white Jesus…"Fuck your Jesus."

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Dean, The New Theology School

June 12, 2022

On Loving the QAnon Crowd // A Foreword for 'Deconstructing The Gospel of Q' (Anon) (by Scott Masters)

***As Dean of The New Theology School, I'm so proud of my student Dr. Scott Masters' (The New Theology School 's new Professor of Practical Wesleyan Studies) book, Deconstructing the Gospel of Q (Anon).**

June 9, 2020

To the faithful.

“If you were an adherent, no one would be able to tell. You would look like any other American. You could be a mother, picking leftovers off your toddler’s plate. You could be the young man in headphones across the street. You could be a bookkeeper, a dentist, a grandmother icing cupcakes in her kitchen. You may well have an affiliation with an evangelical church. But you are hard to identify just from the way you look—which is good, because

someday soon dark forces may try to track you down. You understand this sounds crazy, but you don't care. You know that a small group of manipulators, operating in the shadows, pull the planet's strings. You know that they are powerful enough to abuse children without fear of retribution. You know that the mainstream media are their handmaidens, in partnership with Hillary Clinton and the secretive denizens of the deep state. You know that only Donald Trump stands between you and a damned and ravaged world. You see plague and pestilence sweeping the planet, and understand that they are part of the plan. You know that a clash between good and evil cannot be avoided, and you yearn for the Great Awakening that is coming. And

so you must be on guard at all times. You must shield your ears from the scorn of the ignorant. You must find those who are like you. And you must be prepared to fight.

You know all this because you believe in Q."

"This eloquently worded bullshit is fuckin' crazy."

That was my exact thought when I read the above quote in The Atlantic in June of 2020…but that wasn't the first time I'd had such a response to this type of speak…well written/spoken…but unbelievably dangerous. In fact, the quote took me all the way back to an earlier time…a time when I sat in church service after church service eloquently being told that we must be politically active in certain ways or

we would face eternal damnation. Repeatedly, I remember hearing smooth words from the pulpit, "Evil is coming for us. Our very souls demand resistance. If you have any love for Jesus or America, you will…" By that point, most people were so drawn in to what the preacher was saying…they would do whatever came next. After thinking about it for a minute, I realized that this bullshit church-speak was the actual forerunner of QAnon and utilized the same strategy…speak eloquently…create fear…and manipulate people to do whatever you want them to do. In fact, it seemed that QAnon was birthed in the manipulations of the church…and therefore…as QAnon became more and more violent…I realized that the church had a particular

responsibility to stop it. But who would go for us?

Fast forward two years later…

“I want to write something on QAnon…you know to help people who have been sucked into all of that foolishness.” I about fell out of my chair. As the Dean of The New Theology School, I was interviewing Dr. Scott Masters for admittance to our program. When he said those words, I knew that I’d finally found someone who could push back in a loving way. Over the many months that Dr. Masters has worked to finish his doctoral project, I have been so impressed with his ability to offer a stern…yet deeply compassionate rebuke…of the heresy of QAnon. This text is the culmination of countless hours…not just

of writing…but also of prayer. Dr. Masters is first and foremost a pastor. He wrote this text because he cares about those who have been sucked into all of this QAnon bullshit. If you care about those who have been lost to such heresy, I encourage you to share this text. The world…the church…will be better for it.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Dean, The New Theology School

June 18, 2022

PETRIC J. SMITH: The Theology of a TRANS SAINT

“If I am to call for truth, I must offer truth. We should all settle for nothing less. For it is only in an atmosphere of truth that freedom can ever prosper. And it is only in an atmosphere of truth that we can learn to relate to each other by our compassion and our honesty rather than to judge each other on the points of difference between us. None of us will be free until all of us are free.” – Petric J. Smith

Truth.

While I have no doubt that Robert Chambliss was a child of God…I also have no doubt that he was amongst the shittiest. How the hell else would you describe someone who bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church? Those four little girls never had a chance. Then, he bragged about it. Thankfully, in the midst of such evil…God placed a saint…a TRANS SAINT.

Courage.

You see, Petric Smith was born Elizabeth Ann Hollifield. From the beginning, Smith was a little more masculine. So much so, that his Uncle Robert

(Chambliss) regularly made fun of him. Not thinking too much of him, Uncle Robert was loose with his speech. His underestimation of Smith, led to him sharing multiple details about his actions with regard to the bombing. Believing that truth was the only path to wholeness, Smith courageously turned to the FBI. In typical racist bureaucratic fashion…it would be well over a decade before the authorities used any of the information that he gave them.

Seek.

In the meantime, Smith (still known as Hollifield) became one of the first female United Methodist ministers in Alabama. His love for God led him to

think that he had to deny himself in order to serve. The church…especially the United Methodist Church…has a way of fucking with people's minds… with their souls. Despite it all, Hollifield kept loving the people as best he could…but he struggled to love himself.

Strength.

Out of nowhere, Smith (still known as Hollifield) received a call from the Alabama Attorney General's office. It was time. Smith had undoubtedly dreaded what he knew he had to do. His Uncle Robert was about to be placed on trial for murder. He immediately prayed and prepared himself to stand

up for the truth. Aware that he was placing himself in serious danger, Smith pressed on. God was with him. In fact, he could feel God's presence. The cross he wore around his neck reminded him of the hope that was in him. Due primarily to his testimony, Robert Chambliss was convicted of the murder of Denise McNair (one of the little girls killed in the blast) and sentenced to life in prison.

Wonder.

Facing regular death threats because of his testimony, Smith (still known as Hollifield) fled to Texas. During this time, Smith finally made peace with God's love for all of him…and began his

transition to finally become Petric J. Smith. After years of treatment and surgery, Smith was declared to be legally male by a local court. After the death of his Uncle Robert in 1985, Smith returned to Birmingham. Though there was a tremendous amount of pressure, Smith remained dedicated to who God created him to be.

Freedom.

Over the next few years, Petric J. Smith was at the forefront of the Birmingham LGBT Rights Movement. Pastoring the local Metropolitan Community Church in the mid to late 1980s, Smith was dedicated to ministering to the souls of people who had

experienced similar rejections to what she had. Helping found the first Birmingham PRIDE Parade in 1989, Smith sought to help others live proudly into who and what God created them to be. Writing in the *Alabama Forum* (Birmingham's LGBTQ newspaper), Smith pushed to let his readers know that they were loved…and fought for. Smith loved his community and his community loved him back. So much so, that he was regularly honored for his work and activism.

Memory.

Just a few years before he died, Petric J. Smith published a book that chronicled his experiences

around the Birmingham bombing, entitled, *Long Time Coming: An Insider's Story of the Birmingham Church Bombing That Rocked the World*. Though the book is mainly about Smith's efforts to bring about justice in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing case, he makes it clear that by helping others become free…he was able to free himself.

Fortitude.

Theology is always autobiographical. We seek to know the God within so that we might experience the God without. Petric J. Smith discovered the God within and was able to bring God to the world without. One of Smith's constant sayings was, "None

of us will be free until we are all free." By finding freedom from the oppression within and without, Smith showed us the way.

Call for truth as you offer truth.

Show compassion.

Respect difference.

Free each other.

Be who you are.

Feel God within.

Thus is the theology of the TRANS SAINT of Birmingham, PETRIC J. SMITH.

May we all follow.

Amen.

June 19, 2022

8 Years Ago // Don't You Dare Turn Your Head: The Self-Immolation of The Rev. Charles Moore

The Rev. Charles Moore visits me often. For over 8 years now, I've closed my eyes and felt the pull of his flame. The media attention is long over. Too much time has passed for most. Our memories are so frail.

I won't ever be able to forget. I still see the flames. To commemorate the passion, I've decided to repost the blog that I wrote right after hearing about Moore's self-immolation. I encourage you to sit for a moment with the great martyr of Grand Saline:

Don't You Dare Turn Your Head: The Self-Immolation of The Rev. Charles Moore

The fiery passion of 79-year-old retired United Methodist pastor The Rev. Charles Moore is raging in my soul right now. On June 23 around 5:30pm, Moore exited his vehicle in Grand Saline, Texas, doused his body with gasoline and set himself on

fire. After rescue efforts by bystanders, Moore was taken by helicopter to Parkland Hospital in Dallas and eventually died late last night. Based on notes left behind, Moore chose to self-immolate based on his frustration with the United Methodist Church's position on human sexuality, opposition to the death penalty, disdain for racism (especially in his hometown of Grand Saline) and his deep anger at Southern Methodist University's decision to house the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

Rev. Moore knew how we would react. On June 22, the day before he self-immolated, Moore wrote, "I know that some will judge me insane." When I first shared Moore's story with a table full of people at a

Dallas restaurant, everyone immediately declared him insane. I know different.

While a graduate student in history at the University of Alabama, I spent six months studying self-immolations that took place in both the United States and in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. With stark consistency, the persons who self-immolated that I studied were remarkably sane and unquestionably persons of deep conviction. The temptation of the hour will be to turn our heads and call The Rev. Charles Moore insane. If we do…we should also turn our heads from Jesus and call him insane too. For we must not forget, Jesus sat in the Garden of

Gethsemane and made a conscious clear decision to step out into death…just like Moore.

Instead of judging Rev. Moore, maybe we should try to ignite the passion for justice that burned so brightly in his life in ours. When Texas tries to execute Manuel Vasquez on August 6, maybe we should do something more than simply turn our heads and protect our dignity. When our churches and societies ignore racial segregation and discrimination, maybe we should do something more than simply turn our heads and protect our pride. When we are asked to perform a same-sex wedding ceremony or ordain a same-gender loving person, maybe we should do something more than turn our

heads and protect our salaries/pensions. When institutional injustices occur all around us, maybe we should do something more that turn our heads and bless them with our silence. I will go to bed this evening thankful for the public witness of The Rev. Charles Moore and pray that the church would garner even an ounce of his passion and courage.

On a personal note, I serve on the Board of Directors of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Rev. Moore helped found the organization. Because Moore lived, I am able to do the work that I do. My respect for Moore is unwavering and I am proud to follow in his footsteps. Jesus asks us to give our lives and Moore did.

Tonight my passion for Jesus burns as intensely as ever. When I look straight ahead into the dark, I see Moore's bespectacled image burning. I see Moore giving his life so that others might live. I refuse to turn my head. I know that Jesus is speaking to me from there. The courage of a passionate follower of Jesus can set the world afire with love. May the great martyrdom of The Rev. Charles Moore make it so.

Amen.

more:

texasmonthly.com/articles/man-on-fire/

June 29, 2022

Christ in the Trailer: A Lesson about Migration and Greed from a Literal Hell

***Just a few days ago, a semitruck packed with migrants was abandoned by smugglers in the sweltering heat on a desolate road near San Antonio, Texas. In a literal hell, 53 people burned to death. I've constructed the following narrative with the firm belief that Jesus was in the back of that trailer.**

Jesus looked upon his disciples. The children grew hungrier by the hour. The mothers had nothing to cook. The fathers labored all day for pennies. There was no hope. Desperate to do something…he pushed into his dreams…then his dreams became plans.

Before he left, Jesus told his disciples that he would be back. Then, the treacherous journey began. Over countless miles, Jesus was robbed…beaten… deceived…laughed at…and consistently treated like dog shit. Nobody knew his name. Nobody cared. Everybody was concerned with one person…their self. Bloodied, tired, hungry, thirsty and barely able to stand, Jesus arrived at the border. Briefly

catching a reflection of himself in the mirror, Jesus didn't even recognize the person that looked back at him. Although death seemed close, Jesus thought about all of those he loved back home…his disciples…and kept going. The land of opportunity… the place where all of the fortunes of those he loved would change…was so close.

When he found a smuggler willing to help, Jesus thought his fortune had turned. He only had a little bit of money left. It was now or never. Giving the smuggler everything that he had, Jesus climbed into the back of a trailer. When he hesitated, the smuggler assured him that it was refrigerated, and he had nothing to worry about. The trailer was

packed. Body after body after body was pushed in. Eventually, when nobody else would fit…the smugglers closed the doors and locked them. The space was hot and growing hotter.

Jesus was stuck between a woman and her child. Slowly, sweat mixed with urine and shit to make the smell unbearable. After several hours, people started to collapse. The child dropped first. Jesus tried to help…but the space was too tight to bend over. The woman began to wail over her child. Then, she collapsed. Before, Jesus could conceptualize what was going on…everyone was collapsing. Suffering of an unbelievable magnitude was unleashed.

Then, the trailer stopped. Everybody assumed that the driver was coming back to open the doors. Nobody came. Nobody helped. Nobody…. Everybody started to die.

Jesus' skin was on fire. There was no relief. Jesus couldn't breathe. There was no relief. Jesus shit all over himself. There was no relief. Jesus could no longer see. There was no relief. Jesus's muscles throbbed. There was no relief. The end was near. There was no relief.

The land of opportunity quickly became the land of death.

Jesus shouted out, “God damn these United Sates… whose greed forced us to get into this trailer in the first place.”

With that, Jesus died.

So too did the witness of any disciples living in the aforementioned nation who passively claim to give a damn.

Amen.

July 7, 2022

I'm Still There: Reflections on the 6th Anniversary of The Dallas Police Shooting

I organized a rally.

I marched.

Shots rang out.

Lorne Ahrens

Michael Krol,

Michael Smith

Brent Thompson

Patrick Zamarripa

It’s been 6 years.

I'm still there.

The Sermon After the Shooting

Delivered after the July 7 shooting at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton, Texas on July 10, 2016.

It's been a very busy time. Just a few days ago, I organized the rally and march that preceded the deaths of five police officers in Dallas. This morning I want to journey through the story of Dallas and end with in the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

On Wednesday, I partnered with others to organize the protest. We were all disgusted at the video of Alton Sterling's death at the hands of the police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The next day another video showing the death of Philando Castile at the hands of police in Falcon Heights, Minnesota became widely available. Seeing those men bleed out...watching black Americans regularly bleed out in our streets...remembering Ferguson...remembering

Baltimore...remembering city after city where black lives do not matter...including our own...Denton, Texas...is overwhelming. We see it over and over again. We see black communities overpoliced. When communities are overpoliced, there is no doubt that tragedies happen in greater frequency.

Someone asked me the other day to prove that there is police brutality in Dallas. I simply responded, "Why would a thousand people show up to protest police brutality rally if there wasn't brutality?" We never expected so many people. We thought there was going to be a hundred or so. When the video of Philando Castile bleeding out went viral, the numbers increased exponentially. We gathered at the rally. When I looked out into the sea of people, I

wondered, "What does Jesus have to say in a time like this?" By traditional interpretations, the answer is absolutely nothing. We keep on offering salvation to people who are dying in the streets. We keep on talking about Jesus loving the world and we can't even take the time to love our neighbors.

We say that we are a people who believe that God loves the world...but look around. We don't do shit. People are being gunned down in our streets and we don't do shit. Look around! We keep on hearing people demand that the church do more. The church doesn't have anything to give. The church has no voice. The church has no witness. The church has no purpose.

We traded our voice for influence. We traded our witness for political power. We were most concerned about protecting churches. We wanted to make sure we maintained our denominations. In the mean time, we gave everything away. Do you care more about your church or denomination than you do these black bodies that are lying in our streets? If you do, you are not following Jesus…you are following evil. We have to wrestle with difficult questions in these difficult hours. What is salvation? What is love? What is truth? Where do we go from here? We gathered last Thursday night to wrestle with these questions and many others.

Anyone who declares that Thursday's protest should have been less angry…doesn't understand the daily

violence facing black people in this country. People were mad as hell and they had every right to be. Many have criticized the language that I used at the rally. I declared, "God Damn White America!" I'm tired of hearing about White America. There is no White America. There is only America. I'm also tired of hearing about White Christianity. There is no White Christianity. There is only Christianity. A Christianity that is white is not Christianity. I wish a few more people would start damning everything that is contrary to love and justice.

Throughout our nation, you have heard the phrase, "Fuck the Police!" Why would people say such a thing? Have we considered that the situation has become so dire that people don't feel like they have

any other language to use? Those who criticize the language of those who are being beaten and killed and don't stop to help are the enemies of Christ. People are being slaughtered in our streets. Why can't we love our neighbors as ourselves? We must get saved. We must stop police brutality. We must rip the racism from our hearts. We have to change.

As we began the march, we followed the directions of the police. At every turn and with every step, the protest was nonviolent. I remember the officers repeatedly commending the peaceful nature of the protest. I was thankful that the protest remained nonviolent. Why do you think protestors keep calling for nonviolence in this country? I think it's the same reason that I keep on calling for nonviolence...it's the

only logical choice. Violence never achieves love or justice.

Towards the end of the march, we gathered at the Old Courthouse. After hearing about the horrific 1910 lynching of Allen Brooks from multiple speakers, we made our way back toward our starting point…Belo Gardens Park. As I led our march to it's finish, I talked with a Sergeant from the police department. We talked about how successful the protest had been. I'd just passed Austin Street. I had on my white robe. I was carrying my black cross. I had on one of my favorite stoles. All of a sudden I looked up and heard…pop-pop-pop-pop-pop. I was close enough that I thought I might be shot. My first reaction was to grab my stomach. The Sergeant ran

toward the shooting. The eight hundred people behind me were walking directly into the line of fire. I ran to get as many people out as I could. I repeatedly screamed, "Active Shooter! Active Shooter! Run! Run! Run!" My cross very quickly became a staff to push people out of the way. It was total chaos.

We didn't know who was shooting. We just knew that there were many shots. I remember the question that came after: "Why?" I repeatedly heard that one word question. When people asked Jesus questions of meaning, he consistently responded with answers of being. I did too. I kept telling people that we have to learn to be love and justice. We can't talk about justice without love and we can't talk about love

without justice. When you start talking about peace and nonviolence you better make sure that you are talking about love and justice too. There is no peace or nonviolence without love and justice.

The 5 officers who lost their lives during the shooting remain heavy on my heart. It is difficult to experience something like this and not feel like you have some level of responsibility. There might be a million pieces of evidence to prove the contrary...but still you wonder what you could have done to prevent the tragedy. For 24 hours straight, I was on television. I didn't have time to mourn. I just had to spread the message of love and justice. I did television, newspaper and radio interviews all day long. It went on and on and on. I knew that if I didn't

get the message of love and justice out...somebody else would be ready with a more sinister message. When we are silent, other messages fill the void. As followers of Jesus we are responsible for getting our message out...we are responsible for sharing the good news. If we don't, there will be other messages.

Last Friday night, I arrived home to hundreds of threats. People were looking for someone to blame. When you become a public figure in a time like this, you become a target for hate. People have said all sorts of shit. I even had someone tell me that the reason I act this way is because I'm a vegan. People can make some pretty wild connections. That's why we have to help them make the right connections.

Devastation doesn't come close to describing the totality of what I feel. I couldn't believe what happened. Noises scare me. Movement scares me. Crowds scare me. This morning I thought the car might blow up when I turned the ignition. We live in a crazy time…a dangerous time…a dark time. Jesus still has a word for such a time as this.

There were two people who saw suffering and walked on by. There were two people who saw great difficulties and walked on by. But in the midst of it all, there was the Samaritan. There was the person who stopped. There was the person who bandaged up the wounds. There was the person who held the hurting. There was the person who refused to walk by.

In the midst of great conflict, we keep on walking by.

We say that we can't stop. We say that we can't talk.

We say we don't have time. Where are the

Samaritans amongst us? We need you now more

than ever.

Amen.

July 13, 2022

Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott & the Myth of Progress

I just want to tell everyone that crime is down 3% but homicides are up 29%.

“Isolated Incident.”

“No Danger to the Public.”

“No Reason to be Alarmed.”

“Not the Intended Target.”

“The General Public is Safe.”

Repeatedly, I’ve heard these types of phrases come out of the mouth of Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott… yet people keep on dying. July 13, 2022

Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott & the Myth of Progress

July 15, 2022

Kosoul Chanthakoummane: On the Nature of Execution and Doubt (Of Course in Texas)

According to the prosecution…

On July 8, 2006, Kosoul Chanthakoummane arrived at a model home in Collin County, Texas. There he found Sarah Walker. A struggle ensued. Chanthakoummane proceeded to brutalize Walker. Eventually, hitting her with a plant stand, stabbing

her over 33 times and leaving a vicious bite mark on her neck. When he was finished, he stole a watch and ring off of her body. After it was all over with, Chanthakoummane fled. Walker's body was found by couple viewing the model home later on in the day. In their investigation, police found Chanthakoummane's blood at the scene, Walker's DNA under Chanthakoummane's fingernails, concluded that Chanthakoummane's teeth matched the bitemark on Walker's neck and found multiple eyewitnesses who placed Chanthakoummane near the model home at the time of the crime. When a jury heard this information, Chanthakoummane was convicted and sentenced to death.

So, it sounds like a pretty open and shut case right? Think again.

Since July 8, 2006 or whenever he found out that he was under the investigation for the murder of Sarah Walker, Kosoul Chanthakoummane has claimed his innocence. Before you dismiss him outright, consider the following facts.

Those that identified Chanthakoummane as the man at the scene of the crime did so under hypnosis…and their identifications were flawed. Relator Mamie Sharpless identified an athletic Asian man…but was unable to speak to Chanthakoummane's prominent tattoos or glasses. Sharpless' husband Nelson

Villavicencio also identified an athletic Asian man… but also was unable to speak to Chanthakoummane's prominent tattoos or glasses. Both also said that Chanthakoummane had longer hair…which he did not. Sharpless said that the man identified himself as "Chan Lee"…but when a "Chan Lee" was actually found he was immediately dismissed as a suspect because he didn't sound "black enough." In addition to all of this, hypnosis has repeatedly been discredited by a variety of studies. Eyewitness evidence is often flawed.

The bite mark on Sarah Walker's neck was claimed to exactly match the teeth of Chanthakoummane. But such bite mark evidence has repeatedly been

discredited in a variety of studies. Even Dr. Brent Hudson, the prosecution's bite mark expert said, "I can't tell you that he's the one and only person in the world who could have made that." Other experts who have examined the case, have declared that the conclusory value give to the bite mark evidence was greatly overstated…and such evidence wouldn't even be allowed in most courts today. Bite mark evidence is often flawed.

The DNA evidence collected at the scene was considered to be the strongest evidence that the prosecution had against Chanthakoummane…but one of the things that was left out at trial and consistently since in conversation about this case is

is that there was unknown DNA mixed in with the other DNA that they claimed to be able to identify. The Texas Forensic Science Commission recently cast doubt on the methods used to reach the DNA conclusions in this case. DNA evidence is often flawed.

So, what actually happened? Well according to Chanthakoummane…

Needing a new place to live, he simply entered the model home to tour it. Before arriving, he cut his hand at work and thus bled a little bit. Before he left, he washed his face and got a drink of water in

the kitchen. After, he left without ever seeing or interacting with Sarah Walker.

So, who do you believe?

While it's ok to say that you have doubts about both accounts, it's not ok to execute someone in the midst of such doubts. Kosoul Chanthakoummane might not be perfect…but the evidence that he is a murderer is far from conclusive.

Sign the petition to stop the execution of Kosoul Chanthakoummane @ https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-kosoul-chanthakoummane-in-texas/

July 17, 2022

Will Eaton: The Unspoken Victim of the July 7, 2016 Shooting in Dallas, Texas

On the night of July 7, 2016, Micah Johnson coopted a march that I organized in Dallas, Texas to kill five police officers. Their names were Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson and Patrick Zamarripa. Immediately after the incident, I repeatedly went on national and international

television to share that we were protesting for love and justice. Away from the cameras, I was made aware that there were a small group of people who helped me lead the protest that were pleased with what had happened. In fact, organizer Dominique Alexander and multiple other activists regularly seemed to postulate, "Those cops got what they deserved." I have sat with the evil of such assertions for a long time.

Just the other day, I was sitting at the park with the grandmother of one of my son's young classmates, Ms. Barbara Williams. Honestly, she is one of the kindest people I have met since we moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. Somehow we got on the subject of

my connection to the events surrounding the July 7 shooting. When I started to talk about the consequences of hate unleased, she quietly said my son paid the price for all of that mess a few days later, on July 9. When I asked what she meant, she told me the story of her son.

For many years, Will Eaton had struggled with mental health problems. After driving trucks for a while, Eaton decided he wanted to settle in Sun Valley, Arizona. To say that he was the only black person around would be an understatement. Multiple people have declared that it would have been difficult to find a black person within a couple dozen mile radius. Nevertheless, Eaton liked the

solitude of the space. So, he bought a small plot of land and placed a small shed in the middle. There was nothing luxurious about it…but it was his. Everything seemed to be going good, until he started to be on the receiving end of racial comments from time to time. Too proud to quit, Eaton kept going. Daily, he would figure out ways to make money and survive. When the July 7 shooting happened, he probably didn't even know about it. The news just wasn't all that important to him. Unfortunately, other folk in Sun Valley seemed to take their ques from the news.

On the night of July 9, Will Eaton was walking back to his home from town. Along an abandoned road,

Eaton was shot in the chest. His body laid in the dirt until the next morning. When help arrived, he was long dead.

Prior to the shooting, multiple people had popped off in town that somebody needed to avenge what happened to those poor officers in Dallas. So much so, that other people were taken aback by the brazenness of such comments. When Will Eaton was found dead, the same folks who had popped off earlier declared, "he got what he deserved."

Six years later, the murder of Will Eaton remains unsolved. As I write this blog, the family is working desperately to revive interest in this case. They want

justice. Wouldn't you? Unfortunately in places like Sun Valley, cold case murders against Black folk are not the first priority.

Though the name Will Eaton is not associated with the July 7, 2016 shooting in Dallas…it should be… because he too paid the ultimate price for the hate that was unleashed there. I doubt that who has defended Micah Johnson's actions in Dallas realized that he was responsible for the murder of a mentally ill black man in Sun Valley, Arizona too. In the fog of hate, all colors start to run to together.

Amen.

https://tribunenewsnow.com/information-sought-on-sun-valley-mans-death/

July 20, 2022

LITTLE ROCK IS MURDER ROCK!

***Delivered at Little Rock City Director's Meeting**

Good evening my name is Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood. I just moved to Little Rock about a year ago. My wife is a Professor of Art Education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. We live off of Shackelford between Rodney Parham and Markham. I could

spend all night talking to you about the crime that is happening in our area since we got here. I could talk to you about the shooting at the Waffle House. I could talk to you about the shooting at the Circle K. I could talk to you about the police chase out of North Little Rock that ended in our neighborhood just last night…and pitting them into an apartment complex. I know that y'all have engaged conversation about the new development at Breckenridge Village…but I wanted to let y'all know that there is already a business there…it happens every night…it's a shooting range. Sometimes in this life, you got to say your prayers right in order to be right. So, tonight I want to talk to you about language. The words that I am hearing coming out of city hall are ridiculous. To

continue saying that violent crime is down 3% while murders are up 29% is absurd. What type of revolting disgusting type of mind do you have to have to keep on saying such absurdity. 29%! 50 homicides! That means it is possible by the end of the year that we will have 100 homicides! What in the world is going on? This ain't Little Rock this is Murder Rock! Murder Rock! Regardless of how you spin it…. This city has become Murder Rock! All of this language coming out of City Hall is crazy! "These are domestic incidents." Do victims of domestic violence not matter? "These are personal situations." Do persons not matter? It's July! 50 murders! 100 families….at least 50 right now. Dads…. Moms…. Children…. Sisters…. Brothers…

absent from Christmas…. Birthdays…. I want to know what this Board…what the Mayor is going to do about it. No more spin! No more spin! People are dying! I know I can speak loud…but I don't know that I can speak loud enough for the mayor who is absent tonight to hear me…so I got to rely on you to get to him. This board has got to make him understand that this is not acceptable. I shouldn't have to come down here and scream to feel like I am being heard. Families are desperate. 100 homicides! Think about that number. Sit with it. Let it guide you! You've got to pray right in order to be right. You've got to speak right in order to be heard right. So please for God's sake change your language!!! I don't want to hear that violent crime is down 3% when murders are up

29%! For God's sake…talk about the 50 people who are dead in this city.

July 26, 2022

Lamentations: On Joe James (Execution Date: July 28)

Joe Nathan James, Jr. killed Faith Hall in 1994. There doesn't seem to be much doubt about that. However, doubt about guilt isn't necessary to have doubt about the punishment. The death penalty is abhorrently problematic and this case illustrates why…starkly.

For several years, James carefully kept transcripts, documents and potential evidence from his case with him in his cell. Then one day…as he was out to court

& their cells were being rearranged…guards threw all of these documents in the trash. All the papers that could have potentially saved his life, were destroyed…some forever. Such an action wouldn't have had the enormous consequences that it did if James hadn't had attorneys that were keeping up with his case. Unfortunately, James decided to represent himself.

Can you imagine deciding to represent yourself in your own death penalty case? From all sorts of rules to all sorts of appeals to all sorts of motions…there is no way that you could effectively represent yourself. Who in their right mind would reject the only chance they might have? We are aware of no one

successfully overturning or even delaying their execution while representing their self. Which brings forth another question…why do judges allow these inmates on death row to represent themselves?

Lastly, the Hall family has been very vocal about their wishes…. Consider these quotes from Faith Hall's daughters, Terrlyn and Toni Hall and Hall's brother, Helvetius Hall given to CBS 42 reporter Lee Hedgepeth.

"I don't want it to go forward. We're not God. The Governor is not God,"

“Taking his life is not going to bring Faith back…it ain’t going to make no closure for us.”

“We shouldn’t be playing God. An eye for an eye has never been a good outlook for life.”

Perhaps the greatest injustice in this case is that the wishes of the family are being completely ignored. How can you declare that an execution is bringing about justice for a family when you are ignoring the wishes of a family?

Trashed papers.
Trashed chances on appeal.
Trashed wishes of the family.

The state seems likely to do it again…kill while calling the process fair when they have already stacked the deck.

We lament the senseless murder of Faith Hall. We lament that Alabama is determined to execute Joe Nathan James, Jr. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director Abraham

Bonowitz and the Convener of Clergy United Against the Death Penalty The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

August 7, 2022

Lamentations: On Kosoul Chantakoumanne

Make no mistake…Sarah Walker was brutally murdered in McKinney Texas in 2006. Somebody should pay for such a crime. Unfortunately, it's quite possible that the wrong man is being called to account. Here's why.

The bedrock of every murder investigation is the establishment of a motive. The McKinney Police Department (MPD) tried to say that Kosoul Chantakoumanne sexually assaulted and killed Sara Walker. When no evidence of sexual assault was able to be established, MPD changed the perceived motive to one of robbery and murder. The problem is that MPD Police Chief Randy Roland contradicted his department's own investigation by saying that the "ferociousness" of 33 stab wounds, bludgeoning and a bite mark suggest the killer had a personal relationship, yet no relationship between Chanthakoummane and Walker was ever identified. So, no clear motive.

Hypnosis is a questionable investigative science…due primarily to the power of suggestion. Two witnesses testified, after hypnosis, that Kosoul Chanthakoummane was the individual they saw the day of Sarah Walker's murder. They generally identified a man of "Asian descent." This description, lacking any other identifying characteristics, such as Chanthakoummane's many tattoos and eyeglasses, does nothing to isolate Chanthakoummane from any other Asian male. Throw in a little Southern racism too boot, you have all the hallmarks of a classic misidentification. So, questionable witness accounts.

Bite mark evidence is junk…a joke…science. Without scientific standards for evaluation, bite mark

evidence relies primarily on judgment calls…i.e., the judgment of an investigator that already is predisposed to a particular conclusion. In fact, in 2016, the Texas Forensic Science Commission stopped the use of bite mark evidence in trials because of the enormous propensity for error. In Kosoul Chantakoumanne's case, the state's "bite mark expert" admitted to not having any particular expertise with regard to bite marks when he testified about the bite mark match at trial. Furthermore, the defense called a board certified forensic odontologist who contradicted the medical examiners conclusions at trial. So, no clear bite match.

DNA evidence is only as reliable as those who interpret it. Though investigators declared that there was evidence of Kosoul Chantakoumanne's DNA under Sarah Walker's fingernails, there is no documentation of injuries on Chanthakoummane which would have caused the victim to have his skin or blood under her fingernails. Furthermore, Chanthakoummane's DNA was not found in the bite mark on Walker's neck, nor on the plant stand used to bash her or any other item of significance. Walker's DNA, despite the gruesome nature of the murder, was not found anywhere on Chanthakoummane, nor anywhere inside of his car… or anywhere else. It's difficult to believe a murder that bloody was committed and the killer left

without a drop of DNA to tie the crime to him. Also, there is evidence that Chanthakoummane was at the scene of the crime (a model home) and left before the crime was ever committed…which could explain the transference of DNA…i.e., how Chanthakoummane's DNA ended up under Walker's fingernails. So, questionable DNA evidence.

Sarah Walker was having major problems with her husband, Randy Tate. Walker even had a profile on a dating website. After Sarah's funeral, Tate left town, and once the trial was over, he stopped communicating with Sarah's family. Furthermore, in 2018 Walker's father shared suspicions that Tate was involved in the murder. Curiously, Tate thanked

“all who knew I had nothing to do with this” upon Kosoul Chanthakoummane’s conviction, even though there was no evidence that people were suspicious of him. Plus, don’t forget what Chief Roland said about the “ferociousness” of the crime suggesting that the killer had a personal relationship with Walker. So, another possible suspect.

There is simply #TooMuchDoubt to proceed with this execution. Surely, Sarah Walker deserves better than this.

***SIGN THE PETITION*:**

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-kosoul-chanthakoummane-in-texas/

MORE INFO/Clemency Letter:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/19yL8H4pfXvFrSgEHBNYFpMlXws3cjZZBPSnVMfcGehQ/edit

We lament that Sarah Walker was murdered. We lament that Texas is seeking to execute Kosoul Chanthakoummane. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

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before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director Abraham Bonowitz and Convener of Clergy United Against the Death Penalty The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

August 8, 2022

WHEN FORGIVENESS BECOMES A FARCE: On the Fight to Save KOSOUL CHANTHAKOUMMANE, the KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS & Catholic INDIFFERENCE

From a variety of sources, the words of Joseph Walker have echoed from beyond the grave…

“This crime has devastated my family…but we’ve got to pray for my daughter’s killer.” “…we’ve got to pray for the one who did this.” “Under no circumstance…do I want Kosoul Chanthakoummane to receive the death penalty.” “People want revenge…but revenge never works.” “If they try to execute Kosoul…if I’m still alive…I’ll go down to the prison and make a big scene to force them to stop.” “…understand our Lord loves you.” “Love is hard…” “Under no circumstance am I for the death penalty…”

You see, Joseph Walker’s daughter Sarah Walker was brutally murdered in McKinney, Texas in 2006. Police officers showed up at Walker’s door to give

him the horrible news. Ever since, Walker has been praying for the soul of his daughter and the soul of her killer. Some time later, police produced Kosoul Chanthakoummane and declared him to be Sarah's killer. Without giving credence to Joseph Walker's desperate pleas, prosecutors sought and received a death sentence. Until his death a few years ago, Walker worked tirelessly to get Chanthakoummane's death sentence revoked. Walker's story was/is so compelling that the Knights of Columbus produced a short documentary about it…which is exactly how I learned about it.

Anyone who watches the documentary leaves with no doubt that Joseph Walker…if he was still alive…

would be doing all that he could to stop the execution of Kosoul Chanthakoummane. In his absence, I'm sure that he would expect the Knights of Columbus to take the lead in such efforts. Sadly, they haven't…which speaks volumes of their appreciation of Walker's message.

The Knights of Columbus is one of the largest Catholic fraternal organizations in the entire world. Recent estimates, put their numbers at over 2 million men. Their life insurance program is worth an estimated $100 billion. Let's just say, that if the Knights of Columbus decided to fight to end the execution of Kosoul Chanthakoummane…it's quite possible that they could. But they haven't…and

probably won't. It's curious how they're willing to put forward the money and time to make a documentary to fetishize the forgiveness of Joseph Walker and yet are doing nothing to save Chanthakoummane's life as his execution approaches. So tell me, how opposed to Chanthakoummane's execution are they? Maybe it was never about saving Chanthakoummane …

A few weeks ago at a local church, I attended a gathering of folk praying about the death penalty… which included a number of representatives from the Knights of Columbus. I expected to hear powerful words about saving the life of Kosoul Chanthakoummane. Instead, all I heard was a story

about how Chanthakoummane got…"saved." It was clear to me that these folks cared more about baptizing another convert than saving the convert's life. Which also helped explain everything I needed to know about the Knights of Columbus …their video had nothing to do with Chanthakoummane…it was a proselytizing piece.

Over the last few months, I have put countless hours into trying to save the life of Kosoul Chanthakoummane. When I've tried to enlist other Christians (especially my Catholic friends) to help, all I've gotten is a recommendation to watch a documentary and a description of a jailhouse baptism. Doesn't the message of Jesus require so

much more than meaningless platitudes?

Seriously…either be against the death penalty…and join us as we seek to abolish such evil…or cut all the silly bullshit…I'm choking on it…and quite frankly…I need to save my breathe for the next execution that you'll sit out.

August 13, 2022

A Letter to the Editor & A Public Prayer for Kosoul Chanthakoumanne

Back in 2006, realtor Sarah Walker was brutally murdered. Somebody should pay for such a crime. But what if the wrong person is being called to account?

Next Wednesday, the State of Texas is scheduled to execute Kosoul Chantakoumanne for the murder of Walker in McKinney…but doubts linger. A simple

internet search, reveals a number of questions. The State relied on multiple pieces of discredited forensic evidence…including a bite mark examination and the hypnosis of witnesses. DNA collected at the scene was not tested for possible transference…being carried to the space that it was found. Chantakoumanne's own lawyers declared him guilty at trial without his consent. During the punishment phase of the trial, Sarah Walker's Roman Catholic father was never called to the stand by the defense, as he was (now deceased) adamantly opposed to a death sentence. These are just a few of the questionable occurrences in this case as it traveled through the legal system. While questions don't mean innocence, they should grant us pause.

The bedrock notion of any execution is that you are executing a killer…the worst of the worst…but often we can't be so sure.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Polunsky Unit, Texas' Death Row

GOD you have told us that your name is LOVE. In this frighting moment…grant us the eternal power that is LOVE. In this time of great difficulty…grant us the everlasting strength that is LOVE. In this hour of blinding peril…grant us the limitless righteousness that is LOVE. In this instance of palpable pain…grant us the matchless fortitude that is LOVE. LOVE…rise within us…help us to become a mighty movement

capable of defeating the great evil that is this rush to execute Kosoul Chanthakoumanne. We are fasting. We are praying. We are moving. We are shaking. Our cry is plain… LOVE…stop this. LOVE…stop this. LOVE…stop this. We stand ready in expectation of a mighty inbreaking of LOVE.

Amen.

August 24, 2022

Clemency Statement of & Lamentations on JAMES CODDINGTON

CLEMENCY STATEMENT OF JAMES CODDINGTON

“The person that he welcomed into his home was not me…it was a shell of me…it was a drug addict…that didn’t deserve his friendship…and I’m very sorry that I took their dad…their grandpa. I still today would do whatever I have to do to make it right to

his family. I said it at the time of my sentencing…if this ends today with my death sentence…ok. I can't say that it's wrong. All I can do is to show them every day that he didn't die in vain. I've tried to be the best person that I can be since the day that that happened…in every way. I've had a couple of missteps…but other than that…I'm clean…I know God. I'm not…I'm not a vicious murderer. I don't know how I can explain it any more than that every step that I take…I'm thankful for…and I watch it…I make sure that I don't ever cross the line. It's so easy in here to get wrapped up in this world…and I choose not to. I choose to try to help in any way that I can to keep the younger guys from coming in and making the mistakes that I made when I was young and first

in here. I had a lot of misconducts when I was in my teenage years. In the last 25 years, I've had one infraction…and there's a reason for it…I took a life… and it changed me…and it changed me in a way that I can't explain…but it took a fire out of my stomach that I'd had my entire life and it made me calm. I don't know why he had to die to make that happen but he did it…he calmed me. I can't apologize enough for what I did and for someone to say that I don't care and that I have no remorse…it's the only thing that I have to say is not true…because I've never forgot how he was one of my friends…and he tried his best to help me…anytime I needed it…and for that he lost his life. Everything my attorney has told y'all about me today is me. If I deserve to live…

it's in y'all's hands…if I don't…it's also in y'all's hands. That's about all I can say. I don't know what else to say."

LAMENTATIONS ON JAMES CODDINGTON

James Coddington was…

Abandoned.

Abused.

Poor.

Malnourished.

Filthy.

Beaten.

Kicked.

Thrown.

Traumatized.

Unsupervised.

Underdeveloped.

Ridiculed.

Belittled.

Condemned.

Addicted.

Mentally ill

An alcoholic.

…all before the age of 9 years old.

If you met a child who had gone through all these things…how would you respond? Hopefully, any of us would do all that we could to help the child. But the problem is that we didn't help Coddington in his most crucial years…and like all problems that aren't dealt with…things got worse…much worse.

As he got older, James Coddington turned to the only thing that he knew of that could slightly ease his pain…drugs. There was no life for Coddington without drugs. In fact, he knew of no other way to function. He'd never been taught that there were other ways of dealing with mental illness. The next high was the only thing that kept him going. To say that Coddington was a mess would be an

understatement. But the problem is that we didn't help Coddington in his most crucial years…and like all problems that aren't dealt with…things got worse…much worse.

By the time he was in his twenties, James Coddington was largely still the person he was when he was 9… just in a bigger body. Amid constant struggle, Coddington was befriended by a man named Albert Hale…who took him in and tried to help him. Coddington seemed to respond for a while. Then one day…while in the throes of a three-day crack binge… Coddington busted into the house demanding money for drugs. When Hale refused, Coddington killed him. Though he quickly became remorseful for what

he did, Coddington was dehumanized by the court. Nobody wanted to talk about the 9-year-old. Everybody wanted to talk about the grown man. The problem is that you can't separate the two. Of course, Coddington got the death penalty…even though various experts of the mitigating circumstances of his upbringing were not allowed to testify. Now, the State of Oklahoma is trying to execute him. Why can't we see that the problem is that we didn't help Coddington in his most crucial years…and like all problems that aren't dealt with… things got worse…much worse?

These types of death penalty cases…involving horrific childhood abuse…are becoming more and

more frequent. Why can't we admit that we failed the perpetrator just as much as the perpetrator failed the victim? While it doesn't mean that the perpetrator shouldn't be punished, it does mean that we should have the compassion to look at our own failures as a society and consider them as mitigating evidence before we start going around killing folk.

We lament that Albert Hale was murdered. We lament that Oklahoma is seeking to execute James Coddington. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

SIGN THE PETITION

@ https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-

execution-of-james-coddington-in-oklahoma?msclkid=7fb015fcae1211ecb0966f000c88ed3a

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August 26, 2022

On the Need for Honest Abolitionists.

Throughout my work of abolition, I've committed to standing with those that nobody else will. The ones who have no remorse. The ones who wish they could kill again. The ones that you would never want to meet on the street. While such statements are not true of all of the guys I work with, they are true of some of them.

I do not believe in progress without truth. If we are going to move forward as an abolition movement, we must tell the truth. Unfortunately, I don't believe that we currently know how. For far too long, we have told partial truths. We constantly speak of the need to recognize the humanity of folks on death row…but we fail to speak of the many evil things that they have done…and in the process we dehumanize them by not giving them the chance to repent. It seems that we would rather look past such things. Then, we are amazed when society can't see the humanity of these folks when they are about to be executed…they can't see the humanity because we haven't showed it to them…we have tried to sell the public a story of humanity that is partial, incomplete

and ultimately false. There can be no truth without truth. We will never be successful until we completely lean into the complexity of our cause. Our work has to begin in evil and end in salvation…if we don't deal with the evil then we can never find the salvation…but too often we want to start in salvation…which is why people most often think that we're nuts. It's strange…but I have no doubt that more people are being executed because we spend all of our time trying to humanize/rationalize folk on death row…instead of leaning into the complexities of evil and telling the truth.

Let me make it plain, some of the people that I have worked with on various death rows are not people I

would ever want to live next door to my family under any circumstance…or for that matter even meet on the street. Why are we scared to make such a statement? These folks are not worthless…they have value…but they're not angels…many are from it…they're humans…and by making them out to be angels…we are dehumanizing them. The zealous efforts of the movement to humanize has led to dehumanization…to creating fables when we need the truth. People need to hear about those who have no remorse…those who wish they could kill again… those you would never meet on the street…because if we can save those we can save them all…but we have to tell the truth. What they did is indispensably important to what they can be. What we have done

is indispensably important to what we can become. We are all a part of all that we have met. Indeed, truth is the only path to real humanization…our collective salvation.

Amen.

September 5, 2022

The Dawn of a New Resistance: Words of Intentional Division in a Time of Apathy

***Sermon Delivered on August 28, 2022 at Quapaw Quarter United Methodist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas**

Thank y'all. Good morning. Man...you know, it's usually hot in this sanctuary, but I can tell you when I said I was going to wear this robe, I forgot about that. It is definitely warm up in here. I'm thankful for my son. I got so many kids. I forget their names. My son Quinley and my daughter, Madeleine, are here with me and I think everybody else should be watching at the house unless they have my wife tied up hostage by now. We actually have three more children and my wife is Emily. She's a professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. And that is how we got here in the first place. How I got to y'all... is that I came to the thrift store.

I am a big thrifter…my wife says too big…

nevertheless, I joined you all here on a Sunday morning. Honestly, I am constantly doing so much speaking, talking, counseling, doing all this stuff during the week…that I was looking for a place where I could be relatively anonymous, which is why none of y'all got a chance to talk to me until recently.

I always wanted to get here about 15 minutes late and leave about 15 minutes early. Well, one day Kurt (former pastor who died unexpectedly about a month back) came back to me and started talking and he kept on prying and I kept on resisting. I didn't wanna say a whole lot. And then he finally asked me,

what do you do? And I said, well, I'm a theologian, a minister, an activist.

And I do all these different things. And, he said, well, what do you think about the United Methodist church? And I said, well, I hate the United Methodist church. And he, you know what he said…this is when this is when I knew that Kurt and I were going to get on well…he said I do too from time to time.

Oftentimes, we find ourselves in these institutions, these churches, these different ideologies, these different places of normativity. And we think we are defined by such things. We oftentimes forget that we are defined by our creation, whose we are, who we

are, where we are going. I've entitled my sermon, The Dawn of a New Resistance. Y'all are gonna have to forgive me. I'm an old Baptist preacher and we're used to preaching, you know, 45 minutes to an hour. And you know, y'all's 15 minutes, well that's just the introduction most of the time. So if y'all get up and start walking out, I'll know I've gone on too long.

The Dawn of a New Resistance. Our scripture comes to us from the Book of Revelation. I think that Revelation has a lot more to teach us than just scary stories of the end of time. I think it has a lot to teach us about how we function, how we should live, how we should breathe, how we should think, how we should have our being in this time.

The Dawn of a New Resistance. We live in a time in which we spend a lot of time trying to save institutions, trying to protect denominations, trying to protect the old way of doing things. We spend a lot of time thinking about how we can protect our buildings, how we can protect these wonderful edifices, because we have been told if we protect the institutions, if we protect the buildings, if we protect all of these things, then somehow we are working for…protecting…Jesus.

I like to talk about the difference between that, which is normal and that which is Queer. The normal way of doing things is to keep up again, the

institution, the normal edifices, all of these things that we have been taught that we need and that we have to have. You see, Jesus came to teach us a Queer way of doing things.

Here is this man roaming around in the desert with a bunch of smelly guys saying crazy things, choosing to hang out with crazy people and saying that a new world was upon us. You see, I believe that the old ways were and are passing away.

A new heaven and a new earth, which means an old heaven and an old earth are passing away. You see, John describes the, the great, holy city. Coming out of the sky, out of the heavens. And it's interesting to

me, when I think about who, who is this holy city? No offense...but I asked my wife...and she said it definitely isn't Little Rock Arkansas...but I do believe that the people of God are a holy city standing against the normativities that often drain our souls. These normatives that are again, our institutions, our edifices, but also our injustices. You see, when we refuse to change, things tend to stay the same.

You know, here in Little Rock, I've been particularly concerned about our murder rate. Yeah, we are on track for a hundred homicides this year, 60, I think believe it was 64 last year, a hundred this year. I asked Mayor Scott a few weeks ago. I said, I said, what are we gonna do about this? And a lot of times

in these elections, you know, they'll say, he'll say something to the degree of, well, at least I'm not Steve Landers. Well, I don't care who, who is, who...I don't care if your name's, you know, Teddy, Freddy or whatever...I'm concerned about these homicides. You see the people of God exist beyond the, they exist in this space of a new city, a new people... defined by right and wrong not by political parties... candidates...or ideals. The new city are those standing in resistance to the old ways, standing in resistance to a culture that is defined by violence.

So often, we get so concerned with protecting the way things are...protecting our institutions... protecting our buildings...protecting the way things

were..that we forget to live into the way things can be.

I know here at Quapaw Quarter, this is an interesting time. To be quite frank, I've never been in a church on a Sunday morning and found out that the pastor had passed away. That sounds like a horrible joke we would've learned at seminary. But at the same time, I do not believe in death without resurrection.

I do not believe in death without resurrection. You see John tells us that this holy city, that we are gathering this holy city, this holy beautiful people are coming together. Who is going to be the, for runners of the indwelling and the presence of God.

What can Quapaw Quarter be? You see, God has gathered this group of people together, not to, you know, be defined by all this stuff…not to keep up all this stuff. What would you be if it was all taken from you right now? What would you be if it all disappeared? What would you mean to this neighborhood? If all of this was gone, what would you mean to Little Rock? If all of this was gone…if it are you defined by this building by this amazing edifice by all of these beautiful stain glass windows? Or are you defined as being a holy people of God who is ushering in the very presence of God?

Well, the scripture says that when God comes that God will dwell amongst the people and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. You see, God is wiping away your tears. God is not wiping away the memory of Kurt by no means, but wiping away the tears. So that you may take the teachings of Kurt and those who have come before and push into this new space, this new space where you are the holy city ushering in the very presence of God.

I am tired of hearing about not just here...but in general...about the death of institutions, the death of, of people, the death of spaces, as if there is no power in the name of Jesus. Listen folks...there is power in the name of Jesus...and it's not a power of

death…it's the power of life. So the question becomes…is the power of death ruling in this space or is the power of life ruling in this space? This is a fundamental question that will help determine what your future looks like.

I believe that God is making all things new. I look around and I see all of these various colors of equality. I believe that we are moving to a newer world…one in which those who do not accept L G B T Q equality will be not just outside of the will and message of God…but will be outside of any rational understanding of what a church actually is. I don't believe that you can be a church and exclude people. We are sitting here in a day and age in which we

continue to experience and see racial injustice in this city. I don't believe that you can be a church and not lead the way for racial justice. We are quickly moving in a direction here in Arkansas of being a capital of injustice. Things seems to be getting worse and worse. Every time I look at the news there are new stories of hate and inequality. You cannot be a church and fail to fight against such things.

Somebody told me to make sure I talk about Jesus this morning. And I always wanna say, well, these flags of LGBTQ equality tell the story of Jesus. Jesus said, what you have done to the least of these you have done to me.

This is an amazing church with amazing people with amazing potential of being a beacon of hope to this city. You see, I didn't pick just anywhere to sit on, sit in the back row and not talk to anybody.

I enjoyed this space from the moment I came in and you know, this is kind of a no frill space. You know, this, it, ain't got a rock band up here and there ain't, you know, actors swinging in from the, from the ropes to illustrate sermons…and celebrities filling the pews…and all those kinds of things. But this is a place with a sweet spirit, a willingness…I believe…to be forerunners of God.

But the question is, are we prepared for God to start making all things new? Are we prepared for what comes after L G B T Q equality? Are we prepared for all of the ways that God wants to break us down to build us up…to expand our hearts and minds? Are we prepared for the things that we can't even conceive of yet? Are we prepared for the people that we can't even conceive of walking through these doors? People are coming that need a refuge from injustice. How big is your love? How far are you willing to go?

There is no limit to the love of God.

I want you to think about how can this space that you're sitting in can be used. How far are you willing to go for this space to be used? How would y'all feel about opening the doors and letting all the homeless folks sleep on the pews at night? Whoa, now that starts getting a little scary for some people. And the reason that starts getting scary is because you start imagining shit…. What if people start burning the church down? What if some of 'em start having sex over here in the corner? And what if this? And what if that? And what if this, instead of asking what if this, and what if that in a negative way, maybe we need to start asking what if this and what if that in a positive way, Jesus said what you've done to the least

of these you've done to. Wouldn't be beautiful to ask Jesus to spend the night every once in a while?

You see when God shows up, God doesn't necessarily follow our rules. God doesn't necessarily keep our sensibilities. God doesn't necessarily follow the same worn paths that we are accustomed to.

I want you to know, and I want you to be reminded this morning. And if you leave here with anything, I want you to remember, God is making all things new, all things, new, all things new.

If somebody came in here and said, I am offended by these stain glass windows and their depiction of a

white Jesus…white apostles. Are we prepared to have that conversation?

God is making all things new, all things new.

I do a lot of work on the death penalty and I have a lot of contact with persons around the country before they're executed. And I led a vigil in Oklahoma just this past week for a gentleman by the name of James Coddington…who was ultimately executed. Why do churches say they are opposed to the death penalty and do nothing to stop it?

We say that we're opposed to the death penalty, but most of the time we don't talk about the death

penalty. We say that we are for racial equality, but we don't talk about racial equality. We say we're for L G B T Q equality. And you know, I know there's a couple folks here who make sure that L G B T Q equality is talked about in this space, but oftentimes we don't talk about L G B T Q equality in the ever expanding ways that it needs to be talked about.

I believe that a society is judged by those whom the society has determined doesn't matter. I believe that Christ said that he will always stand with those whom we say don't matter. And so I hope...as we proceed into the future...and as I proceed back to my back row. I hope that this will be a church that finds its starting point where society has placed its ending

point. That finds its place of forward thinking where society is stuck in backward thinking.

This church should be judged by L G B T Q folk… black folk…immigrants…people on death row… disabled persons. I could go on and on. That's the judgment of whether or not this is actually a church, not how well you keep up this building…these edifices. Not whether you're opening up the doors on Sunday morning to have services…but how you are engaging this moment where God is bringing about a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth where God is making all things new.

I know that these have been some difficult weeks for this church, but I also know that moments of difficulty is where God tends to show up and show out. So I want you to open your minds and open your hearts and know that some wild things are about to start happening.

Are you ready for a new movement of God? Are you ready to be the people of God? Are you ready to be a new creation? Let go of all that would hold you back. Open the doors. Let love reign. Be the holy city that God has called you to be.

And I wouldn't be an old Southern preacher if I didn't say… AND all of God's people said, AMEN.

September 11, 2022

Pull Back The Curtains on Executions

By Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

On July 28, 2022 at Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama Department of Corrections officials strapped Joe James, Jr. to a gurney and prepared him to be executed. Normally this should

take minutes. For over three hours beyond his scheduled execution time, gathered reporters, witnesses and other interested parties waited and waited and waited.

Two states over, I was sitting in my office in Arkansas, helping lead an online execution vigil attended by opponents of the death penalty from across the United States and beyond. Yet another outgrowth of the COVID19 pandemic, these Zoom vigils have become a powerful convening of people who oppose executions for myriad reasons, gathering together to prayerfully protest and witness against each execution. Sometimes the execution goes as expected, and our vigil ends within an hour

of the scheduled execution time. But often, especially in Alabama, nothing is predictable. That was certainly the case the night they killed Joe James, Jr.

Like others in leadership on that Zoom, I am familiar with typical execution processes. None of us could figure out what was going on, but we soon understood something was wrong. Because executions take place inside of prisons, we watch the play-by-play reports by the media, usually via Twitter. Reporters will declare, "We're being taken to the witness room now," and say they have to leave electronic devices behind. This usually happens a short time before the scheduled execution. When reporters' departure is delayed, it is often while

waiting for a court to deny or accept pending legal challenges. When the reporters are escorted out of their holding area, it's a fair bet that the execution is imminent.

In the case of Joe James, Jr., what would normally be a matter of minutes dragged into several hours. Of course, there was silence from prison and government officials. Finally, we heard the execution was going forward. It turned out that reporters had been held in the prison van until just before the execution was about to take place. Once reporters were assembled in the witness room, the curtains were opened, and Joe James, Jr. was asked for a final statement. He made none. According to reports, his

eyes were closed and he was unresponsive. This is highly unusual. Even when a prisoner declines to make a final statement, witnesses can hear a “no” or see him shake his head “no.” Fellow prisoners reported talking with James about what he had planned to say, so we know something was amiss.

The Alabama Department of Corrections assured everyone that “nothing out of the ordinary” had taken place. Because the Department of Corrections refused to be transparent about what happened, independent pathologists hired by Reprieve, an international human rights organization, performed an autopsy. Elizabeth Bruenig, a reporter with the

Atlantic who witnessed the exam, published what she saw:

"The state seems to have attempted to insert IV catheters into each of his hands just above the knuckles, resulting in broad smears of violet bruising. Then it looked as though the execution team had tried again, forcing needles into each of his wrists, with the same bleeding beneath the skin and the same indigo mottling around the puncture wounds. On the inside of James's left arm, another puncture site, another pool of deep bruising, and then, a scant distance above, a strange, jagged incision, at James's inner elbow. The laceration met another cut at an obtuse angle. That longer,

narrower slice was part of a parallel pair, which matched a fainter, shallower set of parallel cuts. Underneath the mutilated portion of James's arm was what appeared to be yet another puncture—a noticeable crimson pinprick in the center of a radiating blue-green bruise. Other, less clear marks littered his arm as well."

To put it mildly, Joe James Jr. was tortured by executioners who clearly had no idea of what they were doing. They poked and prodded and prodded and poked. Nobody witnessed all of this incompetence because the Department of Corrections did not pull back the curtains in the execution chamber until Joe James Jr. was already

unconscious. Alabama officials refuse to disclose what happened, or precisely when Joe James, Jr. had been sedated.

Given the shocking evidence of difficulty to establish an intravenous flow in which to pump the execution drugs, one would hope that the executioners sedated him before they started cutting and poking more deeply. It seems more likely that they sedated him only after they were ready, but before they brought the witnesses in to watch the proceedings. This would have prevented James from complaining out loud about the torture he had just endured. When they sedated him remains a secret until a whistleblower comes forward, but Joe James, Jr's

injuries shout it loud and clear: Alabama botched another execution, and they did it in secret.

Whether or not you favor the death penalty, and even if you support torturing prisoners before we kill them, the execution of Joe James, Jr. should bring fundamental questions to the forefront.

Should our government be torturing people?
Does government have a responsibility to be as transparent as possible?
What can be done to ensure full transparency?
Should we continue to allow such secrecy in the conduct of executions?

Shouldn’t our government acknowledge its’ mistakes?

Our answers to these questions speak to the core of who we are as a society. Those prison walls and the curtains in the execution chamber separate us from witnessing the full process of executions. One of the deepest moral beliefs we have in this country is a prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. We say we believe in freedom of information and informed participation in government. If that is true, the tragic lack of transparency that occurred at the execution of Joe James, Jr. must not be allowed to happen again.

We'll never return to the era of public executions, but when we legally kill prisoners behind prison walls, the public must be represented by independent witnesses to the entire process, starting from the moment a prisoner walks him or herself into the death chamber until they are declared dead.

Those curtains run contrary to a democratic society. Public witnesses should know what's going on in the execution chamber from start to finish. This is not only our right, it is our obligation. That is why we demand, "PULL BACK THE CURTAINS!"

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood has served as a spiritual advisor on various death rows for just over 12 years and has accompanied a number of prisoners before their execution. He serves on the Board of Advisors of Death Penalty Action.

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/pull-back-the-curtains/

September 13, 2022

Alabama Insanity: On the Potential Gas Chamber Execution of Alan Eugene Miller

Before government officials in Alabama go ahead with an untested gas chamber execution of Alan Eugene Miller (nitrogen hypoxia), it might be wise to consider a few experiential facts…

Millions upon millions of people were killed in Nazi gas chambers during the Holocaust.

On September 2, 1983, Jimmy Lee Gray was tightly restrained inside Mississippi's gas chamber. At the time, the chamber had an iron vertical bar that ran up the back of the restraining chair. Gray's head was left unrestrained. A prison employee let the gasses flow. According to United Press International reporter Dan Lohwasser, when Gray started to breathe the poisonous air in…he started thrashing his head back and forth…striking the iron vertical bar repeatedly until he lost consciousness. After 8 minutes, officials raced to clear the room so that the press wouldn't continuing seeing the botched

execution. Gray's attorney, Dennis Balske, declared, "Jimmy Lee Gray died banging his head against an iron bar in the gas chamber while reporters counted his moans."

On April 6, 1992, Donald Eugene Harding was strapped into Arizona's gas chamber. The fumes began. Looking red and contorted, Harding clinched his jaw. Unable to stop, Harding took a few breathes...and immediately started convulsing violently. Every vein in his face started to balloon and Harding's face looked like it was going to explode. Shuddering uncontrollably, Harding was wracked with spasms and clinched his fists Tears flowed from his face. Every muscle in his body

twitched. For almost eleven minutes, Harding suffered immeasurably until he was dead.

After becoming disturbed at the cruel and inhumane practice using gas chambers to kill shelter animals, New York Governor David Paterson signed a law banning them on October 29, 2010.

So this is what Alabama wants to do? Copy the Nazis? Repeat botched execution techniques? Use an execution technique that New York doesn't even allow for dogs?

Screams.

Spasms.

Clinched fists.

Head banging

Head thrashing.

Jaw clinching.

Face exploding.

Uncontrollable shuttering.

Immeasurable suffering.

Are these the descriptions government officials in Alabama want in the media the day after the execution?

If so, they're more callous than I could've ever imagined.

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September 14, 2022

The Dead Queen, The Dead King/Royal Family &

Black Lives Matter in London

Mere days before Queen Elizabeth II died on September 8 (September 5), London, UK Metropolitan Police Force (the MET) encountered a car that had been flagged as having been involved in a gun crime (for most, the mere possession of a gun in the UK is a crime). After a short chase, MET

officers boxed the driver of the car (an Audi) in the Streatham Hill district of South London. With little warning, a MET officer fired a gun into the driver's side of the car. The shot struck and killed 24-year-old father and aspiring rapper, Christ Kaba (also known as Mad Itch). Of course, MET officers found no gun. Furthermore, the Audi that Kaba was driving wasn't even owned by him. The MET didn't inform Kaba's family for over 11 hours of what had happened. The family released the following statement not long after being informed of the tragedy, "We are devastated; we need answers, and we need accountability. We are worried that if Chris had not been Black, he would have been arrested on Monday evening and not had his life cut short." In

the days that have followed, momentum has grown in London to hold the MET accountable for Kaba's death. Just yesterday (September 13), thousands of protestors gathered in London demanding justice for Kaba. In addition to this situation, protestors have also been highlighting the June 4 case of Oladeji Adeyemi Omishore…who was tasered by police and basically forced to jump off London Bridge to his death. To say the least, a country known for its' lack of crime certainly seems to have a problem with police brutality.

When I found all this information out, it certainly changed my perception of all of the images around the death of Queen Elizabeth II. While I think it's

undeniably important to love/show compassion to anyone facing tragedy…the privileged and unprivileged alike…I can't help but wonder how Chris Kaba or Oladeji Adeyemi Omishore fit into all of this. The short answer is that they don't.

The United Kingdom (and for that matter much of the world) only seems to be concerned about the pomp and pageantry. The only history on display is of course selective/selected history…as I don't see anyone involved highlighting the violent (often genocidal) history of colonialism. So as the collective gaze of a people is focused on the casket of Queen Elizabeth II, marchers are in the street

demanding justice for Kaba and Omishore. Such a dichotomous moment presents a spiritual truth.

There was a man hanging out listening to the teachings of Jesus. From the context of the text, one can assume that the man was rapidly growing more and more interested in the teachings. One could also fairly surmise that these teachings were everything that the man had been looking for. Finally, such rapidly progressive interaction culminated in Jesus looking at him and declaring, "Follow me!" Excitedly, the man replied, "Ok! But let me go bury my father first." Without hesitation, Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury the dead…"

Right now, the London Metropolitan Police Department is giving lip service to doing the right thing "our condolences…" "we're going to investigate…". Unfortunately, I've heard it all before…here, across the pond. But the call of justice demands so much more. It demands our attention… our effort…our lives. You see…in the midst of the injustices faced by black people in London…the mourning of the city, the United Kingdom and even the world is the dead burying the dead. Jesus is standing with the families and supporters of Chris Kaba and Oladeji Adeyemi Omishore. Those who are alive are the ones out in the streets demanding justice. Without a doubt, the life of Queen Elizabeth II mattered…but not more than the lives of black

people. As the dead continue burying the dead, may we be the vessels of life…specifically as advocates for the lives of our neighbors.

It's clear that Queen Elizabeth II is dead. It's becoming clearer that King Charles III is as well. It's also clearer that the rest of the royal family is too. How can I be so sure? Because…I've yet to hear the names Chris Kaba or Oladeji Adeyemi Omishore proceed forth from their lips.

Amen.

source: aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/14/chris-kabas-family-demand-body-camera-footage-iopc-investigates

September 27, 2022

Lamentations: On John Henry Ramirez

In South Texas, John Henry Ramirez robbed and murdered Pablo Castro in 2004. In fact, Ramirez stabbed him 29 times. A short time later, Ramirez robbed a second victim. Then, Ramirez fled to Mexico where he was able to avoid capture for a little over three and a half years. No one disputes these facts…not even Ramirez himself. For his

crimes, Ramirez was sentenced to death in Nueces County.

Truthfully, most were unaware that John Henry Ramirez's September of 2021 execution date was approaching. In the State of Texas, executions are fairly routine and most often administered in short order with little legal resistance. To say that observers were surprised when the United States Supreme Court stepped in and issued a stay, would be an understatement. Even more surprising, was why the stay was issued. Ramirez's attorneys successfully argued that his spiritual advisor should be able to pray and lay hands on him during the execution. A nearly unanimous Supreme Court

(Justice Clarence Thomas dissented), ruled that these were constitutionally protected activities.

Which brings us to the present, John Henry Ramirez is scheduled to be executed in a matter of days, October 5. Ever since the second date was set, Nueces County District Attorney Mark Gonzalez (who has come to an anti-death penalty perspective) has been trying to withdraw the death warrant (that was pursued as a matter of course by one of his assistants without his knowledge). District Attorney Gonzalez has repeatedly declared, "the death penalty is unethical and should not be imposed on Mr. Ramirez or any other person." Obviously, it is quite unexpected to find an elected district attorney in

Texas who is outspoken in opposition to the death penalty. In addition to all the other aspects of this case, Ramirez is a United States Marine veteran with a variety of ailments from his service. So, what does all this mean?

Questions of religious liberty are undoubtedly of tremendous importance. John Henry Ramirez should be able to have a pastor praying and touching him during his execution. However, problems arise when we favor one religious group over another. It is not lost on us, that certain religious practices would never be allowed in the chamber. Can you imagine Jewish person being allowed to have a Shofar blown at their execution? Can you imagine a

member of the Native American Church being allowed to smoke peyote at their execution? Can you imagine a Rastafarian being allowed to burn marijuana at their execution? If given enough time, one could fill up this entire article with similar questions. The bottom line is that the United States Supreme Court seems to be privileging Christianity over a variety of other faiths by allowing a laying of hands and prayers. Why not take a step back and acknowledge that most religions don't support the death penalty to begin with? Does individual religious liberty not matter anymore?

Incessantly, we are told to trust the criminal justice system…except when we're not. In the case of John

Henry Ramirez, we have the Nueces County District Attorney Mark Gonzalez demanding that Ramirez not be executed. So why should we suddenly stop listening to the advice to trust the system? Shouldn't Gonzalez's conscience matter? It is wild to think that Ramirez might be executed without the support of the local district attorney. Does conscience not matter anymore?

Veterans are supposed to be given deference in our society. Primarily, because we ask them to take on physical and moral injuries in defense of our freedom. John Henry Ramirez did that. So why are we rushing to execute him? Does service not matter anymore?

The case of John Henry Ramirez speaks to many of the problems our society faces. The religious liberty of Christians trumps the religious liberty of all others. The conscience of the dissenter is too often dismissed. The service of the veteran matters as long as the repercussions of it doesn't require too much from us. If we are to begin to heal our land, perhaps a good place to begin is to spare the life of Ramirez.

We lament that such restraint seems unlikely.

We lament that Pablo Castro was murdered. We lament that Texas is seeking to execute John Henry Ramirez. We lament that we haven't been able to abolish the death penalty yet. We lament.

Sign the petition:

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-john-ramirez-in-texas

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director Abraham

Bonowitz and Convener of Clergy United Against the Death Penalty The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

September 30, 2022

Football is Evil: Tua Tagovailoa & Our Addiction to Watching the Destruction of Others

Over the last few days, I've followed the injuries of Miami Dolphins' Quarterback Tua Tagovailoa. Last Sunday in a game against the Buffalo Bills, Tagovailoa was injured and, despite stumbling around disoriented and needing to go back to the locker room, was ultimately put back in the game.

Fast forward to tonight, Tagovailoa was slammed hard to the ground by a large defensive player. Immediately, his hands seized up in what is an immediate and obvious sign of neurological injury. So, in less than 6 days, Tagovailoa was more than likely twice permanently injured for our enjoyment? Not to mention, the fact that countless others have experienced less publicized permanent injuries during the exact same games. How can anyone act like this is ok? Of course, we can no longer claim ignorance. Based on article after article, report after report and study after study, we are all aware that neurological damage takes place at every football game that is played. Why do we keep watching? Are

we that addicted to watching the destruction of others?

The message of Jesus is clear…love your neighbor as you love yourself…i.e. care for your neighbor as you care for yourself. How can we care for our neighbors and continue to support football? It's just not possible. Football shortens…destroys…and takes lives for the collective entertainment of the masses. Isn't that the very definition of societal evil? Yet, millions still watch almost daily. We are sick.

Further writings from 2019 and 2011 on the subject below:

Football is Evil.

In 1971, Detroit Lions wide receiver Chuck Hughes dropped dead on the field during a game against the Chicago Bears.

In September of 2017, Midwestern State University's Robert Grays broke his neck while making a tackle against Texas A&M-Kingsville. Later that day, College of Wooster senior offensive lineman Clayton Geib suffered injuries in a contest against College of Wooster that he would latter succumb to.

Struggling with various football-related neurological issues, Washington State University quarterback Tyler Hilinski shot himself in January of 2018.

Late last year, the HBO news magazine “Real Talk with Bryant Gumbel” reported that of 30 NCAA football players have died during workouts since the year 2000.

Around the same time, high school football player Dylan Thomas died as a result of a tackle in Zebulon, Georgia.

Of the brains of over a hundred deceased football players tested for CTE, an astonishing 99% showed signs of considerable neurological rot.

-mdedge.com/neurology/article/145375/alzheimers-cognition/study-details-cte-football-players

The evidence goes on and on and on.

Over the last few days, I watched parts of multiple football games. Repeatedly, I saw players helped or carted off the field due to significant injuries.

In the midst of the onslaught, I remembered a Letter to the Editor that I wrote a number of years ago.

Letter to the Editor of The Daily Mississippian

September 30, 2011

The Editor:

I experienced my first football game at Ole Miss not too long ago. Buying into the national advertising campaigns and recent attempts to modernize campus symbolism, I expected to see a modern multiracial environment. What I saw was quite the contrary…

I arrived in The Grove to see thousands of white people celebrating their money and football with exotic drinks, expensive clothing, and the finest tailgating tents money can buy. I stopped at my first tailgate to hear discussion of the joys of not being from Utah. To which a young man, donning a pledge pin from a large campus fraternity, replied, "…at least they don't have all these niggers." Honestly, looking around, I had no idea who he was talking about. The only persons on The Grove were members of Mississippi's white privileged elite. The Mississippians this young man seemed to be speaking of are unable to afford the tickets or comforts he and his buddies enjoyed. Somewhat shaken, I continued to journey toward the stadium.

Upon gate arrival, I became more frustrated when I saw African-Americans filling most of the menial/servant tasks of cleanup and security. I bought a program from a vendor and wasn't surprised to see most of the players were also African-Americans. When I got to my seat, I noticed the crowd around me was all white. The longer I sat the more I realized where I was…the Roman Coliseum. Mississippi's white elites scream for blood as mostly young African-Americans place their lives on the line (see former player Bennie Abram / who incurred deadly injuries while playing football) for collective white entertainment. I left knowing, despite trite cosmetic efforts to the contrary, the

historical traditions of oppression are alive and well at Ole Miss.

The entire experience made me wonder when people will get as upset about inequality as they do loosing football games.

Rev. Jeff Hood

Truth cannot be denied.

Football destroys the body.

Football thrives on inequity.

Football is…

Until major changes are made…

Football is evil.

Amen.

October 5, 2022

The Executioner.

Tonight, John Ramirez is scheduled be executed in Texas. Close your eyes. Imagine for a second that you are one of the ones tasked with killing him.

Evenings aren't what they used to be. The kids run around laughing. Your spouse keeps talking. All you

can do is stare off into space. The questions haunt your every thought. Grace? Mercy? Judgment? Eternity? You'd heard these words your entire life… but they seem to have no meaning now. When the kids come to kiss you good night, you wonder if they know what kind of person they're kissing. Gently, your spouse tries to offer reassurance. Words fall short. The nights are the worst. Face after face run circles in your mind. Sweat flows from our brow. Your chest tightens. Are you having a heart attack? No, it's just the souls tearing at your insides. You desperately want out…but there is nowhere to go. The baby cries all the time. Who's going to pay for the formula? The late notice came yesterday. What about the mortgage? Mom is dying. How are we

going to get her in the nursing home? Getting up, you start pacing the halls. The voices follow. Is someone there? Whispers echo against the walls. What's real? The pain is all that you know. Your hand finds a doorknob. Slowly you crack it open, will they still love you when they find out? You begin to cry. Would it be better for them if you ended it all? Would their lives be more moral? Would life be easier? Would they have an easier time finding God beyond all of this evil? Who will care for them? Their clothes. Their food. Their healthcare. Their education. Where did all the oxygen go? You decide that tonight is not the night. Closing the door, you walk to the living room. Collapsing into the chair, you doze off. The alarm jolts you awake. It's only

been thirty minutes. Every night is the same. It all runs together. The only date you can remember is the one you remember…the one you dread…the one that torments you…the one whose voices never stop speaking in your head…the one whose voice is still on the horizon. No matter what you fill your day with, let there be no doubt…the horror of the coming night is ever present.

Day breaks. You've just experienced the longest night yet. Your uniform is right where you left it. It cracks as you put it on. You went too heavy on the starch. You seem to go too heavy on everything these days. Going downstairs, you sit down at the table. As your spouse and kids are about to leave,

you manage to mutter something. Leaning down, your spouse whispers prayers. They mean nothing. You know you're damned. Your body moves. It doesn't feel like you are moving it. It feels like something sinister is out there is pulling you to your moral demise. Before you know it, you're driving down the highway. Every concrete barrier is a temptation. Maybe if you just push the pedal all the way down…you can smash all of your problems away in one fiery crash. Unsure why, you decide against it. Maybe you just don't have the courage? Maybe you care too much about yourself? Maybe you care about your family too much? Maybe? Then, you arrive. Doom sets in.

Pulling in, the guard asks for your identification. You don't recognize the man in the picture on the card. Are you ok? You don't know. You just are. Driving forward, you pull into your spot. Your chest grows tighter. You can't breathe. You begin to cry. Is your heart about to explode? You'd never had anxiety like this before this job. Last chance to run. You think of all that is at stake. Leaning out the door, you throw up. Stepping over the chunks, you proceed to the door. All that could be lost fills your brain. There is nowhere to go. It's a trap. You're trapped. The officer greets you cheerfully. Then, quickly realizes that you are in no mood to talk. After patting you down, he waves you forward. The door shuts loudly behind you. You're back in prison.

The day passes far quicker than you expected. It's probably because you can't think. The seconds just won't register. Before you can resist, you're in the room. The hour of your constant dread is here. Repeatedly, you here doors open and shut. You begin to shake. Loudly, the condemned is brought in. Pull yourself together. All of the thinking is over. All of the feeling is over. Now, you just do. Grabbing the arm, you strap it down on the gurney. You try not to look, but you can't help but notice the condemned staring right at you. There is nowhere to go. There is only those eyes. Those human eyes. You can't move. You're stuck in those eyes…those living eyes. One of your colleagues pulls you away. You

can't stop staring back. Words fill the chamber. You don't hear any of them. You are stuck on those eyes. Then, the poison starts to flow. You know that this is the end. Your eyes connect more deeply than you have ever connected with any set of eyes. The condemned opens his mouth and declares, "I forgive you." You know better. Deep inside. You know you'll never be able to forgive yourself. Then, it's all over. Your entire life flashes before your eyes…or maybe that was somebody else's life. It doesn't seem to matter anymore. Death comes quickly.

October 6, 2022

An Oration to Abolitionists Following the Execution of John Ramirez.

I'm tired of these vigils. Really tired. We show up. We try to do what we're supposed to do. We try to be present. We feel like we've accomplished something. Then, a few weeks later we do the same thing all over again. Why? Why are we so comfortable going through the motions? The truth is, you can get so

good at crying…so good at mourning…so good at grieving…that you forget that what you need to be getting good at is fighting back…organizing… abolishing all this bullshit once and for all. You see, the question of the hour is not how you feel…the question of the hour is how are you going to use those feelings? Not necessarily where do we go from here…but more so…how are we going to go from here? Again, we could spend the rest of our lives attending these vigils…we could spend the rest of our lives upset and angry that these executions are happening…or we could give our lives to making it stop…to abolishing the death penalty once and for all.

Since we've been on this vigil, I got a phone call from someone who is on death row in Oklahoma. When he asked me what I was doing, I told him that I was on a vigil for John Ramirez who was being executed in Texas. Immediately, he said, "Fuck that" and hung up. I was taken aback for a moment, then I realized that if I was on death row somewhere, I sure as hell wouldn't want to spend my time hearing about an execution somewhere else. Then, I got a deeper truth. Maybe we are so used to doing these vigils that we aren't saying "Fuck that" enough. You see we should be concentrating on getting the hell away from these things through destroying the source of their existence…the death penalty. So, maybe the rest of us should start saying "Fuck that" a lot more.

We've read a bunch of scripture tonight. We've talked a considerable amount about God. We've had some movements of the Spirit. All of that is well and good…but my prayer tonight for this group…for this organization…for all who do this work…is…God give us rage. God give us rage. Help us to be angry. And may we use that rage…that anger…to transform our society…to push back against this horrible injustice that is the death penalty.

We heard earlier the Psalmist say, "Ye, though I may wlak through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Tonight, remember…you don't have to fear any evil. Ye, though we have walked through

the valley of the shaodw of death tonight…we don't have to fear any evil…you don't have to fear any evil. Because justice, righteousness, grace, mercy, hope… they will be your guide.

I want everyone who has traveled through this space of death…this valley of death…tonight…I want you to remember John Ramirez…not as an angel…not as a saint…but rather as a human being…just like the rest of us. A human being who the State of Texas murdered tonight. And in your humanity…I want you to make sure this shit don't ever happen again.

May this be the last vigil. Let's declare that with our prayers…in our lives…in our actions. Let's declare

that this is the last vigil. Tonight is going to be the last vigil! You might say that I'm a dreamer…but I can tell you that I'd rather be a dreamer than be found with the executioners. I'd rather be a dreamer than be an accomplice to the death penalty.

God give us rage. God help us to be angry. God give us rage. That we might go out and make this night the last night that someone is executed. May we be the abolitionists who get to see the death penalty abolished.

Amen.

October 10, 2022

SAVE ANTHONY SANCHEZ! : a Choctaw Man about to be Executed on Choctaw Land

Dear Editor,

On this Indigenous People's Day (October 10), there is a Choctaw man sitting on death row in Oklahoma, named Anthony Sanchez. On April 6, 2023, Sanchez is scheduled to be executed for the 1996 murder of

Juli Busken in Norman. At this point, most advocates for people on death row would dive into a laundry list of reasons why there are doubts about the case. I'll leave that for another time. My purposes are simpler than that. I just want to call your attention to the irony that a Choctaw man was convicted of a crime in another part of the state and is being taken back to the Choctaw Nation to be executed, at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. Of course, there will be some who argue that the Penitentiary is property of the State of Oklahoma. While they would be right, what they are leaving out is that the land that the Penitentiary sits on was stolen from the Choctaw people. On top of that, Sanchez had to be transported over Choctaw land to

get there…everything that keeps the prison running travels over Choctaw land…all of the supplies that will be used in his execution will be transported over Choctaw land…and all of those who are responsible for carrying out his execution will be traveling over Choctaw land. So, no matter how you talk about it, the State of Oklahoma will be utilizing Choctaw land and resources to kill a Choctaw man. Such a juxtaposition harkens back to the worst evils committed in the history of the State. I wouldn't think that Oklahomans would want to resurrect such demons by killing another Native man on Native land.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Oklahoma's Death Row

October 12, 2022

The Devil in Disguise? : The Unbelievable Incompetence/Criminality of Joyce Gilchrist & The Fight to Save Anthony Sanchez

Based on flawed forensic analysis, Michael Blair spent 15 years on death row for a crime that he did not commit.

https://innocenceproject.org/cases/michael-blair/

Based on flawed forensic analysis, Malcolm Rent Johnson was executed for a crime many suspect he did not commit.

nytimes.com/2001/09/02/us/oklahoma-retraces-big-step-in-capital-case.html?pagewanted=2

Based on flawed forensic analysis, Curtis McCarty spent 20 years on death row for a crime that he did not commit.

https://innocenceproject.org/cases/906/

Based on flawed forensic analysis, Johnny Edward Tall Bear spent 26 years on death row for a crime that he did not commit.

https://innocenceproject.org/oklahoma-man-exonerated-after-serving-26-years-for-a-murder-dna-evidence-proves-he-didnt-commit/

Based on flawed forensic analysis, Jeffrey Pierce spent 15 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

https://innocenceproject.org/cases/jeffrey-pierce/

Based on flawed forensic analysis, David Bryson spent 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

https://innocenceproject.org/cases/david-johns-bryson/

Every single one of these exonerations have one thing in common, the forensic analysis was performed by disgraced Oklahoma City Police Department specialist Joy Gilchrist.

After the firestorm around Gilchrist's ineptitude exploded, an investigation was commenced that outlined a variety of problems with her work,

including (1) missing evidence in numerous cases; (2) contamination issues due to evidence being "stacked all over the chemist's area"; (3) systematic destruction of rape evidence after two years, well before the statute of limitations had expired; (4) lack of peer review in many cases; and (5) absence of proficiency testing, although such testing had been paid for.

Of the dozens of death penalty cases that Gilchrist worked on, at least half have already been executed. How many of those do you think were innocent?

When interviewed by Dan Rather in 2001 during a 60 Minutes segment concerning Joyce Gilchrist and her

cases, former chief forensic scientist in Kansas City, Missouri John Wilson, said this, "The whole criminal justice system has failed."

https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=faculty_publications

Joyce Gilchrist died in 2015…her legacy of terror remains. Just ask the people still sitting in prison based on her lies.

How could anyone think it right to execute someone when Gilchrist was involved in their case? The possibility of a mistake is simply too great.

Take for instance, the case of Anthony Sanchez. Based on evidence that Joyce Gilchrist would have interacted with (as a supervisor…in the laboratory described above), Sanchez was convicted of the 1996 murder of Juli Busken in Norman, Oklahoma. In April, Sanchez is scheduled to be executed. Surely Gilchrist's connection alone should give us pause.

Even for those who are supportive of the death penalty, the words execution and doubt should never go together. When Gilchrist is involved, they always will.

October 13, 2022

The Real Benjamin Cole

Back when I was a child, I used to play a video game entitled, “James Bond 007.” I’m sure many remember that game. I used to sit around with my buddies and play all day long. There is no doubt that it was fun. While I don’t know if it’s the same version that Benjamin Cole was playing…I can assure you I didn’t love it as much as he did.

On December 20, 2002 in Claremore, Oklahoma, Benjamin Cole was playing "James Bond 007" and grew agitated that his daughter, 9-month-old Brianna Cole, was crying. Instead of getting up to comfort her, Cole got up and violently contorted her in such a way that he snapped her spine and tore her iota. Instead of getting her help, Cole went back and started playing his video game again. What would cause a human being to commit such evil? I don't know. The only thing that seems rational in my mind is that his mind was not rational.

Let there be no doubt, this is a horrific, disturbing, disgusting, unbelievably evil crime. Surely, we must call it what it is. But, the story doesn't end there.

During Benjamin Cole's trial, it became obvious that he was suffering from a variety of mental defects. After the trial, Cole was proven to have paranoid schizophrenia and multiple brain conditions that inhibited rational thinking. Slowly, Cole has become a shell of a human being…often catatonic. To be competent for execution, one has to know that they are being executed and why they are being executed. On multiple occasions, Cole has been deemed competent. I disagree with this assertion…because

I've actually had a chance to recently speak with Cole.

While I'm no psychologist, I found Cole to have very little understanding of reality. Of course, my assumption was that Cole was in need of a spiritual advisor (obviously, I agreed to the call…as I work with guys on death row all over the country). Quickly, it became apparent that he had no idea what he was in need of. In fact, Cole didn't even seem to understand who he was talking to. As for the execution, Cole seemed to suggest that he would receive some sort of messianic proclamation on October 20…not that he would be executed for the murder of his daughter. Repeatedly, he shouted so

many Messianic ideas at me that I had trouble keeping up. Growing more and more intense, he also shouted Bible verse after Bible verse into the phone. As we finished the conversation, he kept on talking about presently being in paradise. I have no doubt that this man has no idea that he is being executed on October 20 or why. He was unable to talk about or seemingly think about anything but his fantasies.

How can executing this man serve any rational good?

Shame on you Oklahoma.

October 14, 2022

Nikolas Cruz, The Parkland Families & The Difference Between Vengeance & Justice

On February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz shot and killed 17 students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Earlier today, a jury in Florida sentenced Cruz to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Here are some quotes from the

reactions expressed by victim's families about Cruz not getting the death penalty…

"The system continues to fail us…"

"…we thought Cruz would get the death penalty…It's just so upsetting."

"This jury failed our families today…"

"I'm disgusted with those jurors."

"they either didn't understand the facts in this case, or [were] dishonest with themselves when they

signed up to become a juror, and would never have voted for the death penalty."

"It's pretty unreal that nobody paid attention to the facts of this case…"

"It's just a travesty of justice."

"It's anger at the sentencing."

"Not everyone's a victim."

"And the monster that killed them gets to live another day."

“This monster killed 17 people, how can he live another day?”

“the state’s attorneys did everything they needed to prove…beyond a reasonable doubt…that the death penalty was warranted.”

“If not for Cruz…What is the death penalty for?”

“We are in a state where the death penalty is an option…What’s that for? That’s my question.”

“…should have been the death penalty — 100%.”

“The lack of empathy, and humanity shown to our families by this defense team — it’s indefensible…”

Source: cnn.com/us/live-news/nikolas-cruz-sentencing-decision/index.html

Let there be no doubt, Nikolas Cruz committed an unbelievably evil act. No one should have to experience what these families have. For his crimes, Cruz will be punished severely. With that said, I was very taken aback by the thirst for blood expressed by these family members after the sentencing verdict. It’s as if they expected the judge to let them rip Cruz limb from limb in front of the courthouse. Vengeance is not the same thing as justice. You see,

our system didn’t fail anybody today…it actually functioned quite well. The jurors took into account all the mitigating circumstances that Cruz experienced before he committed the crime…and punished him as they saw fit. Now, they're being lambasted. These people should be commended for their service not condemned for their conclusion. Irrespective of the feelings of the masses…justice is supposed to be blind…and it was today…and that’s exactly how it should be. Now, may a healing free from violence truly begin in earnest for all.

October 14, 2022

A Primer on Moral Ethics

For a number of years, I spent every weekend in the streets of Dallas. During the time, I was one of the local leaders of the movement for black lives. I'd venture to say that during that time I organized tens of thousands of people to hit the streets. To say that I was critical of local churches and their lack of participation in these moments would be an

understatement. Constantly, I would shout to anyone who would listen, "These ain't no fucking churches…these are the epicenters of complicity… here in the streets…this is where the real morality is." Looking back, I think I was right about the 'epicenters of complicity' part…but I was wrong about one very big thing…an assumption that just because someone was out in the streets that that automatically meant that they were moral. In the years since, I have seen so many people…even leaders…who were once out in the streets do horrible things. One was caught in the bed of a child. One beat their wife. One was complicit in a murder. One was caught laundering money from a charity. I could go on and on. It's important to state

unequivocally, I'm still down for the cause…just not the assumption of morality that the performance of actions around the cause have created. While there is no doubt that people are more than their worst moments, I do think that their worst moments can demonstrate the truth of their performative moments. You see, morality that demands performance will create performances…morality that demands love will create a lasting moral ethic.

On the nature of performance. It's important that one understand that the world always demands performance. It's as if people can't help themself. They want to see something. They want to see one doing something. And if something can't be seen that

it doesn't mean anything. The problem with such logic is that sight can be fleeting…life is often a mirage. People are often worse than their best and better than their worst. If we teach people that moral ethics are about performances, then we will never be able to find out who people really are or what they are about. A true or authentic moral ethic lasts…performances end when the curtain goes down. It's the difference between doing and being. The moral ethicist does something because their moral ethic consists of something…love.

On the location of performance. In order to determine whether or not one is ethical, we want to see what a person does. There is an assumption that

the moral ethic must always be public. Sometimes this is true…but most of the time it is not. The nature of moral ethics is that it begins within and proceeds without. While there isn't one particular space of moral ethic, there is one particular launching point…the self. Love that is grounded in love will look like love. Performance that is grounded in performance will look like a performance. The moral ethicist chooses the location based on their moral ethics not based on the best location to perform. The location of true ethical interaction should always be the same…within to without.

On the nature of love. Love comes from within. It is at the center of who we are. Love proceeds without. It is how we truly connect with the world. Love cannot be performed. It simply is. The nature of love is that it constantly gives from within. It is at the center of what it means to give. The nature of love means that it cannot be a performance. It is always real. Performers perform. Lovers love. The nature of love is love.

On the location of love. Love is where we come from. Love is where we are going. Love is where we will always be. No matter where one is, the primary vocation of the moral ethicist is to make their location…love…known.

On the difference between performance and love.

Performance is temporary. Love lasts forever.

Performance performs. Love is.

On the creation of moral ethic. It is our job to foster love within that can proceed to love without. There is no future without love. The moral ethicist is determined to know love, be love and share love. There is nothing to perform. There is only something to be. Proper action flows from proper being. The moral ethicist is a connector of humanity from within to without in the name of love.

The definition of moral ethics simple…real non-performative no-bullshit…love proceeding from within to without.

October 17, 2022

Jesus' First Execution: Dirt, Anthony Sanchez & the Struggle to Save a Life

Jesus was such an effective teacher that people were constantly trying to trip him up…especially on moral issues. One day, as he was teaching, some religious leaders…some preachers if you will…slung a woman at his feet. To make sure that there was no mistaking what they were accusing the woman of, they loudly

declared that she had been caught in the very act of adultery. In those days, adultery was a capital offense. Seeking to test where Jesus was at on the death penalty, they demanded that he tell them what to do. Instead of responding, Jesus got down in the dirt and started writing. Now, Jesus' body was between the woman and her accusers. If the stones had started flying Jesus was prepared to die with the woman. Whatever he wrote in the dirt…one must assume that it was some of the secret sins of the religious leaders…got them rattled and they started walking away. Looking at the woman, Jesus absolved her of her sin and encouraged her to be on her way.

Right now, we are in the midst of a national execution spree. Month after month, the condemned are being thrown at our feet. Instead of getting down in the dirt or making an argument for the execution to stop, we simply pass on by and act like nothing is happening. Such actions show that we have little to no connection to Jesus…because Jesus is down in the dirt. In this passage, Jesus is clearly coming out against capital punishment. In fact, the only execution that we know of Jesus being at apart from his own…he stopped. It seems to me that those who follow Jesus would do likewise. Unfortunately, we know this is not the case. Christians seem to be constantly raising their stones and demanding blood. What does Jesus say in this moment? It seems crystal

clear to me. "You who are without sin cast the first lethal injection." How could anyone claim to love Jesus and kill folk?

So, what are the sins of those demanding executions? Greed? Indifference? Hate? Pride? Violence? What are the sins? Maybe, it is time to take a survey of our own lives before we keep killing others? We constantly say that those who face execution are the worst of the worst. If we are honest…we are all the worst of the worst from time to time. We must take accountability for own sins instead of spending all of our time lifting up the sins of others. When we kill someone…how does that make us any different than the killer. What is Jesus writing in the dirt about us?

What is Jesus saying as he surveys our lives? We would be wise to read what is written in the dirt.

If those had started flying that day…Jesus would have died too…Jesus was down in the dirt. Where are we in the midst of these executions? Why aren't we down in the dirt? Why aren't we giving our lives to save the lives of others? Why aren't we down in the dirt? Why are we so comfortable with killing? The message of Jesus is plain…it is wrong to kill people…and it is wrong to stand aside while others are being killed.

In Oklahoma, there is a prisoner by the name of Anthon Sanchez. On April 6, 2023, Sanchez is

scheduled to be executed. Last night, we spent some time on the phone discussing this story. Then, unprompted Sanchez said, "Jesus is standing in front of me as the executioners gather…and declaring you who are without sin cast the lethal injection." I believe that is exactly what Jesus is saying. Are there any who are sinless in Oklahoma? If not, there is no one righteous enough to execute Anthony Sanchez. It is time for people to start walking away from these executions. It is time for people to start realizing their own fallibility. It is time for people to get saved from killing folk.

The message of Jesus couldn't be clearer in this moment…get down in the dirt with those facing

death…encourage the killers to walk away by illustrating their hypocrisy…and put down your instruments of death and just walk away.

With regards to Anthony Sanchez…put down your instruments of death and walk away.

With regards to all others on death row…put down your instruments of death and walk away.

It is time to go and sin no more…to walk away from the death penalty.

Walk away!

October 19, 2022

Lamentations: On Benjamin Cole (w/ Abe Bonowitz)

Benjamin Cole is scheduled to be executed for killing his infant daughter, Brianna, on October 20, 2022

Abe: You were speaking earlier about what these executions remind you of? Do you mind sharing that again?

Jeff: We live in a culture that greatly romanticizes hunting. Set up camp under the cover of darkness. Sleep restlessly on a cot. Get up early. Pour some coffee. Put on your finest camouflage. Find your trusted tree stand. Enjoy the cool morning air. Hear the rustling of leaves in the distance. See the deer approach. Then, pow…

Let me make something clear, I have been a vegetarian most of my life. I hate hunting. But…I did go one time with a friend when I was a young man. That was enough for me. You see, we were sitting out in a camouflage tent. In the distance, I see a wild hog approach. It was clear that the hog was young.

The closer it got the more I realized how young it was…easily a small baby with little sense of direction. Before I could react, my friend shot it. When he walked up to it and saw that it wasn't dead…he shot it again. When we got back home, my friend bragged and bragged about how he had taken down a huge hog that would of destroyed crops and other wildlife. I knew better. There was nothing romantic or just about what I saw.

Abe: So, what's hunting got to do with executions?

Jeff: We live in a culture that greatly romanticizes executions. Catch the murderer put them on trial. Prove their guilt. Secure the death penalty. Make

them suffer through the appeals. Then, kill them with no hesitation. "May God have mercy on your soul" type stuff.

Over the past few weeks, I've been in contact with a man that was convicted of killing his baby daughter, Benjamin Cole. For decades, Cole has been on death row. To say that his mental condition has deteriorated would be an understatement. Often, when we have talked it is as if he has forgotten who he was talking to mid-conversation. Furthermore, he thinks that he is the messiah and that God is either going to keep him from being executed or resurrect him shortly thereafter. Lastly, he will forcefully repeat scriptures incessantly…until you

force him to stop. From my conversations with him, he has very little understanding of what is happening to him or why. This is a man that has the mentality capacity of a child. Yet, Oklahoma is determined to kill him. Let me assure you, there will be nothing romantic or just about any of it.

After the execution is over, there will be the typical bullshit about how everyone is safer now that Benjamin Cole is dead. I know better. I've actually talked to the guy. Have you?

There is no question in my mind that this execution isn't going to be all that different from the first and only time I went hunting…a tremendous amount of

blood and bragging…that amounts to nothing more than killing an infantile compromised animal in the woods.

Abe: That's an interesting connection.

Jeff: Do you see any difference?

Abe: Not really, especially when we're talking about the execution of these folks who are literally helpless. So often, we hear people talking about the future dangerousness of these guys. Benjamin Cole isn't a dangerous to anybody. His mind is gone. He can hardly function. I can't help but wonder if these executions are more about elections than they are

about any legitimate government interest. And with the greased rail to the death house the is the US Supreme Court these days, indeed, it is all about politics. Not justice. Not fairness. Not the law.

Jeff: Right.

Lamentations is a series of short reflections derived from a reoccurring conversation that takes place before every scheduled execution in the United States between prominent abolitionists Death Penalty Action Executive Director Abraham Bonowitz and Clergy United Against the Death Penalty Convener Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood.

October 22, 2022

Rigged: On the Partiality of the (a) Death Qualified Jury (or why Scott Eizember shouldn't be executed by Oklahoma in January)

Here in the United States, juries that decide death penalty cases are required to be free of attitudes that would, "prevent or substantially impair their ability to decide a sentence fairly." This means that a jury must be prepared to consider a death sentence…also known as a death qualified jury (…which should

mean that they are also prepared to consider a life sentence…ie a life qualified jury). The standard was set in the United States Supreme Court decision, Wainwright v. Witt, in 1985. Since then, death penalty juries are regularly scrutinized for their adherence to such a standard. Prior to the death penalty trial of Scott Eizember, a juror known as D.B. had the following answers/replies on their juror questionnaire/interactions with Eizember's attorney:

D.B.

Have you ever formed an opinion either in favor or against the death penalty? If so, explain.

Yes X No _

I firmly believe if you take a life you should lose yours.

What are your feelings about the death penalty?

Please explain:

I have no reservations about seeing someone put to death so long as it has been proven the person is guilty, especially if they have taken the lives of others.

What purpose do you think the death penalty serves in our society?

Keeps taxpayers from having to support a criminal for the remainder of their life

Do you think the death penalty in Oklahoma is used too often or too seldom?

Definitely not too often.

Check the “one” statement which “best” summarizes your general views about capital punishment (the death Penalty):

_1. I am opposed to capital punishment under any circumstances.

_2. I am opposed to capital punishment except, in a few cases where it may be appropriate.

_3. I am neither generally opposed, nor generally in favor of capital punishment.

_4. I am in favor of capital punishment, except in a few cases where it may not be appropriate.

X 5. I am strongly in favor of capital punishment as an appropriate penalty.

If you were Mr. Eizember or the State of Oklahoma would you want yourself as a juror in this case?

Yes (_) No (X)

Because if I feel guilt has been proven, I would not hesitate to impose the death penalty.

These responses, Mr. Eizember argues, show that D.B. couldn't fairly consider all three sentencing options for first-degree murder (death, life without parole, and life with the possibility of parole) and had to be excluded.

Besides, even if these answers don't suffice to show that much, Mr. Eizember claims that D.B.'s colloquy with his lawyer during voir dire certainly does. During that exchange, counsel asked D.B. whether she would be able to consider a sentence of life

without parole. “If the death penalty was not an option, yes,” she replied. Asked to elaborate, she reasoned: “If they’re in prison for the remainder of their life without a possibility of parole why not the death penalty?” The exchange continued:

[Q]: All right, so are you, are you telling me then that if you had a situation where it was laid out on the table, life, life without parole or death, then you would automatically consider one of those?

[A]: Automatically consider one of—

[Q]: One of those punishments over the others?

[A]: Probably.

[Q]: And—

[A]: Yes.

[Q]: And that would be death?

[A]: Yes.

After counsel clarified the posture under which D.B. might have to make such a decision—only if and after the jury found the defendant guilty of intentional murder—he again asked whether she "would automatically say it should be the death penalty." D.B. responded that she "would have to look at all three but just off the cuff, it would probably be death," explaining too that she "would have to try hard" to endorse life without parole.

Source: https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-10th-circuit/1713181.html

While there is no doubt that Scott Eizember is guilty of a variety of crimes (general details of which are easily found online), death sentences are supposed to be decided by juries with a substantial degree of impartiality. Regarding the death penalty, do you think there is anything impartial about the views held above? D.B. unquestionably felt that the sentence was death before the trial even started. How is this remotely fair?

You might think that Scott Eizember is a monster that deserves to die. You're entitled to have such an opinion. But here in these United States, we are governed by law and not opinion. The law states that

Eizember is entitled to impartiality from a jury of his peers. The interactions with D.B. make it plain that he didn't receive anything close to such impartiality.

Scott Eizember is scheduled to be executed on January 12, 2023. I guess D.B. will get what D.B. wanted from the very beginning…death. Such partiality speaks to the wider injustice of the death penalty…it's application most often is based on the prejudiced thoughts/emotions of a few (see D.B.'s responses above).

October 23, 2022

Goodbye to my Dear Friend & Mentor: The Rev. Dr. Henry Mugabe of Zimbabwe

I'm not feeling well. By now, I expected to be asleep. But just as I was about to go to bed tonight, I received some heartbreaking news. My dear friend and mentor…esteemed Baptist theologian and longtime President of Zimbabwe Theological Seminary…The Rev. Dr. Henry Mugabe was killed in a car accident

yesterday in Zimbabwe (Zim). It doesn't seem like it was that long ago (2016 to be exact) that I was traveling around Zim with him preaching about the power of God to transform societies (under constant threat from the authoritarian regime of President Robert Mugabe). We last spoke a couple of months ago. During that brief encounter, he wanted me to know how proud he was of me for founding and leading The New Theology School. I told him that I was following in his footsteps and thanked him for the encouragement. Now, I wish that I'd said more. There is no doubt that Dr. Mugabe was/is/and will forever be one of the great theologians of our time. I'm a better thinker and human for having spent time with him.

As a tribute to the man who encouraged me to talk about mental illness on a Sunday in Zim when I wanted to talk about overthrowing the government (because he felt like the congregation needed to hear about mental illness), I'm including below the last sermon that I gave with Dr. Mugabe by my side. Honestly, there is nothing special about the contents…what is special about them is that he was there to hear it.

***Delivered at Monomotapa Baptist Church in Gweru, Zimbabwe on 2/7/2016**

Throughout Zimbabwe, I've heard something repeatedly…that social and political realities have nothing to do with spiritual realities. In the United States, people say similar things when they don't want you to talk about things. People want to keep God way up in the clouds. For if God is up there, then those in power don't have to worry about struggling with the God down here. When you leave God out of our social and political realities, you leave Jesus out of God. For when God came to earth, God was constantly involved in social and political issues. Think about God engaging public health. Think about the racial and economic lines that God repeatedly crossed. Think about God tossing out the public officials outside the Temple. Through Jesus, God

engaged in social and political realities all the time. To say otherwise, is to deny the Gospel.

When people are starving…when people have nothing…when the helpless are trampled…when corruption has taken over…when people are living under a government that does not care if they live or die…God is there…Jesus is there. I've been thinking about the way that the mentally ill are treated around the world. I've been told that in extreme efforts to heal or contain…the mentally ill are sometimes injured or even killed. People of faith in the United States do similar things. They don't understand the physiological realities of someone who is mentally ill. I would imagine the same is true

here. Some might question talking about mental illness in church. If we are to follow the Gospel, we are intrinsically connected to the least of these amongst us. Jesus said, “What you have done to the least of these you have done to me.” God said, “What you have done to the least of these you have done to me.” The mentally ill are the least of the least. God is mentally ill.

Can you imagine God sitting in darkness before creation? The mental illness keeps growing and growing. Eventually, God creates light to try to get some relief. That didn’t work. God creates water to try to get some relief. That didn’t work. God creates animals. That didn’t work. If there was to be any

relief of the mental illness, God realized that God had to create something to love in God's image. When the medicine arrived, God took a long time to get accustomed to it. Throughout the Old Testament, one can see that God is struggling. From the Flood to a couple of Genocides, God couldn't get control and kept hurting people. The incarnation of God in Jesus was a shock therapy. Can you imagine the shock of the smell of shit in Bethlehem? God shocked us and we shocked God. We ultimately shocked God to death. Love was the medicine that brought God back. Though slightly better, God remains mentally ill.

We must stand with God. We must stand with the least of these. We must stand with the mentally ill.

We must rebel against the government when the government is not helping. We must take the place of the government when the government is not helping. We must be the hands and feet of God to the mentally ill no matter what it takes. May this church be a leader of reform efforts in the treatment of the mentally ill. It is time for Christians everywhere to stand with the mentally ill.

Let us remember that Jesus said…God said…"I was mentally ill and you either visited me or you didn't." Will you embrace the mentally ill? Will you embrace the Mentally Ill God?

Before we go, I have one more thing to share with you, “I am mentally ill.”

Amen.

October 26, 2022

Scott Eizember, AJ Cantrell & Patsy Cantrell:

Oklahoma & An Impending Execution

For over a decade, I've worked as a spiritual advisor on various death rows throughout the country. Over the years, I've learned some lessons. In the first death row conversation I ever had, I asked about their crime. Such a question seems forward now. In

most relationships, one would wait until at least the second conversation before asking someone to divulge their deepest darkest secrets. Then again, most of these situations are not secrets. They are widely known tragedies. Nevertheless, my first visit didn't go well because I came across as judgmental. I guess I was. Truth be known, no matter the location, nobody wants a judgmental spiritual advisor. So, I decided that I would never look at the case of someone on death row before I visited with them again. I'd let them open the door to their case. Thus was the situation with Scott Eizember…he opened the door to what he wanted me to know…and I let him lead me further into his case. The result was complicated.

Multiple days ago, Scott Eizember talked with me about his case in greater detail. After our conversation, I spent a considerable amount of time researching the case. Without diving too deep into the narrative (one can find the general narrative here https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-10th-circuit/1713181.html), these are my conclusions.

The deaths of AJ and Patsy Cantrell were a preventable tragedy. Scott Eizember should have never broken into the Cantrell's house (full stop… this is the precipitating cause of the entire situation). AJ Cantrell should have never shot at an unarmed

man (tragically, he accidently killed his wife). These moments precipitated the murder of AJ Cantrell (who repeatedly tried to come at Eizember after firing the initial shot), a wild spree of violence in the days that followed (that thankfully didn't kill anyone else) and the most extended manhunt in the history of Oklahoma. Scott Eizember is not a sympathetic figure. Far from it, the media has made him out to be a monster. Surely, the world is more complicated than that.

The death penalty is said to be reserved for the worst of the worst. But is Scott Eizember the worst of the worst? The deaths of AJ and Patsy Cantrell were the result of a series of events that spiraled out of

control. It's important to remember that these deaths were not the result of an extended period of premeditation, Eizember did not physically kill Patsy Cantrell and that AJ Cantrell fired a shot at an unarmed man. While these factors do not forgive Eizember's actions…nor do they erase that he was largely responsible for the deaths…they do speak to the severity of the crime. The question remains… Is Scott Eizember the worst of the worst? Well, the murders of AJ and Patsy Cantrell were not the result of extended premeditation, the whims of a serial killer or the consequences of mass murder. While I don't think you can call the deaths an accident…I do think it's fair to call them unforeseen. Such a word… unforeseen…does not seem to indicate the worst of

the worst. This is a break-in with multiple moving unforeseen parts that turned horrific.

Is such a situation worth killing a man over? The people of Oklahoma will need to answer such a question by January 12, 2023. If the standard is the worst of the worst…then the answer is clearly NO.

October 29, 2022

Faces tell stories…and stories tell faces.: Save Anthony Sanchez! An Innocent Man on Oklahoma's Death Row

Faces tell stories…and stories tell faces. Such is the juxtaposition from which I write. Sketch artists construct faces to reconstruct events…with the hope that the reconstruction of events will lead to

capturing the faces that have perpetrated a crime. Unfortunately, sometimes stories are constructed based on the faces that are drawn…with the idea that the person suspected of a crime can be made to fit the face. Such is the case with Anthony Sanchez.

You see, just over a month after the murder of Juli Busken (near Norman, Oklahoma in 1996), police received a phone call from a man that recognized the car that she was last seen in. Near the lake where her body was found, the man said that he was cut off by the driver of the car and thus followed him for about five miles. During his pursuit, he got a good look at the driver. So, the police partnered the man with a forensic sketch artist by the name of Harvey

Pratt to construct a face…the face of the murderer. It's interesting how police put so much faith into these sketches…except when it doesn't fit their narrative of what happened…then they force the face to tell a story that it does not tell.

According to multiple alibi witnesses, Anthony Sanchez was nowhere near Norman on the night that Juli Busken was killed (he was actually multiple towns away). Yet, prosecutors suppressed such evidence and used sketchy DNA evidence (that was handled by a scientist named Joyce Gilchrist known for false statements and conclusions to secure convictions) to create a narrative that Sanchez was guilty (8 years after the crime). However, one of the

pieces of evidence that they couldn't manipulate was the original police sketch of the eyewitness. When compared with a picture of Sanchez contemporary to 1996, the two sketches don't look anything alike. Don't believe me, take a look.

The nose structure doesn't match.

The cheek structure doesn't match.

The chin structure doesn't match.

The lips don't match.

The hair doesn't match.

The neckline doesn't match.

Even the ear lobes don't match.

Faces tell stories…and stories tell faces. In this circumstance, the face should tell the story of who killed Juli Busken. I believe it does. Therefore, the killer couldn't be Anthony Sanchez. The prosecutors tried to make the face fit their narrative. It doesn't. There is an innocent man about to executed in Oklahoma. Save Anthony Sanchez!

Sign the petition

@ https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-anthony-sanchez-in-oklahoma/?fbclid=IwAR12AQ4H3atgKAEgAzBnCS5lTAG5Fu1AkVP2GAQJc3Fe9nB2OSefizmQO3Q

October 30, 2022

“Forensic Files” : “Sands of Crime”: Season 13: Episode 13: Separating Fact and Fiction (On the Murder of Juli Busken & the Conviction of Anthony Sanchez in Oklahoma)

From 1996 to 2011, a documentary-style television show called “Forensic Files” aired in 406 episodes on TLC (The Learning Channel). Since 2014, reruns of the original series can often be seen on CNN

Headline News. Starting in 2020, a new iteration of the show called, "Forensic Files II" began to broadcast. Selling itself as a show that chronicles the solving of seemingly impossible cases through the use of forensic science, the show highlights people who are involved in these types of situations (scientists, victim's families, prosecutors, lawyers and a whole host of others). Sometimes, although much more rarely, the show chronicles how people are exonerated by forensic evidence. Each episode is constructed to make it appear as if there are no questions about the evidence presented in the case. Like most sensational crime shows, the majority of the stories paint the alleged perpetrators as monsters and the authorities as heroes.

Interestingly enough…the tagline of the show is, "No witnesses. No leads. No problem." It's that simple… right? Hardly.

With regards to Anthony Sanchez's case, the episode (Season 13: Episode 13) is entitled, "Sands of Crime." Based on the episode, one would think that this is an open and shut case. "In 1996, Juli Busken is abducted at her apartment…driven to a lake…sexually assaulted…and shot and killed…all by Anthony Sanchez. The case is miraculously solved eight years later by DNA evidence." Successful episode…right? Hardly.

When watching the episode, there are a couple of loose ends that are glossed over…to make it seem like there is no question about Anthony Sanchez's guilt. There is no mention of the unbelievable incompetence of the Oklahoma City Police Department Crime Lab, who handled the DNA. Joyce Gilchrist, who oversaw the specific lab that processed the DNA, was actually fired for her blatant manipulation of evidence in multiple cases to secure false convictions. There is no discussion of why the sketch constructed based on eyewitness testimony looks nothing like Anthony Sanchez. There is no discussion of why there were so many fingerprints (upwards of 40) in the car…and not a single one matches Anthony Sanchez. There is no conversation

about the fact that even though Juli Busken was sexually assaulted…no DNA was found on her physical body. The DNA was actually located on a leotard she was wearing (which could very easily make is susceptible to being planted). There was also no discussion of the footprint evidence…though they claimed Anthony Sanchez owned a pair of shoes similar to the print…they never pointed out that Anthony Sanchez's foot was almost a size bigger than the shoe print. The bullet that was claimed to have been found…was found in an apartment that Anthony Sanchez was not living in at the time of Busken's murder. There is no mention of the fact that Anthony Sanchez had at least six witnesses who said that he was nowhere near Norman on the night

that Busken was murdered. No witnesses are brought forward to answer the question as to why the car was dropped off so close to Busken's apartment…when Sanchez didn't live near her apartment at the time. In addition, nobody is brought forward to explain why multiple other people have actually been fingered as the actual perpetrator. There is no discussion of the fact that Anthony Sanchez has maintained his innocence since he was first accused of the crime. Furthermore, I've actually talked to Anthony Sanchez and find his story to be convincing…and…perhaps more importantly… to have consistently checked out.

The discussion can go on and on…but the bottom line is that the case of Anthony Sanchez is far from the fiction that "Forensic Files" presents. In fact, I believe he's innocent. I think you'd be wise to spend some time in the evidence before you make any conclusions. Surely, it's important to remember that there is always a stark difference between television and real life…especially when a man's life is at stake.

One of the lines in the show still haunts me. After the verdict, District Attorney Tim Kuykendall declared, "I hope they (the Buskins) can find some peace and comfort in knowing that someone will be held accountable for Juli's murder." Unfortunately,

it seems that any old someone would do for

Kuykendal and “Forensic Files.”

November 4, 2022

A Petition for Scott Eizember (Scheduled to Be Executed in Oklahoma)

***Transcript of a talk I gave on Thursday, November 3, 2022 to advocate for stopping the execution of Scott Eizember**

Good evening. My name is Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, and I am here to talk to you about a friend of mine. And yes, I did use that word, friend. This is someone who I am a spiritual advisor to, who I've gotten to know who truly has become a friend of mine, Scott Eizember. He is a prisoner on death row in Oklahoma, after being convicted and sentenced for the 2003 murders of AJ Kentrell and his wife Patsy Kentrell.

Scott Eizember is scheduled to be executed on January the 12th, 2023, and his clemency hearing is coming up on December the 7th, 2022. You know, over the last few months I've gotten to know Scott. While by no means a perfect human being…Scott is

by no means the devil either. So often…when we think about human beings, we think in black and white terms. We think good and evil…righteousness and demonic. We, we push back and push things into these corners…when sometimes life is far more complicated than such dichotomies.

By way of narrative…

You see on October the 18th, 2003, Scott Eizember broke into the vacant home of AJ and Patsy Cantrell. They were an elderly couple in Depew, Oklahoma. He thought that they were going to be away for an extended period of time…and so Scott broke into the

home. Again…I say a vacant home…a home in which there was no one there. After getting in, he got something to eat and rambled around. But as he was there, the couple unexpectedly returned.

Scott Eizember picked up a shotgun that he'd found and engaged them with it. Patsy and Scott began to talk, and the situation subsided to the place where Scott set the gun down. You see, after Scott set the gun down, he began to walk towards the front door… being guided by Patsy…to walk away from the situation. As Scott was walking out the door…he heard a click…and after that click, AJ Cantrell fired off a shot. He saw that, I guess, as his opportunity to eliminate the situation, perhaps even eliminate the

threat. Let me make it clear…. although Scott (an unarmed man) was walking away, he fired off the gun…and he grazed Scott's hand…and the bullet wizzed by…and hit and killed his wife, Patsy. Again. AJ Cantrell fired a weapon at a man who was walking away…an unarmed man who was walking away… being led by his wife, Patsy…and accidentally shot and killed his wife. After that… Eizember turned around and wrestled AJ for the gun momentarily. And of course, the reason he did that was because he felt like that if he didn't, AJ Cantrell was going to kill him. Well, in the midst of all of this, Eizember ends up killing AJ Cantrell…perhaps out of anger…out of self-defense…out of an amalgamation of things…that were taking place in that moment. After that, Scott

retreated from the house, left the house, and led authorities on a 37-day manhunt…seemingly embarrassing the state of Oklahoma that he was allowed to get away for that long. There were a number of other violent incidences that happened during that 37-day period…but ultimately what Scott Eizember was sentenced to death for was the murder of AJ Cantrell.

This narrative creates a difficult case for those who argue that the death penalty should be reserved for the worst of the worst. You see, this is a situation in which we are talking about a situation that spiraled out of control. We are talking about someone who broke into a vacant home. We are talking about

someone who was preparing to leave the home after being confronted by the homeowners.

Make no mistake, AJ Cantrell's actions were a precipitating factor in the murder of both his wife Patsy and in his own death…whether he functioned based on his idea that Scott Eizember was still a threat…one cannot deny his gunshot obviously he killed his wife…but it was also a precipitating event that made this situation go out of control. That doesn't mean that Scott Eizember had to kill AJ Cantrell.

Make no mistake, if Scott Eizember hadn't of been in the house, none of this would've happened in the first place. Let's make that very clear. But at the same time, when we talk about the worst of the worst, we are talking about serial killers…we're talking about people who kill for no reason…we're talking about who have extended amounts of premeditation. This is not a crime where people were murdered based on pure evil intent. This is a situation that spiraled out of control.

The question is whether Scott Eizember is the worst of the worst? You see, everybody who advocates for a death penalty argues for the worst of the worst, and if that's who you're arguing for, that's not Scott

Eizember. Certainly Scott deserved to be punished… but if the standard is the worst of the worst…this is not a death penalty case.

There are two other issues that also deserve attention.

One such issue is the fact that Scott Eizember grew up in a home ravaged by drug addiction and alcohol abuse. You see, when Scott was only eight months old, his mother committed suicide. Eight months… after she gave birth to Scott, she committed suicide. Later on, his stepmother, who was also a maternal figure in his life, died of liver disease. After the

death of his step-mother, Scott suffered from years of alcoholism, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and so much more that complicated his life and created situations where he felt out of control… perhaps situations where he wasn't as in control as he might to hope to be.

Another such issue was that there were two problematic jurors in the case. In the litigation… they were known as DB and JS. These two jurors during jury examination before the trial…both exhibited clear bias in favor of a death sentence. One juror even used the statement, "The death penalty keeps taxpayers from having to support a criminal for the remainder of their life." You see, in our

country, a death qualified jury, a jury that is qualified to render a death sentence must be able to consider all options. They must be able to consider life and they must be able to consider death. For DB and JS…the litigation makes it very clear that both of them were…unconstitutionally…problematically… predisposed towards the death penalty. And so, I think it's fair to argue that Scott Eizember did not receive a fair sentencing phase.

With all of this in mind, I'm asking you to think about the circumstances that have led to a death sentence for Scott Eizember.

I'm asking you to ask yourself…

Was Scott Eizember's crime the worst of the worst? If not, I'm asking you to advocate against this execution in Oklahoma.

Did Scott Eizember grow up in home to be ravaged by drug addiction and alcohol abuse? If not, I'm asking you to advocate against this execution in Oklahoma.

What is it like for there to be suicide, anxiety, depression and all these different things in Scott

Eizember's life growing up? If it would have had a great influence on how he developed, I'm asking you to advocate against this execution in Oklahoma.

If you believe that there are any sort of mitigating circumstances in this situation…I'm asking you to advocate against this execution in Oklahoma.

If you think that here in America people deserve a fair trial, a fair sentencing, if you think that it is wrong for people to be predisposed towards the death penalty before ever having heard an ounce of evidence, if you believe that, if you believe in the justice and righteousness of our legal process, of our

constitution? I'm asking you to advocate against this execution in Oklahoma.

Take the initial step…click on the link below and sign the petition to STOP THE EXECUTION OF SCOTT EIZEMBER…

https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-scott-eizember-in-oklahoma/

November 5, 2022

An Open Letter to Debra Wyatt (daughter of AJ and Patsy Cantrell, who were victims of Scott Eizember in Oklahoma)

An Open Letter to Debra Wyatt (daughter of AJ and Patsy Cantrell, who were victims of Scott Eizember in Oklahoma

In my advocacy to stop the execution of Scott Eizember, I came across an article written by Josh Dulaney in The Oklahoman on October 5, 2020 entitled, "Death Row, Oklahoma: How long could you wait for your parents' murderer to be executed?" The article contains an extended interaction with Ms. Debra Wyatt…who is the daughter of Eizember's victims A.J. and Patsy Cantrell. After reading the article, I was deeply moved in my spirit. Though there are comments from other family members, Ms. Wyatt's words stood out. So, I decided to write her. Honestly, I know nothing about Ms. Wyatt. In fact, she could be unwilling or unable to read this for all I know. I hope not…I hope this letter finds Ms. Wyatt

in good fortune. Obviously, I have no way of contacting her directly. So, I decided to construct this open letter responding to the words of hers that I encountered in the article. I hope they are received in the loving spirit from which they are written…and fall on open ears.

Ms. Wyatt's thoughts/quotes from the article are italicized.

Dear Ms. Wyatt,

First and foremost, I am sorry for the murder of your parents, A.J. and Patsy Cantrell. As Southerners, I don't know why we say that we are sorry for something that we didn't do…but I feel like it is the only logically place to begin. Maybe a better way of way saying it is that I am grieved for their murder…although that too seems misplaced because I know that your grief far outweighs any grief that I might carry. Nevertheless, I hope that you will understand that this letter is coming from a place of deep empathy.

First of all, let me introduce myself, my name is Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood. I am a Baptist minister whose career has long been focused on issues of public justice. For over a decade, I have ministered to and advocated for guys on death rows throughout our country. Such a ministry is what led me to Scott Eizember.

Since we can't communicate directly, I can only respond to the things you said in the article. It is my hope to communicate with you as a fellow seeker of God.

"Oh, he's got a beard now," she said. "His eyes are blank, like there's no soul behind them."

I was struck…perhaps even surprised…by your first quoted statements about Eizember. While I am by no means an expert on judging souls…surely only God has such expertise…I can say that my experiences of Eizember have been the exact opposite. Our relationship has been one of mutual respect and encouragement based around curious conversations about spirituality and life. Honestly, I have found his soul to be very much intact. While by no means a perfect man…not even close actually… Eizember is…like all of us…a child of God

Struggling with multiple sclerosis, she is just a few years younger than her mother was when she was murdered. Wyatt wants to live long enough to gather with relatives and watch her parents' killer die by execution.

I'm sorry that your health has not been ideal. While thoughts and prayers seem fleeting in such times, please know that mine are with you. It makes me sad that the execution of Eizember is something that you live for. I couldn't be in a more different position. The potential that Eizember might be executed pains me greatly. In fact, if Eizember is executed I will experience grief similar (though certainly not the same) to what you experienced.

When Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as we love our selves…I just don't feel like killings/executions are an exception to the rule. I hope that you will consider that there are those that love Eizember and desire for him to live.

"People ask, 'how do you get up in the morning after all you've been through?'" Wyatt said. "What's the alternative? It becomes all about the killer after a while. To make it exciting or whatever. But it's something we have to live with every day. And I'm not gonna lie. There's been times I didn't want to wake up in the morning."

To be honest, I'm not writing for Eizember…as I have great faith that he is in God's hands. I'm writing to speak directly to you. Your pain is visceral. There is no doubt about that. Though I can't alleviate any pain that you're going through…I do know that the execution of Eizember is not going to add to your healing. Jesus heals by giving life…not by taking life.

The purpose of this letter isn't a lecture…it's an invitation…an invitation to advocate for life. At Eizember's clemency hearing on December 7, 2022, you will have the opportunity to stand before the Oklahoma Board of Pardon and Parole choose life. Though I'm not sure if it will be enough to save Eizember's life, I do know that it will be enough to

give you life…the message of Jesus is always one of life.

Regardless of your choice, I do pray for God's strength for you and your family in the difficult days that are ahead.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Scott Eizember

November 8, 2022

The Prayer List (November 2022): Clergy United Against the Death Penalty's Reports & Prayers on Upcoming Executions

***In partnership with our friends at the For Whom the Bell Tolls Campaign. Learn more about how faith communities in particular can get involved in this effort at https://forwhomthebellstoll.org/**

Tracy Beatty is scheduled to be executed by lethal injection on November 9 in Texas. He was sentenced to death in 2004 for brutally murdering his mother, Callie Click. During his trial, doctors argued that he suffered from "anti-social personality disorder." On October 21, Beatty's attorneys tried to have him evaluated by independent doctors…but the Texas Department of Criminal Justice refused to make the necessary accommodations for the doctors to complete their psychiatric tests. From the information they were able to gather they were able to determine that Beatty is "clearly psychotic and has a complex paranoid delusional belief system."

Let us pray, “God in your mercy…hear our prayers for Tracy Beatty…soften the hearts of Texas officials…that they might realize that Beatty is an incredibly vulnerable man with significantly diminished intellectual capacity…and be compelled to love their neighbor…and stop this evil execution.”

Further info can be found at https://tylerpaper.com/news/crime/whitehouse-man-texas-death-row-inmate-sues-state-prison-officials-2-weeks-before-execution-date/article_46be5028-53f4-11ed-ba7b-0f8b1a5bc2d1.html

Stephen Barbee is scheduled to be executed on November 16 in Texas. He was sentenced to death for the 2005 murder of Lisa Underwood, her unborn child and her son Jayden. During his trial, Barbee's attorneys admitted his guilt against his insistence that he was innocent. In McCoy v. Louisiana, the US Supreme Court ruled, "a defendant has the right to insist that counsel refrain from admitting guilt, even when counsel's experience-based view is that confessing guilt offers the defendant the best chance to avoid the death penalty." Barbee's appeals based on McCoy have consistently been rebuffed. In addition to his criminal appeals, Barbee has filed an appeal based on indecision on the part of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) with regards

to protecting religious rights of inmates in the execution chamber. To this end, the US District Court in Houston has ruled that the execution cannot proceed unless TDCJ creates a succinct policy for protecting religious rights in the execution chamber. Let us pray, "Hear our cries oh God. Help us to be more like you each day. In the stillness of this moment, help us to love Stephen Barbee as you love him. May his life be spared as a result of such prayers."

Further info can be found at: ketk.com/news/texas/texas-death-row-inmate-convicted-of-murdering-pregnant-woman-son-has-new-execution-date/

Murray Hooper is scheduled to be executed on November 16 in Arizona. Though he had a strong alibi, police corruption was rampant and no physical evidence tied him to the crime, Hooper was convicted of the murder of Pat Redmond and Helen Phelps over 40 years ago. Recently, Murray has been denied the ability to test DNA evidence in the case with updated techniques.

Let us pray, "How long must we wait for justice? Why is Murray Hooper facing execution? Why are we standing by as it happens? Give us the strength of will oh God to save Murray's life."

Further info can be found here:

azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2022/11/03/murray-hooper-arizona-death-row-inmate-execution/8252902001/

Richard Fairchild is scheduled to be executed on November 17 in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, his execution is also on his 63rd birthday. Fairchild was sentenced to death for the murder of 3-year-old Adam Broomhall. Fairchild has documented brain damage…and suffers from regular hallucinations and delusions.

Let us pray, “In the cruelness of this hour…help us to be love. Grant that we might fight for Richard Fairchild was we would want others to fight for us.”

Further info can be found here: theadanews.com/news/local_news/clemency-denied-for-death-row-inmate-richard-fairchild/article_ce5ef6d4-82b1-55eb-b399-5a243491ee7a.html

Kenneth Smith is scheduled to be executed on November 17 in Alabama. Smith was sent to death row for his participation in a murder-for-hire plot that killed Elizabeth Sennett. Her pastor husband had paid to have her killed. Smith has fought to

overturn his execution based on the idea that, "Alabama did not give him the information necessary to knowingly waive his right to choose execution by nitrogen hypoxia instead of lethal injection when inmates had the opportunity to make that choice in 2018." This execution is taking place after multiple botched executions in Alabama.

Let us pray, ''Why do we work so hard to kill? When we know that you oh God are the God of life. Help us to be about life. May we be the ones who save the life of Kenneth Smith."

Further info can be found at: al.com/news/birmingham/2022/09/alabama-sets-

execution-date-for-man-convicted-in-murder-for-hire-of-pastors-wife.html

Kevin Johnson is scheduled to be executed on November 29 in Missouri. Johnson was sentenced to death for killing a white police officer (who was a known racist that tended to escalate situations in the neighborhood) as a traumatized teen (19) a few hours after the tragic death of his little brother. He is the victim of an unfair legal process, ineffective counsel and racist provocations/practices. In an effort to try to stop the execution, a large campaign for Johnson is seeking to stop his execution.

Let us pray, “Racism continues to kill. Yet, you alone oh God know us all. Help us to love both our neighbor and our self as you love May the cessation of the execution of Kevin Johnson give us hope for a better future.”

Further info can be found at: stlamerican.com/news/local_news/murder-by-another-name-the-execution-of-kevin-johnson-part-iii/article_e41008fe-5c4a-11ed-bd5d-3f522c8d8b9a.html

November 13, 2022

“The Weight”: The Weight of Benjamin Cole’s Stuff:

Part 1 of 4

Eyes ahead. Focus. Eyes ahead. Focus. Eyes ahead.

Focus.

I don’t know where it all ends. I just know that it

ain’t stopped. I must keep going.

When I got the first call, I didn't know what to do. It's Benjamin not Ben. Benjamin Cole was so very fragile. The Messianic delusions. The Bible verses. The shouts of God. They were incoherent…but…they were his. The calls kept coming. The words were different…but…they all seemed to be saying the same thing…help. I don't think he thought he was going to get executed. In fact, I know he didn't…or that's what he said. Which goes far to explain why he waited until the last minute to find someone to leave all of his property to. In the end, he told me that I was the only one who answered the phone. I don't know if that's true. I just know that I answered. Nevertheless, I was aware that some stuff was coming. I had no idea what. It was devastating when

Benjamin was executed. It always is. I never get used to it. I never will. When I called to schedule to pick up his stuff, I was told that it wasn't ready. I'd need to wait a few weeks. Honestly, I forgot about it. There is just so much going on. It's as if people are just lined up to be executed. I guess that's exactly what it is. Nevertheless, I was planning to visit a couple of other guys who are scheduled to be executed when I remembered the Benjamin's stuff. So, after a long day of visiting. I pulled up to the gate to pick up the stuff. Expecting a few bags, I was shocked when nearly five boxes came out. The entire back of my old SUV dropped under the weight of all the stuff. After some pleasantries, I was off. The road home was long. I kept my eyes ahead. By

the time I got back home, I was exhausted. Yet, the weight of Benjamin's stuff ever rested in the back of my mind. So, I brought it all in. One by one, I started to open all of his packets. By the time I was done, it was well into the morning. There was all sorts of stuff laid out in the floor. Seemingly endless accumulations of… Religious material. Hair clippings. Incomprehensible writings. Old food. Some personal correspondence. Dirty rags. I could hardly comprehend it all. The only conclusion that I could come to was that it was simply incomprehensible that a man this mentally ill was executed. Benjamin laid in my floor…or at least a physical representation of him…and stared back at me. In the mounds of stuff, I could hear very clear

the cry of the departed, demanding that I don't stop.

I'm still in the floor…and though I'm going through

my day today…I know that I will be for a long time.

Benjamin still speaks…or at least his stuff does.

Further. Faster. Stronger. Abolition. Now.

Eyes ahead. Focus. Eyes ahead. Focus. Eyes ahead.

Focus.

I don't know where it all ends. I just know that it

ain't stopped yet. I must keep going.

November 14, 2022

“The Mail”: The Weight of Benjamin Cole’s Stuff:

Part 2 of 4

Truth be told, I didn’t know Benjamin Cole all that well. I’m not sure that anybody did. Most of the time, he wasn’t really there. Cole lived in a world of his own delusions. Of course, in such a world he was an oracle. If you wanted to have any interaction

with Cole, you had no choice but to enter where he lived. I did. I was there for the last few weeks of his life. In the end, one of Cole's final acts was to leave me his stuff. Then, he was executed on October 22, 2022.

I wasn't able to pick up Benjamin Cole's stuff until a few weeks later. When I finally got in a space where I could open the boxes, I was shocked. There were no less than thousands of pieces of evangelistic mail.

You see, as Cole slowly departed…the "ministries" listed below just kept mailing him all of their bullshit. To be honest, I didn't list all of them below. I couldn't. There isn't enough space. Each would

claim to care about folk like Cole…they are liars. The "ministries" listed below simply used his corpse to assure their donors that they were saving more and more people every day. I can just hear them, "… even on death row in Oklahoma!" These "ministries" are headed by charlatans who know not the love or compassion of God…if they did…they wouldn't have left Cole to rot away on a pile of their mailers. What is worse, multiple pieces of mail from these "ministries" even arrived after he was executed. How much did they care about Cole? Not enough to even know that the State of Oklahoma had killed him…

Utah Lighthouse Ministries

Target Truth Ministries

World Challenge

Life Lines

Midnight Call Ministries

In Touch Ministries

Harvesttimes Ministries

Bread Ministries

Word of Faith Ministries

The Shepherd's Chapel

Tony Alamo Ministries

Gospel Tract Ministries

Cornerstone Network

New Life Mission

The World Tomorrow

Lighthouse Trails

Church of God

Jews for Jesus

CJF Ministries

Chick Publications

Midnight Call Ministries

Zion's Hope Ministries

End Time Ministries

Gospel Tract Society

Philadelphia Church of God

Interconnect Ministries

Prison Literature Evangelism

Tribulation Watch

Pilgrim Tract Society

United Church of God

Trinity Broadcasting Network

Assemblies of Yahweh

Chosen People Ministries

Comforting Heart Ministries

Evangelistic Faith Ministries

Jewish Jewels

American Family Ministries

Perry Stone Ministries

Voice of the Martyrs

Mosaic of Christ

Hebrew Roots

Rock of Ages Ministries

Hope Tract Ministry

The Open Door Ministry

Bible Belt Ministries

Southwest Radio Ministries

Revive Israel

Chosen People Ministries

Bezeugen Ministries

November 20, 2022

PSALM 23! Vengeance Ain't Your Shepherd! Save Scott Eizember!

Greetings. My name is Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood. I am coming to you today from a society that is in deep moral confusion. You see, every single day I wake up to stories of murder, to stories of killing, to stories of

war, to stories of rumors of war. You see, we are a society that is experiencing a pandemic of violence, an epidemic of violence, and we are, as a society, deeply confused.

You see, in our minds, we think the way to end such things, the way to end murder, to end violence, to end killings, to end wars and rumors of wars is to perpetuate more killing and more violence and more wars, and to create more rumors of war. I come to you today from a society that is deeply confused. I come to you from a society that does not understand that you cannot teach people not to kill by killing. You cannot save lives by taking lives. You cannot create a just society by killing.

Murder is an injustice no matter where it takes place. Murder is evil no matter where it takes place. Murder is wrong no matter where it takes place. Moral confusion, my friends. We exist in a space of deep moral confusion. You see, I come to you today to advocate on behalf of Scott Eizember. Presently, he is scheduled to be the next person executed in the state of Oklahoma.

Decades ago, Scott committed a heinous act. His actions led to the death of AJ and Patsy Cantrell… which he followed up with a violent spree of other actions.

He was sentenced to death, I'm sure, by a bunch of people who were just as confused as society is today. They thought that murder and killing could stop more murder and killing. Death can stop more death. They were confused. Those who continue to advocate for more murder, for more killing, for more violence, for more war, for more rumors of war, they are confused. Just in the same way that they have been confused in this case of Scott Eizember. You see, God has nothing to do with killing. The message of Jesus is clear… Love your neighbor as you love yourself, no matter who, what, when, where, why, or how. Love your neighbor. How can we love our neighbors by killing? How can we love our neighbors by taking more lives? How can we

love God? How can we love Jesus and kill Scott Eizember?

I want to speak today directly to those who think that murdering Scott Eizember. Vengeance isn't going to do anything to help the state of Oklahoma…isn't going to do anything, to help our world, to do anything to help our culture, our society. I want to speak directly to you from the 23rd Psalm.

The scripture says, God is my shepherd I shall not want. If God is your shepherd, then you shouldn't want any killing. There should be no want for vengeance because God is your shepherd. You see, it is folks who, God is not their shepherd, that are

desperate to kill, that are desperate for vengeance. My friends, I can tell you, God is all that we need. The message of love, the message of Jesus is enough. We don't need no more killing. The message of love is enough.

The scripture says, God leads us besides still waters not the rough waters of killing, but the still waters of love and of life, not the chaos…the mayhem…of killing. But the still waters of life.

God makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. Those green pastures and those still waters…that's not a place of killing. That's not a place of mayhem. That's a place where God is real,

that love is real. You see, the message of Jesus is to love your enemies. The message of God is to love your enemies, to find forgiveness in your heart. In the midst of whatever you're going through, in the midst of confusion, you see that which is clear is love. That which is clear is grace. That which is clear is forgive. You cannot kill in forgiveness. You cannot kill in love. You cannot kill in grace. You see, those things have nothing to do with killing. The scripture says that God restores your soul. You see, God will restore your soul. Not more killing.

The execution of Scott Eizember will not restore your soul. It will not restore our society. It will not restore. Killing only destructs. Killing only makes us

worse. It doesn't make us stronger. It doesn't give us grace. It doesn't give us mercy. It just destroys you… it destroys us. See, God is waiting to restore your soul. Repent. Repent. Repent from killing. Repent from vengeance. Repent from this desire to cause more mayhem, more violence. Repent. God is guiding us on paths of righteousness for God's namesake. You see, God is showing us what righteousness is. God is showing us that we can't kill in order to make our society better. We can't commit violence in order to make our society better. God is calling us to love… to grace…to forgiveness. God is calling us to stop the execution of Scott Eizember. Because it is not gonna make us more loving. It's not gonna make us more graceful. It is not gonna make us more forgiving. It is

going to make us worse. Please listen. It is God who restores our soul, not vengeance.

Paths of righteousness. Paths of grace. Paths of mercy, paths of love. Such things have nothing to do with killing You see, God says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are walking in this moment through the valley of the shadow of death. We are walking in this moment through the valley of the possible execution of Scott Eizember. If we are to listen to God, the God whose name is love, the God whose name is Grace, the God whose name is righteousness, the God whose name is peace, then we will walk through a such a space to

life. We will not walk through such a space to death. We will not walk through such a space to execution.

So often we assume... If I don't kill this person, if I don't commit vengeance, if I don't kill Scott Eizember, if I don't commit vengeance against Scott Eizember, then I will be afraid. The scriptures say, I will fear no evil. God tells us to not fear any evil. For God is with us. God is with us. You see, the very rod and staff of God comfort us. Do not look to vengeance. Do not look to the death of Scott Eber to bring you any sort of comfort. God is the comforter. God is the one who shows us what love is. God is the one who shows us what grace is. God is the one who shows us what righteousness is. We do not have to

fear. We do not have to fear who or what Scott Eizember could be. We have to trust God. That is not our place. Fear no evil, rely on God. Fear no evil, rely on God.

You see, the scripture says that God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. If you believe that Scott Eizember is your enemy, God is preparing a place for you to sit with love, to sit with grace, to sit with mercy, to sit with righteous.

The scriptures say that God will anoint our heads with oil and our cups will overflow us. You see, if you choose, if you make the choice, if you look to grace, if you look to mercy, if you look to righteousness, God

will anoint your head with oil. God will make your cup overflow. You see, there is great gain in love. There is great gain in righteousness. There is great gain in forgiveness, in mercy. If we want to make our society a better place, then we need to stop killing people…stop murdering people…stop committing ourselves to wars and rumors of. We need to step back from the needle. We need to stop these executions. We need to stop the execution of Scott Eizember.

The scriptures say… Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever. If you want goodness and mercy to follow you all the days of

your life, if you want goodness and grace to follow you all the days of your life, if you want goodness and love to follow you all the days of your life, then look to life. Look to the author of Life. Look to the author of Love, the author of Grace, the one who is shouting down from the heavens, who is advocating for God's child…Scott Eizember, if you want to dwell in the house of God, if you want to dwell in the house of love, if you want to dwell in the house of grace, if you want to dwell in the house of mercy. STOP THE KILLING. Stop the murdering. Stop the wars. Stop the rumors of wars…and save the life of Scott Eizember.

Wake up Oklahoma! If you don't want no more killings in your neighborhood, if you don't want no

more killings in your cities, if you don't want no murders in your neighborhood, in your cities, stop the killing. You cannot teach a society not to stop killing by killing Scott Eizember. It is my prayer this day that you will choose who you will serve. Will you serve the God of grace, the God of love, the God of righteousness, the God who is leading us to a path of non-violence, who is leading us to a path of wholeness? Or will you rely on the vengeance you carry in your self? Will you rely on your own violence, your own desire for murder, your own desire for killing, your own desire, for vengeance? There is no life in these executions…there is only death.

If you continue to pursue the execution of Scott Eizember…there will be no life in your soul. There will only be death. Choose wisely. For the realm of God is at hand.

Amen.

November 23, 2022

Unscripted Thoughts on the Immorality of the Death Penalty

The rapidity with which these executions are taking place is stunning. In fact, these executions are becoming so routine that it's easy for people to forget that actual humans are being executed. Such dehumanization has a variety of consequences…not the least of which is that we become comfortable

killers. You see it takes a real human to kill and it takes a real human to be killed. The two are intrinsically connected. Thus, our dehumanization further has the consequences of dehumanizing the victim. Meaning, if you erase the killer then you are erasing the killed. Our common humanity will either be our common triumph or our common downfall. Right now, it is our lack of humanity that is making room for these executions to continue. We are zealous to destroy with no idea of how to rebuild. Humanization is the only path forward…yet we seem so determined to go backward.

A child of God is not a caricature, and a caricature is not a child of God. Reality is real. A human is real.

We must come face to face with what we are doing. We must listen to the stories of the condemned. We must feel the pain of the victims. We must search out the totality of these circumstances. We must find a way to heal. If we do not, we will continue to live under the evil of vengeance. These executions are a measurement of progress. Have we moved past the barbarism of destruction? Or, have we progressed to a place of hope? It seems quite logical that one cannot teach people how not to kill by killing. Can you imagine placing our children at the window of the execution chamber and telling them that this is the way that society is going to learn not to kill people? Such thinking is absurd. Yet, it is the path of our reasoning. The moral implications of these

executions should not be lost on anyone. We are declaring who we are.

So, do we choose to honor the memory of the departed by killing? Or, do we choose to honor the memory of the departed by making sure that such killing never happens again? There is no way to stop killing by continuing to kill. This is our moment. Will we become killers too? You see, morality swings both ways.

November 27, 2022

Scott Eizember: A Petition for Prayer/Action

Dear Colleague.

My name is Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood and I serve as the spiritual advisor to Scott Eizember, who has been condemned to be executed by the State of Oklahoma on January 12. In the coming weeks, I will be participating in a clemency process for Scott that will culminate in a public hearing on December 7. Scott was convicted and sentenced to death for the

2003 murders of an elderly couple in Depew, A.J. and Patsy Cantrell. Of course, Scott is deeply remorseful for what happened…but that is not the reason I write…I write to talk about our witness as followers of Jesus.

As I've worked with Scott as his spiritual advisor, I've come to know him as a man that asks deep questions. Repeatedly, Scott has enquired why Christians in Oklahoma are so desperate to kill him. The only answer I could/can come up with is that there isn't one thing Christian about an execution. While this answer might sound simple, it seems to be clearly supported by the basic message of Jesus.

I'm sure you remember the moment when one of the great scholars of the law approached Jesus with a deep question. "What is the most important commandment?" Jesus answered simply. "Love God with all your heart…with all your soul…with all your mind…and with all your strength. Then, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these." Everything we do should be centered around such a statement. But, what's that got to do with the death penalty? How in the world can one love their neighbor by killing them? Jesus didn't say your good or righteous or moral or innocent neighbor. In fact, Jesus didn't offer us any exceptions. Scott Eizember is your neighbor. How

can you follow the greatest commandments and kill him? You can't.

In the coming weeks, I am asking you to join me in seeking to love our neighbor. While such an effort might not be your thing, surely love is. There is nothing loving about doing nothing. There is nothing loving about shrugging our shoulders in indifference when someone is killed. I am asking you to stand up against the killing. I am asking you to stand in your pulpits and say something. I am asking you to call, write or send messages by social media to the Board of Pardon and Parole, the Governor and anyone else that might be able to stop this killing. While you might not think that Scott Eizember is worth it,

surely Jesus is…surely our witness of loving our neighbors is.

If nothing else, I covet your prayers for Scott.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Oklahoma State Penitentiary

(Death Row)

December 5, 2022

Preemptive Thoughts: Scott Eizember Clemency Hearing December 7 in Oklahoma

“Forgive them for they know not what they do.” No matter your religious preference, the words of Jesus Christ echo down through the centuries. Perhaps more than any other words ever uttered, they have come to be recognized as the very constitution of grace. Daily, I wonder what the application of such words would look like in our age. What does it mean

to offer grace beyond that which is warranted or deserved? Our laws can only go so far to create a society that exemplifies grace. Primarily, due to the fact that laws reflect a baseline of society's ethic not the height of ethical possibility. By most metrics, some as simple as driving down the main road of most towns, Oklahoma is an incredibly religious space. Yet, Oklahoma has a reputation for little grace when it comes to folks on death row. The clemency process before the Oklahoma Board of Pardon and Parole is anything but. In fact, we are more aware of mitigating factors than ever. Intellectual disability and mental illness seems to be more and more prevalent amongst the condemned. Racism plays a role in these death sentences…as it

does in every other segment of our society. Horrific childhood abuse is common amongst those on death row. The circumstances are endless. Such facts don't excuse the crimes, but they do go far in humanizing those Oklahoma has chosen to kill. Processes named clemency should include actual clemency. Below are the names of 119 people (those executed since 1990) that Oklahoma has shown no grace. How many of these had mitigating factors worthy of our clemency? Maybe grace isn't something to be worthy of. Maybe it is something that should be given freely…or at least more freely than we're presently willing to give. The cost of the death penalty is high. In fact, such cost is measured

in these 119 circumstances where grace was withheld.

Charles Troy Coleman, Robyn Leroy Parks, Olan Randle Robison

Thomas Joseph Grasso, Roger Dale Stafford, Robert Allen Brecheen

Benjamin Brewer, Steven Keith Hatch, Scott Dawn Carpenter

Michael Edward Long, Stephen Edward Wood, Tuan Anh Nguyen

John Wayne Duvall, John Walter Castro Sr., Sean Richard Sellers

Scotty Lee Moore, Norman Lee Newsted, Cornel Cooks

Bobby Lynn Ross, Malcolm Rent Johnson, Gary Alan Walker

Michael Donald Roberts, Kelly Lamont Rogers, Ronald Keith Boyd

Charles Adrian Foster, James Glenn Robedeaux, Roger James Berget

William Clifford Bryson, Gregg Francis Braun, George Kent Wallace

Eddie Leroy Trice, Wanda Jean Allen, Floyd Allen Medlock

Dion Athanasius Smallwood, Mark Andrew Fowler, Billy Ray Fox

Loyd Winford Lafevers, Dorsie Leslie Jones Jr., Robert William Clayton

Ronald Dunaway Fluke, Marilyn Kay Plantz,

Terrance Anthony James

Vincent Allen Johnson, Jerald Wayne Harjo, Jack

Dale Walker

Alvie James Hale Jr., Lois Nadean Smith, Sahib Lateef

Al-Mosawi

John Joseph Romano, David Wayne Woodruff,

Randall Eugene Cannon

Earl Alexander Frederick Sr., Jerry Lynn McCracken,

Jay Wesley Neill

Ernest Marvin Carter Jr., Daniel Juan Revilla, Bobby

Joe Fields

Walanzo Deon Robinson, John Michael Hooker, Scott

Hain

Don Wilson Hawkins Jr., Larry Kenneth Jackson,

Robert Wesley Knighton

Kenneth Chad Charm, Lewis Eugene Gilbert II,

Robert Don Duckett

Bryan Anthony Toles, Jackie Lee Willingham, Harold

Loyd McElmurry III

Tyrone Peter Darks, Norman Richard Cleary, David

Jay Brown

Hung Thanh Le, Robert Leroy Bryan, Windel Ray

Workman

Jimmie Ray Slaughter, George James Miller Jr.,

Michael Lannier Pennington

Kenneth Eugene Turrentine, Richard Alford

Thornburg Jr., John Albert Boltz

Eric Allen Patton, James Patrick Malicoat, Corey Duane Hamilton

Jimmy Dale Bland, Frank Duane Welch, Terry Lyn Short

Jessie James Cummings Jr., Darwin Demond Brown, Donald Lee Gilson

Michael Paul DeLozier, Julius Ricardo Young, Donald Ray Wackerly II

John David Duty, Billy Don Alverson, Jeffrey David Matthews

Gary Roland Welch, Timothy Shaun Stemple, Michael Bascum Selsor

Michael Edward Hooper, Garry Thomas Allen, George Ochoa

Steven Ray Thacker, James Lewis DeRosa, Brian Darrell Davis

Anthony Rozelle Banks, Ronald Clinton Lott, Johnny Dale Black

Michael Lee Wilson, Kenneth Eugene Hogan, Clayton Derrell Lockett

Charles Frederick Warner, John Marion Grant, Bigler Jobe Stouffer II

Donald Anthony Grant, Gilbert Ray Postelle, James Allen Coddington

Benjamin Robert Cole Sr., Richard Stephen Fairchild

On December 7, Oklahoma, through the Board of Pardon and Parole, will have the opportunity to proceed with yet another execution process, that of

Scott Eizember (scheduled to be executed January 12). As Scott's spiritual advisor, I am by no means an impartial observer. I have come to know him as he is, human…just like the rest of us. Surely, there is no grace in killing. Is it necessary to add another name to the list?

December 6, 2022

Pay attention. Love is the test. Love is the answer. :

Save Scott Eizember!

We're losing consciousness. We don't seem to notice.

We just keep going faster. Will we destroy

ourselves? Nobody seems to care. We are just

interested in going further than those who came

before us as quickly as possible. We call it progress.

We are sorely mistaken.

In such a world, it seems ludicrous to ask people to slow down. Yet, slowing down is the only way to know where we are. So, I ask you to slow down.

So often, we fail to realize the evil things that are happening all around us. We're in too big of a hurry to even take notice. We ignore evil at great cost. Often, losing our soul in the process. You see, when we ignore evil we become evil.

There is undoubtedly a need to respond to heinous crimes that are committed in our midst. When people kill there must be a consequence. Historically, society has often pushed the narrative that a killer must be killed. Perhaps, a simpler ethic

has never been spoken. Tooth for tooth. Eye for eye. Body for body. Right? If we lived by such a rule, we would all be toothless, blind and bodyless. For, we are always making choices that detrimentally affect each other. But that doesn't speak to the specific question of one who kills. Such a question is more complicated than simple platitudes. Right? Maybe not. Perhaps, it is sufficient to say that you cannot teach people not to kill by killing. There is a whole generation of young people growing up in a world that is teaching them to kill by killing. You see, the death penalty is not some distant punishment for the worst of the worst. There are real consequences attached to it. In fact, the consequences of the death penalty are here and wildly apparent. Namely, we

are teaching the next generation to be comfortable with killing. That's what the death penalty does. It teaches one to be comfortable with a certain type of killing.

Justice is on the tongue of those who promote the death penalty. Yet, vengeance is what rests in the heart. People want to kill because someone they love has been killed. While I think it's a natural response, it makes little rational sense. Have you ever considered that we don't rape people to teach them not to rape? We don't assault people to teach them not to assault? We don't slander people in order to teach them not to slander? We don't use drugs to teach people not to use drugs? We don't do these

things because a society that is interested in ethical progress is interested in the rational reformation of such behaviors, not the blind continuance them. Nobody seems to be listening. If we continue to do what we've always done, we will get the same results. Surely, that is the very definition of lunacy. Our desire to kill should make us think more not less.

Like it or not, we're all connected to each other. The decisions that we make have great impact. Regardless of the speed by which we travel, we do not walk alone. When the great ethicist Jesus Christ directly commanded us to love our neighbors, I don't think that such thinking was intended for just some of our neighbors. We have an ethical responsibility

to figure out how to love all of our neighbors, including those who reside on death row. The consequence of failing in such an effort is great. Love is so much bigger than passive understanding. Rather, it is about active engagement. We must slow down. We must listen to each other. We must stop running to the edge of a moral cliff. We must figure out a way to love all of our neighbors. Surely, the very health and wellbeing of our society depends on it.

Love your neighbor. Maybe the real test of such love begins in earnest next week. As convicted killer Scott Eizember stands before the Oklahoma Board of Pardon and Parole, will we find a way to love him?

Or, will we allow yet another execution to proceed with little notice? Life is happening out here. Pay attention. Love is the test. Love is the answer. Love and killing don't go together. So, love your neighbor on death row. Stop the execution of Scott Eizember.

December 7, 2022

Scott Eizember Clemency Letter

Scott Eizember – Wednesday, December 7, 2022 at

9:00 AM

Meeting Place: Zoom Webinar

Web

Address: https://oklahomadoc.zoom.us/j/1605256917

Webinar ID: 160 525 6917

***This letter was included in the official packet for Scott Eizember's Clemency Hearing.**

To: The Pardon and Parole Board of the State of Oklahoma

Mrs. Cathy Stocker

Dr. Edward Konieczny

Mr. Larry Morris

Mr. Scott Williams

Mr. Richard Smothermon

You ever willed yourself to believe in something? I used to try. I used to believe that faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Now, I am more of a realist…especially with regards to this clemency process. Repeatedly, you have voted to deny clemency to some of the sickest individuals in the State of Oklahoma. Persons who regularly have no concept of where they are…much less why they are being executed. Benjamin Cole thought that he was going to rise from the dead three days after he was executed. I know. He told me. You see, I served as one of his spiritual advisors too. In going through

his property that he left me, I saw collections of letters and numbers that were some of the wildest manifestations of writing that I'd ever seen. There is too much danger in believing that this letter is going to mean anything to you. I can't live like that anymore. One is better off fighting for justice in the streets than participating in this process. Yet, here I am. Trying to save the life of another person that I advise, Scott Eizember. Why? I'm not sure. I guess I can't help but wonder if there is any modicum of humanity left in Oklahoma…a small piece of the image of God that might finally decide that life is too precious thing to waste. I don't know. I guess I only know to return to hope. Peril finds me once more. Will Scott Eizember be anything more than a pound

of flesh to be processed on the way to the slaughter? You're the only one who can answer that. As far as my participation, all I can do is write. So out of the weariness of my despair in this process, I begin.

As you read the words that follow, I encourage you to listen to them through the prism of the words that Pastor (and your current Chairman) Scott Williams delivered at Grace Family Church in Florida less than three months ago, instructing people on what to do in the midst of great difficulty, "Seek God's voice."

Make no mistake, the death penalty is a symptom of a much larger disease. You see, these are dangerous times. Our ability to interact with each other is

limitless. Yet, our understanding of our common humanity seems to decline with each second. It seems as if the more that we connect the less that we think that each other matter. Far from being who we are, humanity is simply seen as a byproduct of what we do…breathe. We are terrified of meditation because we don't know what we will find deep within. We even more terrified of honest interaction with others because they too might discover who we really are. We are cowards desperate to harness belief both within and without that our disguises are believable. This is the contemporary iteration of humanity from which we encounter the other…each other. The devil that prowls around us is not some anthropomorphic manifestation of evil…it is the

tendency to believe that the only thing that matters are our masks…our assumption that we can destroy to make ourselves more whole. If we are to see where God is…to know where love is…we have to be willing to be seen and to see…to step into places of deep discomfort and offer our true selves. To do anything other than place our bodies into life…into the pursuit of being human…is to fail at the one thing that matters most…love…love of self and love of neighbor. Such love begins with loving the unlovable…again both within and without.

Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the

people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at

her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

- John 7:53–8:11 (NRSV)

The clemency board is standing over someone who is guilty. Make no mistake, Scott Eizember is

responsible for the deaths of the Cantrells and all the terror that came after. Like it or not, the courts have determined that Eizember is to be executed. You stand ready to make sure that the sentence is carried out. I mean that's what the law commands right? Isn't this an especially egregious case? Yet love…our common humanity…demands more.

Jesus bent down and started writing in the dirt. I've often wondered what was written there. Frequently, I've come to the conclusion that Jesus was writing the sins of the Pharisees. What would it be like if this clemency process was about you rather than Scott Eizember? How would you want to be judged? If you are like the Pharisees, you bristle at such a notion.

You would immediately declare, “I haven’t committed such horrific crimes!” Well, if the wages of sin are death, then we have all committed such crimes. One might argue at this point that this is not a religious body. To that I would respond, you’re right…this is a human body that demands humanity. Jesus showed us what was best about humanity… grace.

“Let you who are without sin…” It is my prayer that as you ponder such a phrasing, you will walk away from this execution. I am under no illusion that a vote for clemency will stop the execution of Scott Eizember. It seems as if the Governor is determined to execute as many people as possible. So, I guess it’s

fair to say that this is as much about you as it is about Eizember. Who do you want to be? Do you want to be the executioner or the purveyor of grace?

"Go and sin no more." There is great liberation in such a phrase…both within and without…for us all. The turning. The leaving. The walking away to newness of life. You see, Eizember is no different than any of the rest of us…hopeless without grace. Out here, we are drowning in cynicism about a clemency process that is so devoid of humanity. So, I humbly ask you to prove such despair to be misplaced. Whether you believe Scott Eizember deserves it or not, show us that grace matters again.

Please…do not deny that which has been so freely given to you.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

Spiritual Advisor, Scott Eizember

December 14, 2022

Forgiveness: Thoughts on Leesa Gray, Thomas Loden, Jr., Wanda Ferris and the Perpetuation of Evil

I remember my exact thought when I heard about the murder of 16-year-old Leesa Gray: "This is the stuff that nightmares are made of."

On June 22, 2000, Gray was driving down a rural Mississippi road when her tire went flat. Pulling off

to the shoulder and turning on her flashers, the young woman prayed that someone would stop and help her.

Around 10:45pm, United States' Marine Corp recruiter Thomas Loden, Jr. pulled up in his van. Instead of offering help, Loden grabbed Gray and threw her in the back of his van. After turning on a video camera to record the evil, Loden rapped Gray for over four hours before strangling her to death.

In September of 2001, Loden pled guilty to all of it. Immediately following his plea, Loden apologized. For his horrific crimes, Loden received the death

penalty. Loden further remarked to the Gray family, "I hope this will give y'all some peace."

I've heard it argued that the death penalty should be reserved for the "worst of the worst." Repeatedly, I've made the argument that certain folks on death row are not the "worst of the worst." I don't think I can make that argument in this situation. This crime definitely fits into the category of the "worst of the worst." Loden's actions are pure evil.

Proponents of the death penalty would prefer that the arguments end there. Most would prefer to execute Loden themselves. It seems to me that such

thinking is what got us into this mess in the first place.

Thomas Loden, Jr. served in the military for 18 years…including in combat in Operation Desert Storm. Unquestionably, his mind was destroyed by the things that we asked him to do.

Recently, I've heard Leesa Gray's mother, Wanda Ferris, talk about the upcoming execution of Loden on Wednesday (December 14, 2022).

First of all, I can't imagine what she's been through. Every prayer that I can muster is with her. This entire situation is senseless. I hope that she feels

comforted by the love of all who have been touched by this situation.

But…I couldn't help but be struck by something that I have repeatedly heard her say…something to the degree of, "I forgive Thomas Loden, Jr. but I still want him executed."

As much as I pray for Wanda Ferris, it is imperative to state that you can't forgive someone and still want them executed. Such talk is about vengeance not forgiveness. Isn't forgiveness connected to hope? Where's the hope in killing Mr. Loden?

In addition to supporting the execution, Ms. Ferris plans to attend the execution of Thomas Loden, Jr… praying that she will find peace in the moment. Make no mistake, there will be no peace found in killing. Judging by his many extreme acts of remorse (cutting "I'm Sorry" into his chest), Loden knows that as well as anybody.

From the murder of Leesa Gray to the murder of Thomas Loden, Jr., the result of murder will always be the same…the perpetuation of evil.

Amen.

December 18, 2022

Christmas, Scott Eizember, Christian Nationalism and False Promises of Peace

Just a few short weeks ago, I participated in the clemency hearing of Scott Eizember. Seated at the front of the room, I declared that it is always going to be evil to kill a child of God. Without hesitation, I declared, "Where is God at in a process such as this?" Seeing that Scott's lawyers and I went first, my

remarks served to change some of the tone of the hearing thereafter. Of course, there were all of the traditional arguments that were going to be made anyways…but there was something else that reared its' ugly head…the idea that God was involved in… even guiding…a process that would lead to Scott's righteous execution. One of the original prosecutors that tried the case stated that God was present in his argument because God had always been present in our democracy. Of those who have been enslaved and eradicated by our government might disagree. In addition to such a wild argument, multiple family members of the victims…the Cantrells…made the argument that Scott's execution was the only means by which God could bring them peace. Bad theology

always brings about bad consequences…but bad theology when someone's life is on the line can be deadly.

Christian nationalism is not just heresy…it is the epitome of dumbassticity. How in the world could a nation that eradicates, enslaves and oppresses people throughout its' history be considered the standard bearer of God's will? Our democracy is not a divine construct…it is made up of people and it is only as good as the people who make it up…which throughout our history has often been suspect. God is not a citizen of these United States. God is holy… and one of the holiest attributes of God is love. I don't see how executing Scott has anything to do

with love. Contrary to what the idiot prosecutor argued in the clemency hearing…God will not be the one executing Scott…we will be…including those of us who feel that our only option to resist is to try to make an evil system better. I've always believed that God is with those who stand against evil. Isn't killing somebody always going to be evil?

As I listened to the harsh words of the Cantrells, I was reminded of the words of Christ, "You shout 'Peace!' 'Peace' and there is no peace." You see, they kept repeating variations of the phrase, "We'll finally be at peace when Scott Eizember is dead." Honestly, I couldn't believe that they had let Scott maintain that level of power and control over

them. Do they honestly think that killing Scott is going to get him out of their head? I doubt it. If he has lived there rent free for decades, I don't think he's going to be moving out just because he's dead. Beyond the purely illogical nature of such a statement, it also reveals a really problematic understanding of God. You see, the peace of God exists beyond our circumstances. The one who has true peace…the peace of God…is not dependent on anything else for that peace. If you desire the death of another human…you desire it for your own reasons/purposes…not for God's. I suspect that the Cantrells have two words mixed up…peace and vengeance. The death of Scott Eizember might bring

the vengeance that they long for…but it sure as hell ain't going to bring about no peace.

In the days ahead…before Scott Eizember is likely executed on January 12…we will celebrate Christmas. Think back to Bethlehem. Think back to the manger. The baby brought peace. The angels declared as much. Why then have we turned the incarnation of God into a monster that carries out our vengeance?

December 23, 2022

Scott Eizember: The Christmas Appeal

Barring a miracle, Scott Eizember is going to be the first person executed in Oklahoma next year. For months, I've served as his spiritual advisor…and as one of his most tireless advocates. In time, Scott and I have become friends. For many, it might seem strange to call someone on death row a friend. To

me, what's strange is that we live in a world that thinks it's strange to befriend an outcast. Isn't that contrary to the message of Christmas? Thousands of years have passed since an outcast was born in a stable. This is the season to celebrate right? The outcast from that stable changed the world. Far be it from me to say that Scott is on equal footing as Jesus, but it might be important for us to take a second to remember that God has been using outcasts to change the world for a very long time. In fact, God's love always seems to start with the outcasts. While I don't expect such revelation to immediately change anyone's mind about executions, I do hope that the beauty of Christmas reminds us to pray for the outcasts…including Scott.

December 29, 2022

“Thou Shalt Not Kill: A New Year Without the Death Penalty

“Thou shalt not kill.” The simplicity of the statement belies the profundity of its’ message. Indeed, the message makes it clear that we belong to each other. We are each other’s keepers. We are not to kill because we don’t want to be killed. We are called not to take the life of the other as a means of

protecting life in general. We are not to kill. Though the source of such a statement is religious, the utility of it is profoundly humane. If we want to survive as a species, then we shouldn't kill each other. Killing is an existential problem. There is no survival in killing. Yet, we have multiple killings scheduled in the coming weeks. Some might call them executions, but the truth is that they are killings. Each time we execute someone we are rebelling against the fundamental law that binds us together in community…our collective humanity, "Thou shalt not kill."

The start of a new year fills us with hope. There is an expectation that we're going to make this year better

than the last. Of course, this would mean that we've stopped for a second to consider what made the past year less than desirable. When you ask people if killing would fit into such a category, of course most would say yes…though I doubt most would be thinking about the death penalty. How can you teach a society not to kill when their government keeps killing people? Indeed, the death penalty is an existential threat. It taps into the worst of us…a belief that there can be something moral about killing…and produces a lesson that is even worse still…that vengeance is somehow an appropriate manifestation for the governance of human conduct. Surely, we're better than this? "Thou shalt not kill." Maybe this will finally be the year we begin to

practice what we preach. A time in which we are made better by our restraint. The next person on death row would be a good place to start.

December 30, 2022

“The End”: The Weight of Ben Cole’s Stuff (Part 3 of 4)

For the last few months of my life, I’ve worked incessantly to try to save Scott Eizember’s life. Despite my fiercest efforts, I’ve been unable to stop his execution. On January 12, I will more than likely stand in the execution chamber with Scott, pray and read scripture and watch him die. Thus is the role of a spiritual adviser…. In recent days, Ben Cole’s stuff

has taken on new meaning. Every time I walk past the pile, I am reminded that the hour of execution is fast approaching whether I like it or not.

December 31, 2022

“The Power”: The Weight of Ben Cole’s Stuff (Part 4 of 4)

Before he died, Ben Cole told me that he would return in three days. Under great delusion, Cole earnestly believed that he was a messianic figure. Of course, I thought such thinking was nuts. But then, I allowed myself to journey a bit. In Matthew 25, Jesus said, “I was in prison and you either visited me or

you didn't." If Jesus declares that he was in prison, then it doesn't take too much mental gymnastics to think about Jesus on death row. If one can put Jesus on death row, then it doesn't seem like too far of a reach to think of Jesus being executed (especially when he actually was executed by the state). So, maybe Ben Cole was actually much closer to being a messianic figure than anyone actually gave him credit for…just not necessarily in the way that he imagined. Honestly, his things have taken on a sort of iconic/sacramental status for me. That is to say, they are weighty.

December 31, 2022

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an existential problem. There is no survival in killing. Yet, we have multiple killings scheduled in the coming weeks. Some might call them executions, but the truth is that they are killings. Each time we execute someone we are rebelling against the fundamental law that binds us together in community…our collective humanity, "Thou shalt not kill."

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