This morning we are going to be talking about the death penalty.

I want to make a few disclaimers at the begging of my sermon.

This is an issue that I know has people on both sides.

I would guess that if I were to do a poll that half of us would be for it, and the other half would be against it.

I am taking a chance this morning that we as a community can handle difficult issues together.

That even when we disagree we can talk to each other about our views.

There is an old saying that pastors are like whale they don’t get harpooned until they start spouting off.

But I am going to take that chance that I might get harpooned this morning I will be spouting off.

And I am not asking this morning that you agree with me.

But I am asking that you be willing to enter into a dialogue.

I never see it as my job to tell you what to believe, or how to think.

Rather my job is to raise questions about what it means to be a person of faith.

To help us to see God at work in our lives, and to help us discern how we live as people of faith.

My sermon this morning is offered in that same spirit, to encourage you to think about this issue not from a political or a philosophical point of view, but from a spiritual point of view.

I trust you all to be able to hear my sermon in that light.

Ever since I was a kid, and I started to think about such things, I was against the death penalty.

To me it does not make sense to kill someone so we can prove that killing is wrong.

I never really thought about it in spiritual terms.

But the more I study the issue, the more I pray about it, I realize that there are many spiritual dimensions to it.

Those are the things I want to talk about this morning.

This morning is Christ the King Sunday.

It is a day when we consider what it means when we say that rules our lives?

What does it mean that we praise a king, who did not win a military victory, but was killed on a cross?

What does the cross mean for us as believing Christians who follow Jesus’ example?

Not too long ago I was talking to a friend who has had a fairly tough time lately.

He lost a lot of things in his life.

Most of it was his fault.

He lost his family and friends because he was an alcoholic.

During that time in his life he had an affair.

He got a rather difficult divorce.

His kids no longer talk to him.

I asked him if he thought that there were simply things that can’t be fixed.

That sometimes there are wrongs that cannot be undone.

He said, “No”.

I asked him why.

“Because I have to believe, and have hope, that I can get back all the things I have lost in my life.”

As people of faith this I think is an essential part of what it means to be a spiritual person.

We have hope that no situation is completely hopeless or lost.

We believe that every day and every moment there is a chance of redemption, of grace, of forgiveness.

Lots of times when we talk about the death penalty we talk about the worst cases.

We talk about people whose acts are reprehensible, makes our stomachs turn, and who do just plain evil things.

Can God work with such a person?

Let us go back to Jesus hanging on a cross.

In Luke’s Gospel Jesus says something really remarkable.

After having been tried in a sham of a trial,

being whipped,

having to carry his own cross beam,

being nailed down with his hands and feet,

while being mocked and spit on, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

We can skip over this moment if we want, we can rationalize it away, but I think this is really extraordinary.

Because Jesus could have said something like, “Father, just wait until I get to heaven with you then we are going to really get revenge on these evil people.”

The death penalty is about revenge.

It is about us making ourselves feel better because, “they got what was coming to them.”

Perhaps Jesus words can be a guide for us.

That forgiveness is better.

Not just for the one who did the horrible thing, but for us as well.

Our spiritual selves are better when we can find our way to compassion and forgiveness.

Hatred, spiritually speaking, only eats at our souls.

Another significant thing happens on the cross.

Jesus is not alone in being crucified.

He is there with two other criminals.

Jesus while dying decides to have a Jesus moment.

He talks to them.

He offers them a hope of redemption.

Sure one of them doesn’t seem to want it, or need it, but it is there as an option.

We say those same words as the criminal.

Jesus remember me.

I am wondering if the criminals of our day know that Jesus does remember them.

Do they know that even when we sin, when we do evil things that Jesus remembers us and calls us by name?

Do we know the power that comes with us calling on the name of Jesus?

Using Jesus name does something significant in our lives.

It is a redeeming act of forgiveness, hope, and redemption.

Also, for me, I am always aware that it was the state sanctioned death penalty that killed Jesus.

No way to get around it.

The Romans killed Jesus, and it was perfectly legal.

Now Jesus was innocent we know that.

But this is exactly one of the issues is what happens when we kill innocent people in a vain attempt to get rid of the evil.

Jesus in another parable warns us against trying to get rid of evil.

Instead Jesus tells us to let the good and bad grow together, and let God sort out the rest.

Spiritually, from a perspective of faith, although we can judge good and bad behavior, we can’t say who is good and who is evil.

That is only up to God.

Perhaps I should make one other disclaimer is that I am not advocating for letting people get away with murder.

When people do evil things then we have to judge them and they have to pay for those crimes.

But death is final.

It gives no room for redemption, for God to work forgiveness in us with us.

It gives no room for miracles.

So the question that we are left with is what will be in our hearts?

What will be left…revenge, hatred?

Will we find hope and the possibility of redemption?

Will we allow for the criminal to be in paradise with us?

Will we allow God to work in the lives of people who do evil?

This morning I am not pointing to any of my clever arguments.

I am pointing to our Lord and savior, king of our lives, who hangs on a cross and pleads for God to forgive those around him.

I am pointing us to Jesus as an example of what is possible with God.

Like I said at the beginning this is not to say that you have to come to the same conclusions I do.

All I am asking is that we put Jesus into the equation when we ask such questions just like we should with everything in our life.

Because when Jesus is our guide and is example, then Jesus is truly the ruler of our lives.

Amen

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