

Life Is Cheap Sometimes, Isn't It?
March 2007

Life is cheap sometimes, isn't it? People in our streets take the lives of others, some of those who die are innocent and sometimes it happens in our hometowns. Recently here in Helena, a young woman, a single mother, was brutally murdered in her laundry room. She leaves three motherless children for her parents to raise. A man, who claimed to be high on meth and didn't remember what he was doing at that moment, was convicted of the crime and is on his way to prison.

Another murder in Helena occurred when a couple of petty thieves, punk kids, stabbed a young man when he ran from them as they tried to rob him. The victim was a law clerk at the Supreme Court. I didn't know him, but I have talked to people who did and they speak very highly of him. A real tragedy! The two young men confessed and they, too, are on their way to prison.

In Bozeman, a young man was killed by a couple of former college athletes, supposedly in a drug deal gone bad. The County Attorney in Gallatin County chose to pursue the death penalty and a trial date has been set for one of the accused sometime this summer. The second trial is tentatively scheduled for early next year. Why the delay? Capital cases require more lawyers, witnesses, and more preparation which also means more time and more money.

It makes me wonder why the drug dealers in Bozeman are facing the death penalty and not those convicted of the murders in Helena. Some, who argue to keep the death penalty, say the family needs the killer to die so that they can have closure. Does the family of the drug dealer deserve closure more than the family of the law clerk or the young single mother? Is that the purpose of the death penalty...to provide closure for a victims' family?

Who makes that decision? It hadn't dawned on me before, but a county official makes that decision for ALL of us in Montana. It's not the Governor or the Attorney General or any other official elected by the entire state. An official, elected by those who reside in one particular county, makes the decision and yet, the decision is made in all our names.

Fifteen or twenty years ago none of this would have mattered to me. I was a "fry'em" kind of guy. They did the deed; they need to pay the price. That was before I started working with the poor and the homeless. It was before I watched how the courts treat poor people. Not long ago, I watched a court in Helena put a young mother in prison for 5 years because the judge just couldn't see any other way "to get her attention." She was working full time, raising a family of 4, and a full time student in the nursing program in Helena, carrying a 4 point! She was sent to prison for a parole violation. Let's just say when judges and prosecutors make decisions like that, they get my attention!

The prisons are full of poor people. They are not all necessarily innocent, but most are poor. But it is worth noting that at least 3 inmates, serving time in Montana prisons for

other than murder convictions, have been exonerated of their crimes in the past few years due to the use of DNA evidence.

We must also acknowledge that conversion experiences do happen with inmates. We must all be given the chance to change our lives. Many years ago, two men were sentenced to death. One of the men had a "real" conversion experience; the other did not. Let me quote their conversation just prior to their execution: *"Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, 'Are you the Messiah? Save yourself and us.' The other, however rebuking him said in reply, 'Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed we have been condemned justly for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal. Then he said, 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied to him, 'Amen I say to you today you will be with me in Paradise.'" Luke 23:39-43.*

Conversion comes in God's time not ours.

A good friend of mine has a tag line in her emails, a quote from Abraham Lincoln. "Yes, I changed my mind. I'd like to believe I'm smarter today than I was yesterday."

Yes, I have changed my mind, I've had a conversion experience, based on these people I know, the events I have been part of, and my deeper understanding of the value of life which I learned in my faith walk. The people and my God have changed me.