February 24, 2019
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Sm 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23
1 Cor 15:45-49
Lk 6:27-38

By Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

This Sunday we hear some of the most difficult teachings of Jesus Christ:

“Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give, and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.”

If you are like me, upon hearing this you can quickly recite a whole litany of accusatory “Yes… BUT…” up to and including “He’s really just an evil person and does not deserve to live.” Indeed, there is a need to bring some limits and prudential judgment to all of our relationships. Yet Jesus clearly reminds us, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone” (Jn 8:7). Our call to discipleship requires our own moral formation and disciplined discretion in following in the footsteps of Jesus and his teaching to love without conditions.

A most serious sign of our readiness to give up on disciplined discipleship and Jesus’ admittedly difficult and thought-provoking mandate is our rising acceptance of sentencing offenders to death. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey, “Public support for the death penalty, which reached a four-decade low in 2016, has increased somewhat since then. As of June 2018, 54% of Americans favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder, while 39% are opposed.”¹

The issue of capital punishment is complex, yet historically there is ever stronger Christian teaching against its use.² It is important to not see this strong opposition as some kind of pietistic naïveté on the part of the Church, but rather a profoundly respectful reverence for the value of the life of all persons. Lest we forget, the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation with sinners of all sorts has its grounding the words of Jesus, while he was suffering the Roman version of the death penalty. Jesus’ awareness of the price and power of forgiveness was poignantly real, as he extended mercy to his own unjust executioners (Lk 23:34). And then, his personal words of salvation were addressed, not to an “innocent” man, but to a criminal (Lk 23:39-43).

On Aug. 2, 2018 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, announced Pope Francis’ significant revision of the teaching on the death penalty in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 2267).³ The Church now teaches that the death penalty “is inadmissible”—no matter how
serious the offense the person has committed—“because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.” Pope Francis declared it is “inadmissible” because the death penalty is “contrary to the Gospel,” and we must work “for its abolition worldwide.” The U.S. bishops have long called for the abolition of the death penalty in the United States. There is also strong evidence against the effectiveness of killing offenders for genuine resolution, healing and closure for horrific crimes, as is witnessed by victim families and offenders alike.

The reasons for opposition to the death penalty among victims’ families span a wide range. But perhaps most compelling is that for many, the death penalty provides neither the closure nor the healing that legal and political systems oftentimes promise. Instead, a growing number of victims’ families are saying it inhibits that healing. Data surfaced in a 2012 article in the Marquette Law Review found that the family members of murder victims in Minnesota [no death penalty] were physically, psychologically and emotionally more healthy at all stages of the proceedings than their counterparts in [death penalty state] Texas.

Let us pray that we may have the courage and fortitude to accept God’s mercy and then empowered by that grace willingly extend justice, love and mercy to all of our sisters and brothers.

Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. 
Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes. 
As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us. 
As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

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One example will serve to make this point.

In October 1997, 10-year-old Jeffrey Curley hopped into a car with two men who promised him a new bike. Instead, his abductors tortured and killed him before dumping his body in a river. Bob Curley, Jeffrey’s father, was overcome with despair, believing his son’s horrific death was debased because Massachusetts had no death penalty. Driven by desolation Bob led a years-long crusade to reinstate capital punishment in his state, insisting that doing so would prevent others from suffering. Yet, even following the sentencing of Jeffrey’s killers, Curley was plagued by the haunting question: Would a death penalty sentence for his son’s killers—a punishment fraught with its own injustices, both legal and moral— in fact be disrespectful to his son’s memory?

After two years of struggling with such doubts — while forcefully advocating for reinstating the death penalty – Curley experienced a surprising transformation. He met and debated against Bud Welch, a death penalty abolitionist whose daughter, Julie, had been killed in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 and who fought ardently against the death penalty even as one of Julie’s murderers faced it.
In addition to Welch’s personal testimony, two cases made Bob Curley change his mind – Manny Babbitt and Ted Kaczynski. Mr. Babbitt was a poor African-American Vietnam War veteran and Purple Heart recipient (and paranoid schizophrenic) who murdered an elderly woman from Sacramento, Calif., in 1980. Mr. Kaczynski, better known as “the Unabomber,” was a Harvard-educated, Caucasian “man of means” (Mr. Curley’s term), who killed three people by mail bombs in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s and injured 23 more. Both men were turned in to authorities by their brothers. Mr. Kaczynski “killed more people than Manny,” notes Mr. Curley, but received an arguably lighter sentence. Mr. Babbitt was executed in a California prison in 1999, and Mr. Kaczynski was sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole.

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4 For a wide range of resources to help individuals, parishes and dioceses participate in the “Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty” go to www.usccb.org/death-penalty.