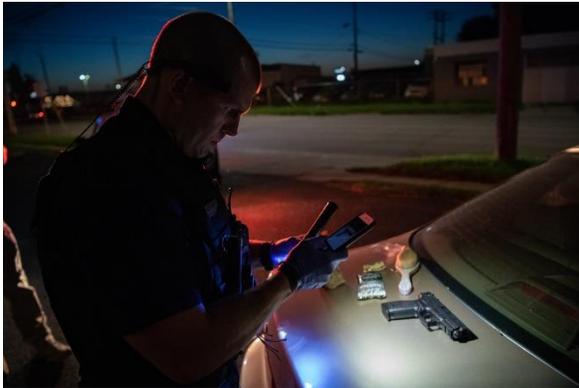


Radio Program from Northport, FL, WKDW – FM, 97.5 FM, Sundays, 10-11 AM
Bible Study series on History of Church of God, resuming weekly on Dec 2, 7: 30 PM
Cybercast this Saturday, 2 PM from Vero Beach

Pastor's Letter 11-20-2020

I had to go to Court

Last week my appearance was summoned in Broward County Court, over an *extremely complex* case with far-reaching ramifications, involving the re-sentencing of an inmate for severe crimes that he committed 42 years ago.



There is really no other way to describe what happened other than to say that these crimes were horrific...absolutely horrific. Not surprisingly, there are losses suffered by several grieving families that continue to this day.

Two Murders

At first the court heard from family members and friends who complained that this event happened. They were bitter and they were angry. How it happened was hard to fathom. It all went back to a fateful day 42 years ago when the future inmate in question was just 15 years old. He tried to run away from home yet his car broke down on the Florida Turnpike. A State Patrol officer stopped to help him and radioed for a wrecker to come to the scene. Then the future inmate

inexplicably pulled a gun from the trunk of the car and shot the trooper dead at point blank range. Then he turned, fired 3 shots that killed the arriving wrecker driver, and drove off with the wrecker until he was apprehended by other law enforcement.

Yes, family and friends were bitter and they were angry. They wanted the State of Florida to lock this man up until he died. The State's prosecuting attorney, displaying all elements of righteous indignation, passionately repeated their demands. Different people stated on the record that no person like this should be allowed to live. One family member exclaimed that this killer "doesn't deserve to breathe the same free air we breathe, and that some things are just unforgivable".

Another family member stated, "If this man got out of prison, I am not sure what I would do." And soon, it would be my turn to speak...but first, let me give some background.

A father but not a dad

In society, while everyone has a father, very few people and virtually none in prison have genuine dads. It is a curse of society. Not that this justifies these murders but this 15 year old did not have a dad. His father was very strict and demanding of him and there was constant tension and strife between the two. The son displayed great ability in baseball and his father pushed very, very hard for him to get drafted into professional baseball. Also his father insisted that his son drive before illegally obtaining a driver's license. He also *insisted* that his son be involved with firearms. To cope with domestic tension, this teenager turned to drugs and indeed was under the influence of drugs at the time of the shootings.

My time with the Killer

While many prisoners write the home office to ask for a ministerial visit, we understand that most are merely curiosity seekers with little interest in becoming a true Christian. But this person was esteemed by Cincinnati to be quite serious about Christianity and thus referred to me. Over the next several years I found him to be different [from the boy he had been]..., repentant, sorrowful, pensive, mellow, and extremely introspective as well as a very good student of the Bible. A local prison chaplain also volunteered to me that this inmate was repentant. Eventually I finally baptized him. Having been sentenced to two life sentences, he knew that his opportunity for parole was slim but he wanted to move forward where he could.



Instead of completing a pastor letter for last week, I had to remain engaged with this monumental court hearing for all day Thursday and much of Friday.

My Turn to Speak

When I was asked for my testimony, I obviously acknowledged the obvious grief that the family and friends had gone through. No amount of tears could erase that pain. I mentioned that my findings of the inmate paralleled other religious personnel and case workers who found this man to be pensive, humble, sobered, and repentant.

Then I was cross examined by the State Attorney who probed for loose bricks in my foundation of testimony. He asked questions like did I know this person's favorite Bible scriptures so I answered "John 3: 6, Ps. 23 and Ps. 100." Undeterred he asked me how long, really, did I actually ever visit this person. To that I said, 7-8 times or more (before Covid 19 stopped all prison visits), Each visit was 2 hours (maximum time allowed) per visit and I said that if he lived nearby instead of 600 miles away, round trip, I would have seen him more. After the attorney caught his breath he asked if I really ever had counseled with victims of crimes. Here I looked him straight in the eye and answered yes - many times drawing on experiences dealing with alcoholism, issues of suicide, and drug abuse murder, hate, rape, bi-polar situations, revenge, divorce, untimely death etc. Then he asked if I had ever bothered to have this man apologize to the grieving family and friends. I replied, how could I since today would be the first opportunity they would all be under one roof. I added that merely getting people together does not necessarily solve problems as evidenced by numerous nationalities being unable to bury the hatchet to make peace. Sometimes the people are not ready to do make the next step. Certainly the family was not.

CONCLUSIONS

1. A fair amount of public attention is focusing on this case since it could establish a landmark ruling. For example, Florida law says that a juvenile cannot receive a life sentence. Therefore this case could set precedence if he is set free.
2. A neurologist (a brain doctor) was called on to explain the fact that teenage brains are unevenly developed for a variety of reasons. The implication being that the perpetrator did not have full control of his thinking..especially when you factor in that at the time of the crime he was high on drugs. (This obviously is not a justification for committing crimes but it may serve as a mitigating factor in determining the appropriate punishment for the crime.)
3. I was struck by the amount of anger that was in that court room. 42 years changed nothing with these people. Anger is very unhealthy and potentially anger can destroy the victim as well as the perpetrator.
4. I intuitively wondered as well if the state attorney was harboring anger over some incident that happened in his earlier years and that subconsciously he would be reliving pain for some past experience that he went through. If so, that could throw “gas on the fire” as he spent some private recess with the family and seemed to fan the flames of negativity which clearly shut down any possibility for reconciliation.
5. For Christians to consider: Where is there an element of forgiveness? How can we really, really love God whom we have not seen if we find ourselves incapable to loving people whom we do see? Can any of us even eventually pray for our enemies?
6. And isn't it the height of hypocrisy if we expect Christ to forgive us of savagely killing Him but we refuse to forgive others who change? And if they do not change, shall we harden our hearts against them forever? This is SO fundamental; even if it is not always easy.

Before the hearing was over, the State Attorney snarled and asked the defendant who was connected to the courthouse by Zoom, “Do you have anything you would like to say to the family?” Here the inmate took a handwritten, comprehensive

apology out of an envelope and read it to the family and friends of the family. It was deeply sincere. Very moving. In fact gut-wrenching as he cried and struggled to get through. It was heart felt and shockingly poignant in its scope. It seemed that some people including the judge were moved to tears. I thought it proved the feeling that other chaplains, prison personnel and I all had feeling that after 42 years, it was time to get paroled and relocated to a Florida half way house program.

I include a picture here of a non-Florida prison that carries an eerie message. Ask yourself, Does it make sense to imprison in a cage a confused, dad-less teenager on drugs to life without parole?



So what happens next? We wait at least another week. The judge seemed so emotionally moved by the letter of apology that she set the day of sentencing for later instead of for right then.

This weekend should be very busy in the 4 congregations

Lonnie Mooneyham will be in Tallahassee, Stan Braumuller will speak in Vero Beach, Bill Wilson will be over in Ft. Myers and Perry Harold and I will give split sermons in Ocala. Let us make the most out of the coming Sabbath.

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