

In the Eternal Embrace

By Mary Ellen Meyer

With faith that death is a beginning to a new life, Wendell Grissom was executed by the State of Oklahoma on March 20, 2025. Wendell trusted in the embrace of Christ on his “heavenly birthday.” He never wavered in that trust in the ten years that Jim and I knew him.

Jim and I work as volunteers, facilitating the Centering Prayer Group and assisting the Catholic chaplain at Solano State Prison in Vacaville, California. We have witnessed many inmates changing the direction of their lives and walking a new path of service and love.

Ten years ago, through our writing ministry, we came to know Mr. Grissom on death row in Oklahoma. He was a humble, honest, prayerful man who regretted his past choices. With his ministry degree and his open heart, he was able to help others who reached out to him. He used sacred music, prayer, Bible reading, and his many connections with others outside of prison to sustain himself through his 20 years of a most difficult incarceration.

Wendell wrote the following thoughts about heaven: “Here’s what it will be like when we go home, I think. Someday it will happen, for we are given a time to be born, and a time to die. One day you and I will find ourselves face to face with the Savior. What will it be like? What will His embrace feel like?”

“He will hold us tightly as we smile, laugh, and cry together. Jesus knows us personally and perfectly. He has been with us through every trial and triumph of our lives. He is the sure foundation we have built our lives upon. At last, we will be reunited, we will finally be home. And in that embrace, may we be greeted with these words which are in the Bible: ‘Enter into the joy of the Lord.’”

“So never fear death, for in death we’ll be going home, a home like we’ve never known before, surrounded by love we’ve never known before. So, to die is gain, not loss.”

After petitioning, I was granted approval to be spiritual advisor for Wendell. I was given training for the process by the Oklahoma State prison chaplain through “screen share.” This approval allowed me an hour of prayer with Wendell the day before his execution and my presence with him at the time of death.

This was not my first time meeting Wendell. Last November, his mother, who has become a close friend, picked Jim and me up from the airport, arranged two nights with her in a hotel, and accompanied us to McAlester State Prison for visitation.

The four of us joined our hands in prayer before and after the visit, each of us taking a turn leading prayer. We felt comfortable and at home with Wendell and his mother, and we knew

our friendship had grown to a deeper, spiritual level. I felt that with divine grace, we would be all right.

Wendell and I spoke of the pain of his many years of incarceration and the execution as not being wasted. All that pain will bear fruit. He smiled and spoke of having produced a really big garden.

When his time came, stretched as on a cross, Wendell said he would not be experiencing anything close to what Jesus felt. I believe he united his painful journey to that of Christ.

I was able to stand at Wendell's feet and touch them. I thought of Mary at the foot of the cross, my heart shattered, too, as I placed my hand on Wendell's feet, telling him this was love from his own mother and from the many who supported and loved him. This touch brought comfort to Wendell's mother, who chose not to witness the execution. I prayed words from his friend, Deacon Jerry who could not be present. "Eternal rest grant unto Wendell, O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace."

As we prayed the intimate words of Jesus the night before he died; prayed Psalms 91 and 23; and sang "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," I saw Wendell peaceful. We kept our focus on the embrace of Christ and the joy that no one can take from us.

I have become a deeper more compassionate person by walking this journey with Wendell and feeling the love and support of a large, faith-filled, praying community.

"We remember Wendell as a loyal and caring friend and a devoted son and brother who has spent two decades trying to atone for his harmful actions," Wendell's attorney wrote in a press release. "Wendell's execution perpetuates a cycle of pain and trauma. We hold out hope for a day when we no longer purport to advance justice by taking one life for another."