

A Meditation on Forgiveness, Accountability and the Abolition of the Death Penalty

*"O LORD our God, you answered them indeed; *
you were a God who forgave them,
yet punished them for their evil deeds." (Psalm 99:8)*

What does that verse mean? Doesn't God's forgiveness just wipe the past away?

Well, actually, no. God's love washes us clean and gives us a fresh start, but it doesn't erase the past. Because forgiveness is not the same as exoneration. It doesn't relieve us of responsibility for what we have done. When God forgives, it is as if God is saying to us, "What you did was wrong, and I still love you. Therefore I refuse to let what you did come between us. But I love you too much not to hold you accountable. I want you to keep on growing. Yes, I love you just the way you are, and I love you too much to let you stay the way you are."

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, either. Instead, it is remembering what we did or what was done to us while refusing to allow the offense to have power over us anymore. The God who forgives us sets us free and holds us accountable in the power of deep and unquenchable love.

That's why when I heard that both Houses of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia have adopted resolutions to abolish the death penalty, I remembered this verse from Psalm 99. Abolishing the death penalty proclaims the fierce love, the compelling forgiveness and the demanding accountability of God because:

- It honors life.
Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)
- It strips the power of and impetus toward vengeance.
Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 19:12)

- It is motivated by Godly love for the guilty and for the innocent. *Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:43-45)*
- It leaves abundant room for healing and repentance. *Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matthew 9:13)*
- It puts judgment for life and death right where it belongs -- in the hands of God. *There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. (James 4:12a)*
- It holds the guilty accountable in significant ways while ensuring that innocent lives are protected. *So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Romans 14:12)*
- It rejects retributive violence that disproportionately targets persons of color and persons who are poor. *Jesus read from the scroll: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." (Luke 4:18)*

When the abolition of the death penalty in Virginia is signed into law we will take a giant step, in the love of God, toward healing and wholeness. We will end one dimension of our complicity with vengeance, killing and injustice. We will proclaim that the love of God made known to us in Christ Jesus, who was himself executed by the state, brings healing and forgiveness even while holding people accountable for their actions. In that love we know hope, see justice and encourage amendment of life. For that, I give thanks to God.