Death Penalty

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Although the criminal justice system lawfully suggests capital punishment as a result of murder, the act of execution is murder itself and although legal, does not seem to do any good. The act to kill someone as a punishment for killing does not do any justice. There are many factors to consider before taking someone’s life whom is already incarcerated.  A person committing a murder could be for vastly different reasons. Many times murders can occur from people who are mentally unstable, accidentally, a response of self-defense, a result of drugs, or other rare occurrences that are not always considered. We live in a world with serial killers, sociopaths, and murders that only happen once. The law of the death penalty can determine one’s fate just based on a one-time occurrence. In many cases people can be falsely accused based on their race, gender, and geographical location.   The act of execution seems too high of a risk for any case of murder whether innocent or guilty.

                The Catholic Church believes that execution can be avoided even if it is for the safety of our society. Every life is just as valuable as the next, even if that person committed a crime such as murder. Growing up around St. Leo parish, a Jesuit parish in Tacoma, I have been raised with this belief. Whether it is a learned belief or an inherent opinion, I do not believe execution is the answer for many murder cases.  The environment of the church certainly has influenced the way I developed my thoughts growing up. However, my beliefs today, though might be influenced by the Catholic Church, do not necessarily match up with the beliefs of the Catholic Church.

                As a Jesuit, which I like to call the “liberal Catholics”, have taught me many important perspectives on issues we face in our world and in American society.  Many of these perspectives however were taught through experiences, rather than church itself. St. Leo Parish is right in the middle of hilltop in Tacoma amongst the poor communities. There are many services through St. Leo such as the Food Connection, Hospitality Kitchen, Operation Keep ‘Em Warm and Fed, and many other programs that are oriented to help the poor and vulnerable. My mother became the youth minister at St. Leo when I was ten years old. From that age I would come into work with my mom frequently and spent a lot of time around the existing poverty and reality of life on the streets. There was violence and substance abuse happening right outside the church. The people, who came into the hospitality kitchen, required a high demand for security, as fights would break out often.

              For the last six years I have been working for the Summer Meals program for the Food Connection preparing meals for children in low-income areas throughout Tacoma and Lakewood. One day I was working in the hospitality kitchen to collect milk out of the coolers. Unfortunately coming out of the cooler I witnessed the murder of a man right in the middle of the eating area. The prosecutor was a middle aged white woman who had been seen as troublesome before. However, these people were homeless therefor there was no news of the murder and the case was forgotten. The woman who stabbed this man did not personally know him. She could have killed anyone in the room that day. Not knowing her criminal history, this might have been her first murder and because of that she will be in prison for a very long time. After a summer of observing her, there was a clear sign of a mental illness. There are many mental illnesses that are not treated that can easily lead to the harm of another human being. If you are not mentally well, it can be easy to mistake and differentiate right from wrong. There can be an absence of emotion and empathy that can lead to difficulty of interacting with other people socially.

It is more common for people of low-income backgrounds have higher rates of violence and murder. This can all be traced back to childhood. If basic physiological needs are not met such as food, shelter, and basic health care then it is hard to meet the psychological and emotional needs of someone. People who live in poverty are not able to live a stable and safe life because they are in survival mode. They do whatever it takes to survive. In this process, if emotional and social needs are not being met you do not behave the same as someone whose needs have been met. This is when mental illnesses can form, especially after an influence of drugs. Especially if you are trying to survive, you will do what it takes. In the case of the murder at the Food Connection, the woman’s physiological needs were not being met. She relied on the Hospitality Kitchen for her food and a shelter by night. In her case, she often showed signs of anger towards people around her. Many times she would talk to herself when she was by herself on the streets in hilltop. Her signs of mental illness could lead to different types of illness however there could be many causes for her disability. The fact that this woman stabbed a man for no reason could lead to many possibilities for her reasoning. If she was put in a mental institution I do not know, but the fact that she was homeless and had nowhere to go is a factor to how this situation came about.

Education itself can be a huge benefit to keeping children and the next generation out of poverty. However if you are already living in poverty, you are more likely to drop out of school sooner. If you live with one parent or guardian in financial stress and have siblings you can miss out on a lot of opportunities. In the summertime I see many children who hang out on the street with no parents around. Many of the adults in these neighborhoods are unemployed and influenced by alcohol and drug abuse. Although we are there to feed the children, often parents will ask for food because they have not eaten in days. These parents and adults in the neighborhood do not know how to come out of the cycle. They rely on the food bank and free services for their kids to get by. These children are unfortunately going to stay in the same cycle as their parents and will live in poverty and violent neighborhoods.

                I grew up in a white, middle class family who was around poverty but not living within it. There are many war veterans in hilltop and downtown Tacoma that seek services at St. Leo and many are homeless with mental illnesses. These are the populations we tend to ignore as a society, especially because of ambivalent perceptions of the mentally ill. People with mental illnesses who are also poor are not able to beat the system. Many end up in prison with nowhere else to go. If they were a person of middle class with the resources and medications they need, prison might not have been in their path. There are many homeless people I have met who are veterans with nowhere to go. Their experience from war has caused disabilities and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. These people have experienced horrifying events that have led to substance abuse, depression, and act on domestic violence after going through trauma. I believe that if there were jobs and homes for returning veterans, although they might still be scarred from the psychological effects from war, can come out of survival mode and live somewhat healthy, non-violent lives.

There might be some situations where the death penalty is justified. There are many serial killers and war criminals such as Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer that are either locked up for life or have received the death penalty. In middle school I had a friend whose neighbor, a young girl, had been kidnapped. She had been raped and killed not long after she went missing. When occurrences like this happen, you know nobody in their right mind would do this. However, people without these disorders do not know what it is like to lack emotion and empathy. These people have a different chemical wiring in their brain. People who rape, kill by the dozens, and are also necrophiliacs do these things that are unimaginable to anyone else. People like this might not live a quality life being institutionalized forever. In that case, we are just protecting the rest of the world from these people by putting them in prisons and institutions. However, there are not many solutions for those who are institutionalized. They might see the death penalty as their way out.

The death penalty is unjust when used for crimes that could easily be mistaken. There is more of a chance that a person of color will receive a sentence that is worse than the same crime of a white person. If the death penalty is used, it should be a very rare case and also accepted by the prisoner. The other option is to stay in prison forever.  I have been around people with these mental illnesses, and some people if pushed in the right direction can lead to a healthy life if the illness does not digress. Our society needs to help the poor and vulnerable to keep them from being in these situations and decrease the amount of crime and murder in the country. Also, to treat those who are mentally unstable and find a way to help them and direct them another way.

Although my life has not personally been influenced by poverty, substance abuse, and violence, I have seen enough of the never-ending cycle that gets people in bad situations. I have seen the results of these situations as people lose hope. In urban areas, people fight for survival. They have low graduation rates, low income, few job opportunities, and becomes an environment for homicides. I do not believe in the death penalty because the persecutors are also the victims and have been their whole lives. People who live in poverty live around violence and become violent because it is their only visible option to survive. People with a mental illness are lacking the emotion that most people have. Whether that can be fixed I do not know but we cannot leave those people who are living on the streets. I think if we are able to help these populations, violence can be decreased and less people will be incarcerated. However, those goals might not line up with the justice system. The death penalty does not seem right for people who have already struggled their whole lives to survive mentally and physically. They have already lived with no hope, and with the death penalty at stake, their lives have lost personal value. If the death penalty is a way of protecting our society, it is certainly not protecting our prisoners.