



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

***September 4, 2011: Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time***  
***Karen Fitzpatrick***

RCL: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

LM: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

Treat the sinner in the church as you would a Gentile or a tax collector, Matthew's Gospel tells us. How are Gentiles and tax collectors treated in the Gospels and in the early Church? Gentiles are those outside the church community, but they also are the mission field. So now we're to expand this, making recalcitrant sinners part of the mission field, objects of preaching in the hope of converting their hearts. Tax collectors eat at Jesus' table. Do we need to work so sinners return to our tables of fellowship?

Even a confirmed sinner cannot be cast out without hope. Congregations throughout our country are split over the death penalty, despite pronouncements opposing it from many denominational leaders.

We would regard it as barbarous and inhumane for a criminal who had tortured or maimed a victim to be tortured or maimed in return. Such a punishment might satisfy certain vindictive desires that we or the victim might feel, but the satisfaction of such desires is not and cannot be an objective of a humane and Christian approach to punishment.<sup>1</sup>

Today's Gospel invites challenging questions about where the call to reconciliation leads us. The passage from Romans, emphasizing loving neighbors as a summation of all the commandments, offers the same challenge. Reconciling with others and loving our neighbors lead naturally to a concern for whether they are fed and whether justice prevails in their lives.

Even for those who refuse reconciliation, we do not lose hope for future restoration. Prison chaplains tell us that movements like Kairos are able to help bring about true conversion of heart among the most hardened criminals in maximum and other high security prisons.

Frank was a real leader—in the wrong way. He was incarcerated at Lebanon Correctional Institution in Ohio, where Kairos was introduced as a weekend pilot project. The chaplain invited some leaders to attend, saying to Frank, "Give it a try. The worst thing that can happen is you waste a weekend."

"And it won't be my first wasted weekend," Frank commented as he agreed to attend. At the conclusion of the Kairos experience, Frank exclaimed, "The walls came tumblin' down! My parents, my wife, my children, my grandchildren couldn't bring down the walls, but tonight the walls came tumblin' down!"



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A week later the director of food service, where Frank helped prepare the six thousand meals served each day, approached the chaplain, saying, “What did you do to my clerk? He’s reading the Bible every day!” More than a decade later Frank continues praying. He has now moved to medium security.

Sister Helen Prejean has done more to focus national attention on the death penalty issue than any other individual. Long before the film version of her dynamic book *Dead Man Walking*,<sup>ii</sup> Sister Prejean followed God’s invitation that she write to a man on death row. A former English teacher then working in adult literacy among poor people in New Orleans, Sister Prejean tells how writing to the death row inmate led to a visit. Later she accompanied her first befriended inmate to his execution. Since then she has worked with several more death row prisoners and has become an international spokesperson against the death penalty.

The busy preacher needs both stories and facts. The Death Penalty Information Center offers many helpful facts through its website.<sup>iii</sup> Their analysis shows that the U.S. is the only Western democracy with the death penalty and that our country leads the world in executing people for crimes they committed before the age of 18. The death penalty’s deterrent effect is questionable, since murder rates in states that have abolished the death penalty are lower than states still using it. Too often innocent people are executed or are kept on death row but are later released because of new evidence of innocence. Racial inequities also characterize the way the death penalty is applied. Statistics show that cases involving life imprisonment are less costly to states than cases involving the death penalty.

Working for reconciliation is never easy, but it is also never optional in God’s vision of a peaceful world.

### ***Children’s Time***

Children may have profoundly negative images of people in prison, based on what they’ve seen or heard. They might think those in prison are bad people rather than people who have done some bad things. Perhaps someone in your congregation has worked as a tutor or chaplain in a prison setting and has seen and could tell about the kind of transformation that Karen describes above in Frank’s life. Or you could use Frank as an illustration of how God breaks into our lives and cares for us, even when we resist and even when we’ve done some bad things. That’s how deeply God loves all of us – even prison walls and bars can’t keep God’s love out of our lives.

### ***Musical Suggestions***

In the Midst of New Dimensions – NCH 391

The Gift of Love – UMH 408

As We Remember – GC 818

Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace – BP 178



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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Catholic Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment, November 1980; currently available online at <http://osjspm.org/cappun.htm>.

<sup>ii</sup> Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., *Dead Man Walking* (New York: Random House, 1993).

<sup>iii</sup> The latest studies and statistics are available on [www.deathpenaltyinfo.org](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org)