

Words from Rev. George A. Mason, Ph.D., Founder and President of Faith Commons

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Edward Busby will be executed tonight for his terrible crime of murdering 77-year-old Fort Worth resident Laura Lee Crane in 2005. Mr. Busby is a Black male, indigent and has an IQ in the range of 75, which qualified him in some legal definitions as mentally disabled. Busby's profile fits neatly into the precise story of those who are executed. Almost never white, never women, never anything but poor, never educated. The death penalty is not justly applied in this state or this country.

I was supposed to speak at a vigil this evening to mourn this execution, which marks the 600th in Texas since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. Because the Supreme Court of the United States took its good time and only overturned the stay of execution in the final hour before he was set to die, I did not make it. I thank Human Rights Dallas, Hadi Jawad and Rick Halperin for organizing and carrying out the vigil. Eric Folkerth represented the clergy. Nancy Kasten and I from Faith Commons were co-sponsors.

Here's what I was planning to say. It still represents my sentiments on this sad occasion ...

Tonight we gather in the shadow of a terrible milestone.

Six hundred executions.

Six hundred human beings put to death by the state of Texas since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976.

And tonight, the man at the center of that number is a person whose intellectual disability has become part of the public debate. Lawyers and courts will continue to argue those questions. But we are here tonight because there are some truths deeper than legal procedure.

We faith leaders are here, though, because faith asks different questions.

Not simply:

“What is permitted?”

But:

“What is merciful?”

“What is just?”

“What kind of people are we becoming?”

And perhaps most importantly:

“Can we honor the dignity of human life without exception?”

The great religious traditions of the world begin with a startling claim: that human beings bear the image of God.

Not some human beings.
Not the innocent only.
Not the useful.
Not the successful.
Not the morally pure.

Human beings.

Which means every life is more than the worst thing that person has ever done.

That does not erase grief.
It does not erase violence.
It does not erase accountability.
And tonight we must speak with tenderness toward victims and families whose wounds never fully heal. Nothing said here should minimize their suffering. The cry for justice is real. The ache of loss is real.

But there is a profound moral difference between grieving violence and repeating it.

There is a difference between protecting society and sanctifying death.

The question before us is not whether evil exists. It does.

The question is whether killing teaches us how to overcome killing.

And after six hundred executions, can we honestly say that it has?

The death penalty asks us to believe that somewhere, somehow, healing comes through another death. But the moral arc of faith points in another direction. Again and again, the prophets call us away from vengeance and toward mercy. Again and again, scripture insists that justice without compassion hardens into cruelty.

The Hebrew prophets dreamed of a day when people “shall not hurt or destroy.”

Jesus stood in the long tradition of those who interrupted cycles of violence rather than perpetuating them. He spoke of mercy, forgiveness, and the immeasurable worth of those discarded by society. He refused to reduce people to a single act, a single label, a single failure.

And whatever our religious tradition—or even if we claim none at all—we know something sacred happens when we refuse to surrender another human being to hopelessness.

Because hopelessness is the theology of execution.

It says a life can no longer bear meaning.
No longer bear redemption.
No longer bear possibility.

But faith insists otherwise.

Faith says no person is beyond the reach of grace.
No soul is disposable.
No life is beyond the concern of God.

Tonight we stand not only against an execution, but against the slow erosion of compassion that can happen to a society one execution at a time.

Six hundred executions do not merely tell us something about crime.
They tell us something about us.

About what we fear.
About what we normalize.
About how easily human beings become abstractions once they are behind walls and razor wire.

But tonight we resist abstraction.

Tonight we remember that this is a human life.
A mother's child.
A fragile life bearing the same divine breath that animates every one of us.

And we remember too that mercy is not weakness.

Mercy is one of the deepest forms of moral courage.

It takes no imagination to kill.
It takes extraordinary moral imagination to believe that even now another way is possible.

So tonight we pray:
For victims.
For families.
For prison workers.
For judges and lawyers.
For governors and courts.
For those condemned.
For all of us.

And we pray for a society courageous enough to believe that justice does not require execution in order to be real.

May we become people who cherish life more deeply than we fear one another.

And may God have mercy on us all.