**Sermon Text for July 28, 2013**

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Exodus 21:12-17, John 11:45-53

“The Death Penalty”

 It continues to amaze me how God honors this sermon series by the current events which take place that are perfectly related to the topic of Scripture. God’s timing on these sermons is absolutely impeccable. On Friday Ariel Castro admitted guilt to kidnapping three women in Cleveland and so avoided the death sentence being imposed against him. The victims were relieved. Attorney General Holden stated that the government would not be seeking the death penalty against Snowden who is holed up in a Moscow airport because of his leaking of state secrets.

 Did you know that only China, Iran, and Saudia Arabia execute more people by the death penalty than the United States? Not the crowd we want to be associated with, but it should give us pause. So why are we talking about the death penalty? As you know, once a year I preach a sermon on financial stewardship and that normally takes place in November. Likewise, once a year I preach a sermon on a political hot issue and that takes place in July because there are fewer of you here. I didn’t do a political topic last year because, well, I was new, and I wanted you to like me. So you can expect one next year as well.

 This year we are addressing the topic of the death penalty and I hope it doesn’t come across as just he opinion of a misdirected preacher, but rather the Word of Truth which came from study and struggling with the Scripture and I hope a somewhat objective but solidly biblical view is presented on a topic that does affect all of us.

 Today, both of our Scriptures address the topic of a nation deciding to put someone to death, and how we can find in Scripture an understanding of what our approach to this topic should be. Let’s read.

Our first Scripture for today is one of many and a whole myriad of Scriptures in the Old Testament that not only allow for capital punishment but for all intents and purposes codify it and make it into law. It is enthusiastically embraced by the people of Israel not only for murder, but, teenagers are you listening, also for those children who were disrespectful to their parents. Ah, the good old days. When children were respectful to their elders or else they would be dragged out to the village square and stoned to death.

 Many Christian proponents of the death penalty also see the foundation for the establishment of the death penalty is by God himself in Genesis 9:5-6 where God describes dietary codes that include not eating flesh that has blood. It is basically an anti-cannibalistic, and an anti rare meat, statement that contains the phrase: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.”

 So if somehow you are able to remove the context of this Scripture from being about food and apply it to life in general then you probably could come up with a verse supporting the death penalty. But what we read today in Exodus lays out the law more clearly and supports it more directly. These practices of the death penalty were kept even up to the 1st century in Jesus’ day. As proof do you remember John 8 when the adulterous woman was being dragged out into the square to be stoned? They were just carrying out the law and were perfectly justified in doing so. But Jesus had a bit of a different take on it and it wasn’t that he was soft on crime because he did say go and sin no more, but he would not allow the law of capital punishment be carried out in this case.

 Some would also turn to Matthew 26:52 as an example of Jesus himself supporting capital punishment when he tells one of his disciples who strikes a guard trying to save Jesus from his arrest to put away his sword for: “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” But before we get to our John Scripture for today we know that Jesus’ defining statement on this topic is seen in Matthew 5:38 when he states: “You have hear that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist evil with evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

 Jesus here is not telling us to be passive, he is not telling us to lie down and roll over in the face of aggression. If someone hits you there are two assumed responses that could take place. You could hit the person back or if he is noticeably bigger, you could cower or turn and run. Jesus says, no, take the third strategy, take control of the situation, do not let the other person dictate your actions, blow their minds by offering the other cheek and they will not know what to do.

 When Jesus came upon this earth he came to save our souls. But I read one commentary who said: “Jesus’ words should not be applied in a government setting. He came to bring salvation, not to establish policy.” I have to respectfully but forcefully disagree. He came to bring salvation that would also affect our way of life and the decisions that we make. We are not called to leave the decisions to those in the government while many in the government are also followers of Christ so the decisions that they make have to based upon the teachings of Christ.

 When Jesus stated “you have heard but I say to you it marks the new covenant that he brought which provides salvation but it also provides a whole new ethic and way of life that makes us different from others.

 In John 11 the religious leaders in Jesus’ day did not know what to do with him. He just raised Lazarus from the dead so a lot of people were beginning to go after him and follow him and believe in him. So the leaders in vs. 48 state: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” Then in verse 53 we read that from that day on they planned to put him to death.

 Jesus, our Savior, was a victim of capital punishment. And the reason they gave for putting him on death row was not a result of murder on his part, or blaspheme, or heresy, Jesus was put to death because the way of life of the religious leaders was threatened. The popularity of Jesus could attract some unwanted attention from the Romans so they might destroy the holy place, or the temple, which they did in 72 anyway. And their nation as a whole would be in jeopardy because of his influence on their people to take them away from how things used to be. But the nation of Israel crumbled and went into diaspora in 72 as well. The prophecy of Caiaphas came true.

 Jesus’ threat to their way of life rose to the level in their eyes of being justified to take his life. But there are other reasons why today we may feel motivated to support the death penalty. Probably the favorite is the desire for vengeance. You heard of the two robbers who entered a man’s house and raped and killed his wife and daughters right in front of him. They were caught and we would all want to be the ones who would push the button the electric chair for them.

 But the Apostle Paul tells us: never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” The more we act on our desire for vengeance the further we move from God’s desire and will in our life. The more we seek vengeance the less God is able to enact it. God says you can choose between your vengeance and my vengeance. I think I’ll go with God’s.

 Others see the death penalty as a deterrent to crime and murder. The thinking is that with the death penalty less people will want to kill because they don’t want to die. Did you know that those states that have the death penalty have more than double the homicide rates that those states without the death penalty? It is basic knowledge that the death penalty does not deter crime. The statistics simply do not support it. There have been many studies done that support this fact.

 Others use an economic argument or a financial argument that it is less expensive to put someone to death than to keep them in prison their entire life. Actually, the truth is that to put a person to death with all the trials and fees which are much more expensive than a life sentence the average cost is 1.8 million. To house a life prisoner which costs the tax payer about $35,000 a year the person would have to be in jail over 50 years before their costs would rise to the level of executing someone. Very few make it in prison for that long, the average stay for a lifer is 25 years before they die in prison.

 I know, some of us are saying, but I want justice, this just sounds too soft. I don’t care what the Bible says or what the facts or the statistics are, it just isn’t right, there is no sense of justice in all of this. I can only think of the sense of justice that our Savior has. Each one of us here in this sanctuary is guilty and we all deserve to be put to death. Paul tells us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And then he states that the wages of sin are death.

 When you decide that it is okay to take a person’s life because of their actions we are then condemning ourselves to that same sentence. What has always puzzled me are those who are in favor of the death penalty but opposed to abortion. I know, that’s a lot of you. I believe in a consistent life ethic. But the baby is innocent. Either we are for life, or we are against it. Not a single one of us is innocent and God does not give us the right to put a period after anyone’s name as if there is no more hope for them to become saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. When you take a person’s life you are playing God and our Savior is none too happy with that. I am equally appalled by those who support abortion but then are opposed to the death penalty. I must be missing something here, because either we are for life or we are against it. But the mom must be able to choose. No, God has already chosen.

 Ultimately how we view this issue is a personal one. We ought not decide as the religious leaders did in John 11. As a group they decided to take the life of Christ. I wonder if they would have decided the same on their own. We are called as Christians to decide these matters not based upon our emotions or our sense of justice, but rather on God’s call in our lives to bring the Gospel to all people and to allow all people to have hope in Christ. The taking of a life, whether they deserve it or not, flies in the face of God’s justice. Amen.