

The Tennessee Tribune

Volume 22, No. 39 3 Sections THURSDAY, September 29-October 5, 2011

The Death Penalty and the Beloved Community: Two Incompatible Ideas

A Commentary by Jason Curry



The Reverend Dr. Jason Richard Curry is Dean of the Fisk Memorial Chapel at Fisk University. He can be reached at jcurry@fisk.edu or www.fiskmemorialchapel.com.

When we consider the moral atrocities that have negatively impacted the lives of African-American for centuries, we are able to understand why many African-American are opposed to the death penalty. Unfortunately, some Americans have supported slavery (until 1865), Jim Crow laws as well as racial segregation. Even though African-Americans have always been less than thirty-percent percent of the total population of the United States, African-Americans have been subjected to a disproportionate amount of violent and inhumane acts, which include, but are not limited to, killing by the state via the death penalty. Even though many scholars have written extensively about the racial, gender (more males are killed), geographic (more people are killed in Southern states) and economic (a disproportionate amount of poor people are killed) biases associated with the death penalty, America continues to make use of this practice

as a way of implementing justice. Therefore, it is no surprise that many African-Americans were vehemently opposed to the recent killing of an African-American named Troy Davis. Even though there was evidence to convict him as well as to set him free, the countless and senseless deaths of African-American males throughout our history as a nation have made Mr. Davis' death too much for many people bear.

Studies have shown that sentencing people to death does not deter other people from committing violent crimes. Scientific studies involving DNA tests have also shown that innocent people have been put on "death row." People often speak of the death penalty as a way of bringing closure to horrific act or crime, but my years of pastoral counseling with bereaved families suggest that it is not death but rather life and love that give people the hope, healing, strength and courage to face another day. I completely

understand that friends or family members of the deceased want justice for the crime that was committed, but I also understand that the message of Christ demands that we consider a higher moral law; a law which suggests that we ought to have a reverence and respect for all human life, even if it is a misguided and deranged life which has no respect for the rules of society or the Christian quest for the beloved community.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the beloved community as the ideal community for all of humankind. It is the Christian ideal or earthly kingdom that is spoken about in the first part of the Lord's Prayer. People who have been hurt, victimized and abused are sometimes unable to work toward this beloved community, therefore, let those who now about faith (Hebrews 11:1), longsuffering for Christ (Galatians 5:22) and agape love (1 Corinthians 13) continue to lead the way.