

# Restorative Justice

Sister Helen Prejean to speak at the UO

In the Bible it reads, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand.” But death row critic and Roman Catholic nun Sister Helen Prejean says that doesn’t mean there should be violence done in exchange for violence. “People misinterpret the scripture according to what their bent is,” she says. “It’s an easy human impulse to try to get a divine authority to back up what you’ve already decided you believe in.”

“An eye for an eye,” Prejean says, “is really part of trying to contain violence.” She explains that the concept was meant to prevent further and more drastic violence and retaliation. If, in earlier societies without prisons, one man murdered another, the family of the dead man might get revenge by killing the murderer’s entire village. “It meant only a life for a life, only an eye for an eye. It was to restrain violence, to contain it,” she says.

Prejean, known for her book *Dead Man Walking* and the feature film it launched, is coming to the UO to speak on restorative justice as part of a lecture series presented by the Savage Committee on International Relations and Peace. Her talk, “Inalienable Human Rights Today,” starts at 7 pm Monday, Jan. 25, in Room 175 of the

Knight Law Center.

Prejean says, “When you look at the biblical concept of justice, now the Bible of course can be quoted six ways to Sunday, but it’s filled with the idea of restorative justice and that healing and health and wholeness is what is desired and not just pure punishment and pain.”

Restorative justice, she says, is the opposite of what we have now, a system she describes as “pure retribution.” She says, “It’s the state versus the criminal; they seek to punish the criminal; the victim is out of the loop.”

Though no one has been executed in Oregon since 1997, the state has a death row with 32 prisoners on it, according to the Oregon Department of Corrections. Five of those cases are from Lane County. The last two men to be executed, Harry Charles Moore and Douglas Franklin Wright, chose not to pursue any legal appeals to prevent their deaths by lethal injection.

Oregon is one of the many states where, Prejean says, “Many people have not reflected deeply on the death penalty.” Oregon, she says, “is hanging by a thread.”

Prejean considers herself to be an

educator whose job it is to go around the country to waking people up through storytelling and explaining what happens not just to those who are killed, but to the guards and other people involved.

Under the ordinary system of retribution, according to Prejean, “You killed, so we kill you, and the victim’s family gets to watch. And that’s supposed to heal or restore.”

Restorative justice, Prejean says, acknowledges that, “Yes, there has been a wrong done in the community, sometimes a very grievous wrong.” But it aims to bring the community together in a kind of healing circle. And one part of the restorative justice process is that the one who has done the crime gets to tell his or her story, but also meets victims of his or her type of crime. “They face, by an encounter with the victims’ families, just what their act has cost the victim’s family and the community,” she says. “And then steps can be taken to restore them into the community.”

“The way the criminal justice system is set up, it never brings together the offender and the victim,” she says.

Prejean says that part of restoring offenders is looking at their lives and what led to the transgression: factors like drugs, education or a dysfunctional family with abuse.

Then she says those who are going to be released need to learn conflict resolution along with everyday skills such as budget management, how to have a job and how to relate to people so they can learn to be a contributing member of a community. She cites the example of Bridges to Life, a faith-based program in Texas, which uses mentors and counseling to help prisoners and reduce recidivism rates.

Prejean says that in many places prisons have a 70 percent recidivism rate, meaning that seven of 10 former prisoners wind up back in prison. Oregon prisons have a comparatively low recidivism rate, with 29.3 percent of parole or post-prison supervision offenders convicted of a new felony within three years of their release, according to the DOC. But that’s still about three in 10 prisoners committing a felony only a few years after their release.



GRANT-GUERREIRO PHOTOGRAPHY

Part of the issue is community, she says; prisoners come out and don’t have a sense of belonging. “They’re so used to being alone in prison; you don’t let people get close to you in prison.”

Prejean says using a healing circle where former prisoners communicate and talk to others from the community can help with that. The idea of the healing circle in restorative justice, she says, comes from Native American traditions. “The community talks about the hurt done in the community, and the community comes up with steps,” she says.

States with overcrowded prison systems like California are starting to look at alternative sentencing, especially with juveniles, Prejean says. With 2.3 million people in prison in the U.S. – one in every 100 adults – and two-thirds of them there for nonviolent crimes, “our answer to all our problems has been to throw people in prison,” she says. “That’s why it’s in the air that we’ve got to find another way, and restorative justice is one of those ways.”

In addition to Prejean’s lecture, which is free and open to the public, the winners of the Cheyney Ryan Peace and Conflict Studies Essay Contest will be announced. Ryan, a professor of philosophy, has played a major role in the development of peace-related initiatives at UO. “Cheyney has done marvelous work,” Prejean says. “You can’t have peace if you don’t have justice, and it’s always peace through justice.” **EW**

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