
Homily for a Service of Prayer and Light

**A homily by Canon Cathy Zappa
for the Service of Prayer and Light,
in the days prior to the execution of Kelly Gissendaner**

Thank you for being here tonight. Really. Because this is a difficult place to be. I don't mean the Cathedral, of course. I'm talking about the emotional and spiritual space we're all in right now: this period between the delivery of Kelly's death warrant and her scheduled execution, called the "death watch." And we're on death watch with her. With her, we hold out hope for clemency, while, at the same time, we prepare for her death. It's a difficult space to be in.

And that's not all. As we pray for mercy for Kelly, we pray also for her children, who wait and watch with her. And we remember Doug Gissendaner; and pray for his parents and siblings; and pray for the Board of Pardons and Paroles, who are tasked with balancing justice and mercy and with deciding Kelly's fate. It's difficult to hold all this together.

It would be easier, perhaps, if Doug Gissendaner had been a bad apple, but he wasn't. He was anything but; and Kelly herself prays for him and his loved ones every day. It would be easier, perhaps, if we didn't know the person Kelly has become, but we do. And many of us love her dearly.

And then there's all that we bring in here with us tonight: our fear of dying, or losing a loved one. Our different positions on capital punishment. Our personal experiences of crime and violence, as victims or offenders, as police, attorneys, or judges—or as people who worry about crime in general.

Yes, this is a difficult space to be in, and I'm admittedly quite intimidated by the task of trying to say something about it. Which is why I'm so grateful for liturgy and prayer and music—which help us gather all this together, and place it in God's hands.

Ironically, one person who has taught me a lot about how to be in this kind of space is Kelly herself. I met her about five years ago, when I was a teacher and she a student in a prison theology program. She wasn't in my class, so I knew her at first from a distance, and through other inmates. It was obvious that she was excited to learn and grow and be around other people; and that she cared about them, and they about her.

When she was pulled from group classes, we met one on one, and studied the Bible together. And talked a whole lot about God—not just about God in the abstract, but about the real, living God who had shown her mercy and loves her, in spite of all she's done. We talked about sin and forgiveness and reconciliation, and always about her kids. And we cried some, too.

She helped me understand hope in a whole new way: not as naïve optimism that everything will turn out the way we want, but as courage to look darkness in the face and dare light to shine into it—as faith to take seriously the pain she's caused, and the pain she's suffered—and still trust in that God can bring reconciliation out of brokenness, healing out of hurt, life out of death.

Prison staff and inmates will tell you that Kelly's determination to hold onto God has been contagious, and continues to give hope to others. A "scared-straight" program used to bring troubled youth to talk with her through the gate. She didn't need to scare them. She just spoke out of her experience—and reminded them that they matter. Several women entered our rigorous theology program—or stayed in it—because of her encouragement. Over and over, she's drawn on her experience to support others in crisis—calling them, through an airvent!, from the brink of despair and self-destruction, just by

showing them that someone cares, and they're not alone.

Some of these women are here tonight, seeking to give this love and hope back to her, and her children. But most of them can't be here, either because they're still in prison, or on parole or probation. Tiffany is one of them, and she wrote this about Kelly:

"Having spent ten years in prison, I feel like I should qualify to speak for some of those who are left behind, including Kelly. I started my time in 2004. I was 22. As a young prisoner starting out, I was rebellious and said things that were not right. I ended up in lockdown, where you're in the cell by yourself 24-7. This is where Kelly stayed all the time, and I was placed in a row next to her. I remember her telling me to behave.

"I was embarrassed when Kelly realized that I was in the Voices of Hope choir, because I was supposed to be a 'good sister.' This is what you're called when you do the right thing at the prison. But she didn't judge me.

"I spent 68 days in lockdown next to Kelly, and she taught me a lot. When I was falling apart, she was there to lift me up. When I wanted to straight off myself, she was there. For the whole 68 days, when I needed something, she was there.

"And I tried to do the same for her. I would sing to her and other people on the floor. 'His eye is on the sparrow.' Right now," Tiffany concludes, "Kelly is that sparrow."

The Kelly we know today didn't give up on Tiffany, or on any of the women who've been in lockdown with her. Or on her kids. Or on oblivious seminarians like me. Because God never gave up on her. Because God never gives up on any of us. Because no one, and no situation, is beyond God's power of redemption and reconciliation.

There is always cause for hope, because God is good, and loving. Because God is merciful, and just. Because **God is**.

Isn't that really why we're here, in this place? Yes, I love Kelly, and pray that she'll be granted clemency. That's no secret, of course. But because of my relationship with her, I care also about Doug Gissendaner and his parents and siblings, and the Board of Pardons and Paroles, and the prison staff who will enforce their decision, and the 80+ men on death row in Georgia who see their fate bound up with hers.

God, we need you. We need your light in this darkness.

I know that's why I'm here, in this difficult space, praying with you and trying to say something about all of this: because I need God, and I trust God (or at least try to, in times like this). And because I hurt and hope for everyone impacted by this. And because I hope that, with God's help, we can find a way that honors life—both the life of Doug Gissendaner, and the life of Kelly Gissendaner. Because I hope that, with God's help, we can find a way that honors both God's justice and God's mercy.

And so, thank you, again, for being here, too. For standing in this confusing, heartbreaking space, together, with Kelly and all those affected by her crime and sentence. Thank you for helping them bear all this fear and suffering. And thank you for bearing witness to hope and to the extraordinary wideness of God's mercy.