

Thank you for receiving my testimony in support of Senate Bill 306.

My name is Reverend Susan Kidder DeBree. I live in Helena and am a fourth generation Montanan. I raised six children on a ranch northwest of Helena and lost my firstborn daughter through domestic violence related homicide.

I speak today on behalf of my Bishop as a representative of the United Methodist Church. I am the District Superintendent of fifty United Methodist Churches from Livingston to Troy. I also speak as the past president of the Montana Association of Churches.

The Montana Association of Churches includes the American Baptist Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Presbyterian Church, the two Roman Catholic Dioceses, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. Individual members may vary from official church positions, but our unified position opposing the death penalty was worked out through a long process of dialogue and prayer.

I urge you to honor this discussion with respectful dialogue as well. Growing up in Ronan, my stepfather was a dedicated Republican, active behind the scenes as a speechwriter for governors and policy builder for the party. My mom was the Democratic Committee Chairwoman for Lake County. Dad was Lutheran and Mom was Roman Catholic. As you can imagine, we had spirited dinner conversations! But we learned to do that with civility and respect; we still had much in common and could work together for the good of the family.

Seven years ago I cared for my dad through his last days. One of his deepest distresses was the way our political parties have become so antagonistic toward each other and are losing the willingness to work together for the good governance of the people. For the larger good of the people, I urge you to move this bill on through this committee so we can engage in full and respectful discussion on this issue.

Imposition of the death penalty models the use of extreme violence as the way to resolve conflict. The government, which needs to set the standard for civil behavior, is saying through the death penalty that taking a life is an acceptable way to deal with a problem. I believe this stance contributes to a cycle of continued grief and violence.

I believe we each hold within us the capacity for violence, what Carl Sagen called the "Dragons of Eden." We all stand in continual need of redeeming grace. We have our lifetimes to recognize our need, repent and receive forgiveness and reconciliation. Imposition of the death sentence cuts this possibility short and continues the cycle of the use of deadly violence as a means to solve conflict. It simply is state sanctioned revenge.

The question has been raised in this debate about the Biblical teaching of "An eye for an eye." My son-in-law's comment is that then the whole world would be blind...The Old

Testament teaching was a means of limiting the extent of revenge one could legally require.

The Bible is a record of a continual growth of understanding of who God is and of how our relationship to God leads us into self-understanding and guides our relationships to others. It's a living document about an ongoing process of creation, of becoming more fully the human beings God intends for us to become.

The New Testament teachings lead us beyond the equalization of retribution into the love of God given through Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5, Jesus teaches, "Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere?" Then he goes on to some of his hardest teaching, to not hit back. But he lived it through...He didn't hit back. You know the rest of the story. He died side by side with men being executed for capital crimes and he reached out with God's forgiveness toward those who hung him there. He broke through the cycle of violence. Nothing can separate us from that love.

I am absolutely not suggesting we let people convicted of heinous crimes off the hook. I would not support this if life without the possibility of parole were not integral to the bill. My understanding of this sentence is that there in carrying it out, there would not be recurrent requests for parole hearings. Life without the possibility of parole means just that, in a secure facility where people would not pose danger to other inmates or staff. But it does mean life.

We support this bill, and encourage you to support it as well.

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