

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Voice-Our Choice: What is Your Trajectory?

Rev. Dr. John Judson

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Genesis 4:1-16, Mark 1:29-39

I want to begin this morning with one of my quizzes? I will give you two names and we will see if you know who they are. OK, so the first person is Tom Brady. How many of you know who Tom is? Good, as I thought almost all of you know that he is the quarterback of the New England Patriots and will be playing in the Super Bowl later today. And he is famous for? Yes, deflate-gate, the infamous deflating footballs in the first half of the Conference finals against the Packers. My guess is that it would have been virtually impossible not to know about Tom and deflate-gate because people have talked about little else. Here is the second name, Robert Ladd. How many of you know who he is? Ok, a couple of you. So who is Robert Ladd, he is a man with a 67 IQ who sits on death row in Texas waiting to be executed. He was convicted of two horrific murders years apart, one in 1980 and the other in 1996...and there is little doubt about the fact that he committed them. The question that confronts the courts, the State of Texas and I would argue the church and all of us in it, is whether or not it is legal and morally appropriate to execute not only someone with a minimal IQ but anyone at all.

I realize that even by asking that question many of you are having a visceral response. I say that because this is a religiously, politically and emotionally charged issue. In Michigan it is not as much of an issue because the death penalty has been banned. Yet we live in a nation that, if there was an execution Olympics, would finish in fifth place, just out of medal competition. The nations ahead of us are China, Iran, Iraq and North Korea. The question which I believe that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we ought to ask ourselves is, should we to be in this company? My guess is that some of you would say absolutely and others of you would disagree. If the Bible spoke with one voice on this issue it would be easier to come to an agreement, but it does not. It offers us two trajectories. The first is what I call a trajectory of Law...and to be clear law is good. It protects us. It helps to order our lives. So what we see in the Torah is a trajectory of law which contains a list of crimes for which someone should be executed; murder, adultery, striking or cursing one's parents and wearing cotton-polyester (actually the death penalty is prescribed for those who wear clothes of mixed fabrics). The Apostle Paul also makes it clear that governments have the right to use the sword, meaning going to war and execution. In some ways crucifixion was taken for granted in the Roman Empire. So there are portions of the Bible where law rules and takes capital punishment for granted.

The second trajectory is what I call the trajectory of life; a trajectory which implies that the goal of God is life and not death. I would offer both of our stories this morning as clear examples of this trajectory. First we have the story of Cain and Able. They are brothers and each strives to please God. For some reason Able does and Cain does not. Cain, being the

jealous kind, kills his brother and attempts to bury the evidence. God will have none of the hiding and punishes him not by executing him, but by placing him in human solitary confinement as a loner. And as God does so, God insures that his life will be protected...the so-called "mark of Cain." In our second story Jesus is confronted by people who are sick and demon possessed (meaning they are controlled by powers which oppose the rule and reign of God). Jesus, does not simply do a little preaching, he does a great deal of healing. He defeats the powers which would rob people of life; just as he will do on the cross, when he finally defeats the powers of sin and death. These stories, along with many others show us the trajectory of God's work in the world; the saving and restoration of life. It reminds us that God wants to restore creation to its original purpose which is to be a place of wholeness and well-being for everyone.

As with many difficult ethical issues, the correct answer is not always clear. That being the case it is easy for us to let the issue pass...to focus on deflate-gate and pay no attention to the struggle over the death penalty. Yet if we as Christians are to be the conscience of the nation; if we are those who are supposed to let our beliefs impact the world around us, I don't think we ought to simply let it continue without speaking out about it. This morning I will not tell what you ought to do...remember that this sermon series is, The Voice-Your Choice. What I will tell you is where I stand...and that is on the side of God's trajectory of life. I believe that God is calling us to reject death whenever and wherever possible so that life and new life has a chance.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, what trajectory will I choose, when it comes to the lives of those who have taken life? Will it be to take theirs, or will it be give life one more chance.