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Introduction of Sister Helen Préjean

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Introduction of Sister Helen Préjean
Jonathan D. Green
Founder's Day Convocation
8 February 2012

It is my great privilege to introduce our Founders' Day Convocation speaker, Sister Helen Préjean, award winning author and advocate for the abolition of the death penalty.

At our opening convocation last August, I referred to Socrates's question, "Ti esti dikaiosune?" or "What is justice?" and this was just the sort of inquiry our founders must have intended when they described our then fledgling university as "an Institution of Learning which shall shed brightness on all the land around and send down floods of light and blessedness upon generations yet to come."

What is justice? We live in a nation that proclaims itself a model of democracy and a beacon of hope, and yet we imprison a larger percentage of our population than any other nation in the world¹ and we rank fifth for the most executions². We have established a system that institutionalizes disenfranchisement with a bias toward the poor and the underrepresented. What is justice?

Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere³." When can a people decide that it is right to take the life of an individual? The Torah states "ayin tachat ayin," "an eye for an eye," a number of times. This lex talionis or law of the talon was meant to assure that punishments did not exceed the crimes committed, but as Gandhi quipped, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Who shall speak for the disenfranchised? When our founders invoked us to "send down floods of light and blessedness upon generations yet to come," they were calling us to action, to unleash knowledge and wisdom for the common good. As the scripture says, "From those to whom much is given, much shall be expected in return."⁴

Sister Helen Préjean has become such a voice. She has sent down floods of light on the best and worst of our humanity, and, through her inspirational writings, she has helped us to better ask ourselves, "What is justice, and for whom should we speak?" And she has modeled a life faith in action. As the Gospel of Matthew says, "[They will ask] When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply,

¹ http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/cr_i_pri_per_cap-crime-prisoners-per-capita, 9:40 p.m., 7 February 2012.

² "Death Penalty Facts." Amnesty International, October 2011.

³ Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963)

⁴ Luke, 12:48

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”⁵”

Please join me in welcoming Sister Helen.

⁵ Matthew, 25:44-45 (NIV)