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Author and Activist Calls for Fire and Passion

February 9, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — “It’s all about catching on fire,” said activist and author Sister Helen Prejean during her address at Illinois Wesleyan University Founders’ Day Convocation on Wednesday. “Our life is flow, our life is a river. Different currents fit it – we’re going to the sea. Life is about fire, the passion.”

In 1982, when Prejean began visiting convicted murderer Patrick Sonnier in prison, she started to discover the fire within her for social justice. However, she noted, it took awhile for this awakening to occur.



Sister Helen Prejean

The daughter of a successful lawyer, Prejean said she grew up in privilege, although she was not keenly aware of it at the time. It wasn’t until she immersed herself with the poor of New Orleans and moved into the St. Thomas housing projects that she was awakened to the need for social justice in her own city. She learned that there were more complaints to the justice department about police brutality in New Orleans than any other city. “I was living out in the lakefront by the suburbs and it could have been going on in India. I didn’t know anyone had been beaten by the police,” said Prejean, who recalls how her firsthand experiences in the housing projects ignited a fire in her heart.

It was this awareness of injustice, as well as an inside look at the death penalty in New Orleans that caused Prejean to take a stand. “You can’t see the suffering, the system in place that’s killing people and say, ‘Well, I’m neutral.’ Catching on fire for justice means somehow we have an experience where we see the suffering,” she said.

Prejean’s journey began with letters to Sonnier while he was in prison. He never asked her to visit, but was simply grateful that someone had found him. Then, as Prejean meditated on the scripture of Matthew 25, she was stopped by the verse, “I was in prison and you came to me.” Convinced that a visit wouldn’t change her ministry at an adult learning program at the time, Prejean wrote Sonnier a note that she would visit sometime.

The first time Prejean met the convicted murderer, she was nervous. “Could we have a normal conversation? Would he look mean?” she wondered. “I had never met a murderer before.” When the guards brought him in, she looked into his face through the mesh screen between them and was dumbfounded by his humanness. From that moment, Prejean had an insight that stays with her still today. “We are all worth more than the worst thing we’ve ever done in our life,” Prejean said.

For the next two and half years, Prejean remained Sonnier’s spiritual advisor and spent the last hours of his life with him, praying and talking as they always had. Despite her great strength, however, Prejean recalls being “scared out of my mind. This was over the top, an experience I never had before.” She noted the strange protocol of death in this situation – Sonnier was not in a hospital bed, fading away; rather, he was fully alive. Sonnier insisted Prejean not accompany him to the electric chair, for fear that the experience would scar her, but she was committed to the fire that sparked years ago. “You will not die without seeing a human face,” she told him. “I will be the face of Christ for you and you will look at me when you do this.”

Following the execution, Prejean was unaware of what would come next. “I didn’t know what was going to be unleashed in me after all of this,” she said. Although Prejean will always be outraged at Sonnier’s crime, the death of two innocent teenagers, she also saw the injustice from within, the state protocol of taking a life for another life. “There standing outside those prison gates at night is what leads me to you today – the fire that began to burn in my heart,” she said.

From her heart, the closing remarks were addressed to the students in the audience. “What a tremendous opportunity you’ve been given to develop your gifts, who you are, to think critically and find your passion. My prayer for you is that your little boat will hit the current that will take you for something noble and worthy. Something that will be worth giving your life.”

A catalyst for national dialogue on the death penalty, Prejean is the author of two novels, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* and *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*. She is currently working on a third book, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*. Prejean’s first book is the inspiration for the 1995 film *Dead Man Walking*, starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn.

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