

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

January 11, 2012

NO FORGIVENESS, NO MERCY  
DO NOT BRING CHRIST INTO  
THE 21ST CENTURY

When Haley Barbour granted over 200 pardons in Mississippi right before he left the governor's office, it created an outcry. A judge granted an injunction to prevent 20 or so of those prisoners from being released based on a technicality. This controversy has made national news with victims and their families decrying the pardon of murderers.

Mississippi is part of the Bible Belt, the area of our country that has a large number of Christians, many of whom vote for the "family values" candidate in national elections. I have been studying the Bible and the message I get from it is one of forgiveness and mercy when we accept Christ as our Savior. Now I know I'm reading the same Bible as those folks in Mississippi yet I come away with an entirely different perspective:

"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, sayeth the Lord." (Romans 12:19)

This does not mean that we should seek retribution against those who have wronged us, it means that we should leave it to the Lord to punish them. Yet those Bible-toting politicians in Mississippi who have stepped up to block the pardons are the same people "Christians" voted into office. Since when is vengeance a family value? The hypocrisy is appalling.

But Mississippi does not have a monopoly on vengeance. When it comes to pardons, Wisconsin is worse. Before Tommy Thompson became governor in 1984, there was a long tradition of granting pardons to prisoners. Throughout the 1970s many prisoners serving life sentences received pardons while in prison. Those pardons consisted of commutation of sentence from life to 50 years which permitted the prisoner to become immediately eligible for release on parole (parole eligibility for a life sentence was 11 years, 3 months). The prisoner was then permitted to transfer to a work release camp and earn release on parole. In one case, then-governor Pat Lucey granted a full pardon to a prisoner who had served 5 years on a life sentence.

In the 1980s, Tommy Thompson created new restrictions on granting of pardons. Prisoners could no longer ask for pardons. The best they could do was petition the pardon council for permission to ask for a pardon - something to my knowledge has never been granted to anyone in prison. Also, pardon applicants had to be out of prison for 5 years before they could ask for a pardon. These restrictions remain in effect and it has become the norm not to grant clemency to anyone - regardless of the circumstances.

What used to be an act of mercy, a demonstration of compassion and forgiveness, is now taboo. Victim's advocates and the news media are quick to attack anyone who even suggests releasing prisoners on parole let alone pardoning them. It's a shame that we live in a society that places more emphasis on vengeance than forgiveness.

As individuals, our citizens are not vengeful people. Speak to the average person about a criminal who has repented and changed his ways, he or she will agree that a specific reformed prisoner deserves a second chance. Even George Bush declared in a speech that we are a nation of second chances. But speak in the abstract about granting pardons or early release for prisoners and that same person will start foaming at the mouth.

We still live in a democracy and we still have a free market economy, but we no longer live in a free country. We have become a police state where the few fall victim to the tyranny of the many. Had I not spent the last 27 years in prison I'd probably be out there beating the drum of vengeance along with everybody else. It is not until you or a loved one falls victim to our judicial system that you can appreciate the terror powerless citizens feel toward the police state which has enslaved them.

It is easy to condemn Syria or Russia for their human rights abuses. It's an entirely different matter to look in the mirror and acknowledge our own oppression.

I applaud Haley Barbour for his courage and hope that the firestorm of criticism he is receiving will not deter other governors from showing mercy to those most in need.