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The Lutheran,
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Study guide:

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#Kellyonmymind

College professor accompanies death row inmate

By Robert C. Blezard

What is just punishment for a crime? Is it different for someone who has no remorse and is unrepentant than for someone whose life evidences deep sorrow and a dramatic move toward compassion and rehabilitation? The story of Kelly Gissendaner challenges our culture's assumptions about criminals and asks us to think about what would be a Christian response to crime and punishment.

Exercise 1: Miracles

- Do you believe in miracles? What happens in a miracle? What miracles have you experienced?
- What were some "miraculous" aspects of Kelly Gissendaner's story? In the working of her miracles, what role did God's power play, and what role did the actions of God's faithful people on earth?
- How would you relate Gissendaner's story to the phrase "God's work. Our hands."?

Exercise 2: Confession and forgiveness

- The rite of confession in the 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship (page 56 and elsewhere) quotes 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Why is (or isn't) confession necessary for God's forgiveness?
- The prayers of confession in the LBW (page 56) and Evangelical Lutheran Worship (page 95) don't merely acknowledge sinfulness but also express a desire for repentance—turning from sin to lead a new and transformed life with the help of God. Why is desire for a repentant life integral to confession?
- Are all sinners deserving of God's forgiveness? Why or why not?
- Does God forgive our sins because we deserve it?
- Do people who are convicted of horrible crimes deserve God's forgiveness just because they confess?
- Did Gissendaner deserve God's forgiveness?
- Why does God forgive our sins even though we don't deserve it?



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Exercise 3: Repentance

The final section of the prayer of confession in LBW (page 56) reads: "Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name." Another prayer of confession in ELW (page 95) reads: "Turn us again to you, and uphold us by your Spirit, so that we may live and serve you in newness of life, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord."

- Describe what true repentance is.
- In what ways do these prayers express a desire for true repentance?
- Does transformation always follow repentance?
- What would be some indications that a sinful life has been transformed?
- What signs are evident in the story of Gissendaner?
- How have you seen that in your life or those of people close to you?

Exercise 4: Joy in heaven

Sandwiched between the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus teaches: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). Note that the parables come in response to grumbling that Jesus hangs out with sinners. Read the whole passage (Luke 15:1-10) and discuss:

- Who complains about the company Jesus keeps, and why?
- In his response, what is Jesus implying about his critics?
- What does the passage reveal about God's favor and mercy?
- What does it say about God's desires for human beings?
- How does verse 7 relate to Gissendaner's story? How does it relate to you?

Exercise 5: Work together

Paul tells us in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Look over the story of Gissendaner and plot out the things that had to "work together" in order for her to be spared the death penalty. Discuss:

- For what Godly purposes is Gissendaner's life and work focused?
- How is she providing valuable service to others in the criminal justice system?
- How does her life present a compelling witness to love of God and salvation and redemption through Christ?
- Could she be as strong a witness if she had been executed?



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Exercise 6: Jailhouse conversion

The phrase “jailhouse conversion” is sometimes invoked to describe a passionate coming to faith by someone who is behind bars and usually is meant to imply insincerity—a pretence of faith for show or convenience. But should we be so quick to judge? When have you experienced God’s love and mercy more clearly, in times of happiness or trouble? When have you been more eager to turn to God for guidance and support, in times of joy or sorrow?

Read Luke 7:37-47 and discuss: How and why was the woman’s response to Jesus “over the top,” shocking and scandalous? Why did it alarm the host? What is Jesus’ explanation? Does Jesus doubt the sincerity of the woman’s faith? Do you?

Repeatedly in the Gospels, polite religious people object to those who follow Jesus eagerly and passionately. Compare Matthew 9:10-11, Mark 2:15-16, Luke 7:39 and Luke 15:1-2. What do you think motivated Jesus’ critics? Suspicion? Disgust? Envy? A belief that only people like them are worthy of God’s love? Why don’t they rejoice that a sinner is “getting religion”? Would they accuse those sinners of being jailhouse converts? Why do we sometimes doubt those who come to Christ in dire circumstances, such as incarceration?

Jesus makes his motivation clear in Matthew 9:12-13. What does this say about his “righteous” critics? What does it say about Jesus’ sinful followers? What does it say about God’s intentions and preferences? In this passage, who is merciful and who is not?

Exercise 7: Bearing fruit

Jesus tells us repeatedly in John 15:1-8 that God expects lives of righteous people to bear spiritual fruit. Paul explains the term this way: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). What would a fruitful life look like? What would be indications? Would a fruitful life be a transformed life?

As a study group, explore Gissendaner’s February 2015 clemency appeal (<http://pap.georgia.gov/sites/pap.georgia.gov/files/PressReleases/Gissendaner%20Application.pdf>) and highlight the spiritual fruit her life bears. What spiritual fruit does your life bear?

Exercise 8: A chance to live

Through the work of Jennifer McBride and many others, Gissendaner has been spared the death penalty, at least for a time, since the sentence could be carried out at any moment. (However, she is not spared punishment for her crime, since she is still in prison for a lifetime.) Looking at the story of her life and her clemency application (above), do you think she deserves to live out her days? Why or why not?



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As a study group exercise, divide into two and ask half the class to argue the case for putting Gissendaner to death and the other to argue the case for her to serve a life sentence instead. Both sides should use Scripture to inform their argument. What would Jesus do?

Exercise 9: A life corrected?

Like many state prison administrations, Georgia's is called the "Department of Corrections." What is the "corrective" purpose of the criminal justice system? Who is the object of "correction" and what does that mean? Has a person been "corrected" who shows genuine remorse for crime and whose life shows evidence of transformation from evil to good? If not, what would be the marks of correction?

In his opinion piece, "Let Kelly Gissendaner Live," *Christianity Today* editor Mark Galli wrote: "By God's grace, Kelly Gissendaner's life has been 'corrected,' as much as one can do that in this life. By his further grace, may someone, somewhere, find a way for her to live and to continue her extraordinary work in prison" (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march-web-only/let-kelly-gissendaner-live.html.) Do you agree with Galli? Why or why not? Would Gissendaner's death serve more of God's purpose and have more meaning than her continued life and witness?

Exercise 10: Join the effort

Jennifer McBride and others who support Gissendaner invite others to go to www.kellyonmymind.com to learn more about how to join them. What can you do? Will you? What can your congregation do? Will it?

Exercise 11: For action

Many Christians are outraged by our country's system of mass incarceration as a response to crime. With 719 people incarcerated per 100,000 population, the U.S. leads the world in prisoners. By comparison, the rate per 100,000 population is 484 for Russia, 289 for South Africa, 243 for Colombia, 223 for Israel, 149 for Spain, 148 for England, 130 for Australia, 114 for Canada, 101 for France, 80 for Germany, 67 for Sweden, 54 for Japan and 30 for India. Here are some ways to respond:

- Explore the ELCA's social statement, "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries" (www.elca.org/socialstatements). The ELCA has a study guide that can help.
- Invite a prison chaplain in your area to speak to your congregation or group about ministry to inmates. Ask the chaplain to help your congregation understand the myths and realities of prison, and why Christians should be involved. Look for ways that your congregation can support or assist prison ministries.



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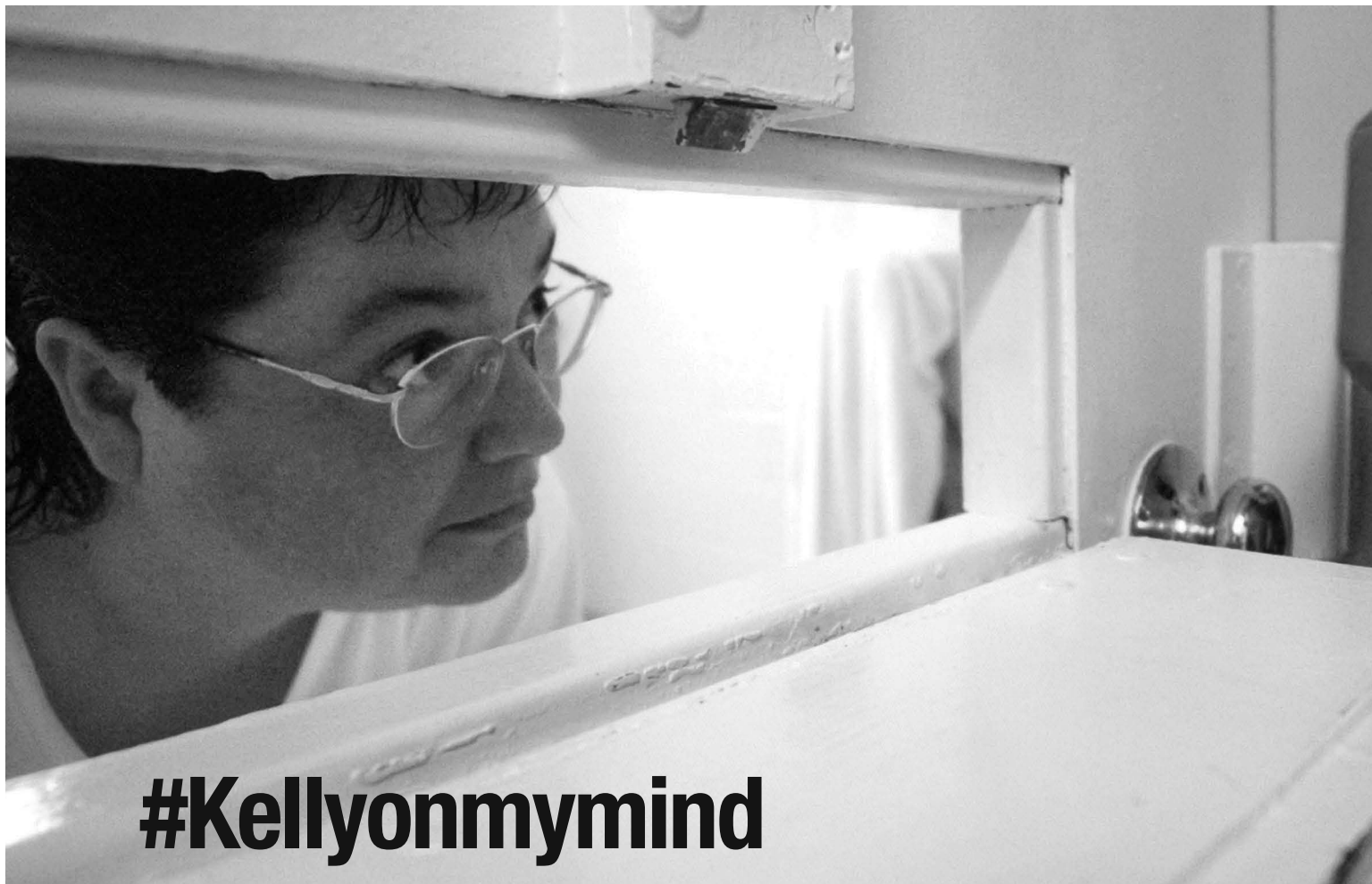
- Connect with ministries that are working to help “returning citizens”—those who are released from prison. Ask representatives to meet with your congregation or group to explain their work. Look for ways that you can support this work.
- Many ministries support the families, and especially the children, of incarcerated men and women. Invite representatives to talk with your group or congregation about their work. How can you and your congregation help?

Exercise 12: A four-pronged approach

To encourage God’s people to get involved in helping reform the criminal justice system, the ELCA social statement “The Church and Criminal Justice” recommends four actions.

- **Hear the cries:** Listen to the stories of all who are involved in the criminal justice system—the victims, the offenders, the spouses and children, the communities, the officers, the legal experts—to understand deeply what is really happening.
- **Hospitality:** While maintaining safe boundaries for vulnerable populations, provide support or a welcome to former offenders or their families.
- **Accompaniment:** “The ELCA understands accompaniment as walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality,” the statement says (page 29). Congregations can find ways to serve and express solidarity for victims of crime and their families, as well as offenders serving sentences or released.
- **Advocacy:** As Christians we not only work to assist people who are hurting but also to address the legal and civil structures that affect them. Through advocacy we can help educate God’s people and raise our voices to reform the criminal justice system to work more effectively to protect the public while minimizing harm to offenders’ families and maximizing the chances that an offender will successfully reintegrate into his community.

Study the social statement and discuss: Why should we get involved? What’s at stake? What can we do as individuals? As congregations? As synods? As a denomination?



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College professor accompanies death row inmate

By Jennifer M. McBride

Editor's note: At presstime, Kelly Gissendaner's fate was still undetermined. In 1998 she received the death penalty for persuading her boyfriend to murder her husband. If executed, Gissendaner would become the first woman in 70 years to be put to death in Georgia. The boyfriend, Gregory Owen, will be eligible for parole in eight years due to a plea bargain. In 2010, Jennifer McBride, now a professor at ELCA-affiliated Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, was one of Gissendaner's teachers in an Atlanta prison theological program. McBride became an advocate and leading activist to grant Gissendaner clemency and commute her sentence to life in prison.

Lutherans have the tagline “God’s work. Our hands.” to propel Christians into action. The phrase holds together a paradox and a tension. The work is God’s—God’s initiative, God’s dynamic movement, God’s power. Yet it demands human participation. Too often we view our participation as mere invitation instead of divine command, and so we’re tempted toward passivity and pessimism about our capacity to make real change.

Addressing the tension between divine and human action, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison “that being Christian” demands two things: “prayer and the doing of justice.” In an essay in which he reflects on a decade of resistance to the Nazi regime, he wrote: “I believe that God is no timeless fate, but that he waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible action.”

This tension consumed me in

Kelly Gissendaner, the only woman on Georgia’s death row, peers through the slot in her cell door as a guard brings her a cup of ice. Gissendaner has in recent years undergone what writer Jennifer M. McBride calls a “significant transformation,” partly due to her involvement in an academic theology program.

the final weeks of winter earlier this year. I knew the call from Kelly Gissendaner’s lawyers would come sometime in February telling me that their client received her death warrant. That call would include the precise date of the execution, which was set for two weeks later, Feb. 25.

My friendship with Gissendaner, the only woman on Georgia’s death row, began when she was a student in an academic theology program in the prison, sponsored by four Atlanta area seminaries. By the time I met her, she had already undergone a significant transformation, as expressed best in her clemency confession:

"It is impossible to put into words the overwhelming sorrow and remorse I feel for my involvement in the murder of my husband, Douglas Gissendan. There is just no way to capture the depth of my sorrow and regret. I would change everything if I could. I will never understand how I let myself fall into such evil, but I have learned firsthand that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God's grace and mercy."

The fruit of Gissendan's transformation is seen through reconciliation with her children, ministry to despairing inmates whom no one else can reach, counsel to troubled youth and daily encouragement to others.

Through the theology program, she continued to cultivate fruit. She discovered her authentic theological voice, began a pen pal friendship with German Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann, and gained a sense of hope and purpose she hadn't previously known.

In her 2011 graduation speech, Gissendan said: "From the start of the theology class I felt this hunger. I became so hungry for theology and what all the classes had to offer."

Six months into the program, a new administration prohibited her from attending class. She recounted this about her theology education:

"Since I couldn't go to theology class ... the instructors came to me. ... That gate was meant to keep everyone and everything separated from me. But that gate couldn't keep out the knowledge that I was so hungry for, nor friendship and community. And it sure couldn't keep out God. ... Hope is still alive despite a gate or guillotine hovering over my head. ... I have the capacity and unstoppable desire to accomplish something positive and to have a lasting impact.

'I have learned firsthand that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God's grace and mercy.'

"Even prison cannot erase my hope and conviction that the future is not settled for me or anyone. I have placed my hope in the God I now know. I rely on the steadfast and never-ending love of God."

Execution day

I was with Gissendan on the scheduled execution day when the news came that her clemency was denied. It's the closest I've come to the powers of evil and death, and I wasn't sure I could find my way out of the despair.

But earlier that morning, the execution scheduled for that night had been postponed for five days because of the possibility of snow. With this gift of time, a new resolve welled up within me, a determination that Gissendan's execution would not happen in silence, behind closed doors, without the world watching.

I didn't necessarily think her life could be saved, except by her lawyers who were working around the clock. But I did think her story could be told. We could raise her voice, demanding that her life be witnessed and that this execution be condemned.

Without much of a plan, I reached out to a colleague at *The New York Times*, simply wondering if the theology certificate and story of Moltmann's friendship might be of interest for his weekly religion piece.

As I did so, I noticed Facebook and cellphone messages from a few close friends. A group of about

15, all of whom were connected in various ways to the prison theology program, were already gathering to plan the next steps—faculty, theology instructors, pastors and priests, doctoral students and seminarians, and a former inmate who credits Gissendan with her own transformation.

That night in the living room of a dear friend, the #kellyonmymind campaign was born.

In that living room we met every night to devise a course of action. Within a day or two, *The New York Times* piece was out, getting picked up by other media outlets from CNN and the *Washington Post* to Fox News and the Christian Broadcasting Network. Kelly's story was impacting Christians across the political divide, pushing the logic of Christian faith to its outermost limits, pressing us to re-examine and reaffirm the truths we proclaim about repentance, forgiveness, redemption and hope.

In five short days leading up to the scheduled execution, we launched a major social media campaign reaching more than 4 million people, wrote for *Huffington Post* and CNN.com, gathered letters from religion scholars around the world who advocated for their fellow theologian, started petitions and delivered more than 80,000 signatures to the governor's office.

We mapped out talking points, made phone calls, published news releases, held a news conference at the Georgia Capitol, produced short documentaries, hosted a prayer vigil and sparked others in seminaries across the country, and responded to numerous local and national interview requests.

The movement happened so quickly we could barely keep up.

Gissendaner and McBride, a professor at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, who taught Gissendaner through an Atlanta prison theological program and helped connect her to German Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann.



AMNE BORDEN EMORY PHOTO VIDEO

Casting aside our day jobs as much as we could, we threw ourselves into the work, every concrete act arousing passion for the possible and throwing open the future. This was our participation in God's redemptive movement, already revealing itself in threats of snow. This was, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., our "fanatic resistance" to evil and death.

Telling Kelly's story

We told Gissendaner's story everywhere and every way we could.

"As long as Kelly has breath,

hope is still alive," one documentary proclaimed. "So we must act while there is still time. Tell [Georgia Gov. Nathan] Deal he *does* have the power to halt this execution. Tell Georgia's Board of Pardons and Parole that there is *still time* to reverse their decision."

The execution was rescheduled for March 2 at 7 p.m., but as often happens there were several delays as we waited for the Supreme Court to rule on appeals to the higher courts. Hours later, those last-minute appeals were denied. More hours passed and finally we heard that

there might be a complication with the lethal injection.

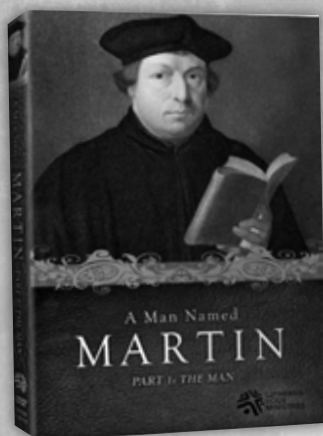
Information was spotty, until finally, close to 11 p.m., the Department of Corrections issued a last-minute postponement due to an unidentified problem with the compounded drug. It appeared to be "cloudy." All planned executions in Georgia were temporarily postponed and would resume once the analysis of the drugs was complete.

Months later, as we await another death warrant, someone close to Gissendaner's case told me: "The more I've thought about it, the more convinced I've become that Kelly's life was saved that night because of the work you all did to make sure the world was watching. The Department of Corrections didn't have to stop that execution on account of the drugs."

On Good Friday, I walked across the prison compound with one of the women in the theology program, who told me that the delay of Gissendaner's execution reawakened her faith and gave her back her strength. "It had been so long since I had seen God move," she told me.

Still reeling from the experience just a few weeks before, I asked—more for me than for her—"What if the worst still happens? How will that affect your faith?"

She responded: "I've thought about that a lot. All I can say is that I needed to know that God is still moving. Now I know." □



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Author bio:

McBride, Board of Regents Chair in Ethics and assistant professor of religion at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, encourages those who want to work on Kelly Gissendaner's behalf to go to www.kellyonmymind.com to find out how to participate.