

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)  
St. Joseph's Neier April 5-6, 2014  
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Central Idea: The Lord of Resurrection and Life helps us make sense out of senseless death.

*"I am the resurrection and the life;  
whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,  
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

"I'll get out of here one of these days. In a box."

If your idea of the American Justice System is: just lock them up and throw away the key. Consider the story of Jack Hall.

Jack Hall was a murderer. I say "was" because he is no longer alive. He was convicted and sentence to life in prison, where he eventually died. There is no doubt that Jack killed a man, he freely admitted it. There is no conflicting DNA evidence. There are no confused witnesses. There are no guiltier accomplices. Jack did it. Jack did it alone. Jack admitted it. End of story. He spent that last 20 or so years of his life in the Iowa State Prison and was given the new name of inmate #801309.

Jack always said he would get out of jail one of these days. In a box. He did.

The state locked him up and threw away the key. Plain and simple.

But as you all have known about me and my homilies, nothing is that plain, nothing is that simple.

A little background is in order. Born George William, PFC "Jack" Hall served four years in the military during WWII, was a POW, and ultimately found his way back home. Unable to shake what he saw and did in war, the feeling to kill anyone who crossed him remained. So, when his youngest son hung himself after battling drug addiction since the age of fourteen, the chance for revenge was too much to ignore. Hall came across the dealer that hooked his son bragging about his occupational success and took it upon himself to ensure no one else's children suffered the same fate as his. It earned him a life sentence at the age of sixty—in total 21 years behind bars.

But the last 12 are what I would like to talk about today. Jack suffered a heart attack and was in the prison infirmary for the last years of his life. America has a problem, a problem that really no one cares about. Our prison population is aging. Simply letting

them out would be a bad answer. Many of them would end up like the character Brooks in the Shawshank Redemption, unable to handle life out on their own. So what to do?

Many prisons have adopted a prison hospice program. In the Iowa State Penitentiary in Ft. Madison, Iowa (I once dated a girl from there, she wasn't an inmate) two of the cell block's infirmary have been converted to a hospice. (For all of you who are worried about your tax dollars, it was privately funded and was built by inmates.) But, and this is the key part, it is staffed by fellow inmates. As Jack Hall began his slow descent into eternity, he was aided by Herky (life sentence for murder), Glover (life sentence for murder) and Love (life sentence for kidnapping). The idea is a simple one, a person may have a life sentence for their crime, but they do not have to die alone.

All of this was documented in a film that was nominated for an Oscar which you can watch this weekend on HBO. It is a story of compassion and what it really means to be rehabilitated.

As I thought about the story of Jack Hall, I reflected on the fact that all of us are, in fact, terminal inmates. We all desire love, we all desire connection, we all desire life. The Scriptures today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, are all about life and death and the fact that Jesus calls us to something beyond. Jack Hall's life may have ended when the judge in his case banged his gavel, (lock him up and throw away the key) but a forward thinking program and other people's humanity saw a different story.

As we enter into the final stages of our Lenten observance, may we find that connection, may we find that compassion, may we find that, indeed, Our Lord is the resurrection and the life. May we discover that no matter how far gone we may think we are, no matter how desperate our situations, no matter how hopeless our imprisonments, we may always find deep within our hearts, an expectation of life and love.

The amazing thing about the story of Jack Hall is that he, like many in his generation, was a hardened segregationist, steadfastly against the civil rights movement. As he entered into the last days of his life, his caregivers, his friends really, the men who would be there as he passed from this mortal coil to the beyond, were all African-American.

It is funny how life does that to you sometimes.

No matter how locked the door, no matter how far the keys seems to have been thrown, we have a Lord who always seems to find a way inside.