

Human Rights – Conversations Across Generations

Episode: Sister Helen Prejean

Original Release: November 2025

Transcript of audio conversation

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:04

Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights, Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:16

And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:27

Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:29

For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35

And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43

We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:50

So, pull up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:03

Today, we are honored to welcome Sister Helen Prejean, one of the most influential moral voices of our time and a global leader in the movement to abolish the death penalty. For over 35 years, she has accompanied people on death row, counseled families of victims, and confronted the realities of state killing with courage, compassion, and moral clarity. In 2002, my dad and I were lucky to meet Sister Helen in Galway, Ireland at Bill Schabas' house where she taught us about her work in the anti-death penalty movement. And, 23 years later, we get to reunite and have one of the most powerful and dynamic conversations on our podcast. Sister Helen is the author of the acclaimed memoir, *Dead Man Walking*, which became an

Academy Award-winning film starring the Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Dead Man Walking has become an internationally performed opera and a stage play that continues to reach audiences around the world. Sister Helen's writing and advocacy have helped reshape public consciousness, legislative debates, and the national global discourse on human dignity. She holds more than 65 honorary degrees from universities across the United States and remains one of the most trusted voices of justice and human rights. She joins us today to celebrate the release of Dead Man Walking, the new graphic edition. It a powerful adaptation bringing her story to a new generation. We are so grateful to have her here today with us.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:52

Sister Helen, I thought we could start off with actually a celebratory note because I saw today that your dear friend, Calvin Duncan,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 2:59

Yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 3:00

won his election.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 3:01

Yes. And you know what? He won just democracy at work with volunteers, people getting out there for him. And he had an opponent that played dirty and called him a murderer and said that he was a murderer. I mean, which was false, you know, and the whole thing. And it worked against him. And Calvin won by a whopping 68%.

BERT LOCKWOOD 3:24

Oh, my gosh.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 3:25

Then this other guy is clerk of court. They found court records in the landfill. I mean, and, you know, people trying to get their court records is so important, as Calvin discovered becoming a jailhouse lawyer, as he knew. So that's a great victory.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 3:41

A great victory. And for our listeners, Calvin Duncan is now the newly elected clerk of criminal court in new Orleans. And as sister said, he won a whopping 68% of the vote. and sister, could you share with our listeners how you first met Calvin at Angola prison in Louisiana?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 4:00

I'm sure. I mean, cause I'm a bit vague on that part. Um, but it was when I was going to Angola and I would have some of the, jailhouse lawyers or maybe in the library or whatever. I mean, that guy's book really helps you understand how you gain agency in your life when you have none. I mean, he tells these gripping stories of being in the Orleans Parish jail and his mattress was on the floor cause all the bullies, the ones with strength claimed all the beds. Uh, the jail is

the most dangerous place to be in the prison system. You have no protections at all. And the first thing that he did was he noticed some of the older guys coming back for a new hearing. They had to come back to the jail and that they didn't have any teeth and they couldn't get teeth. And so he got copy of the criminal code of procedures, how you file a motion. And that was the very first thing he started doing for other people was helping them get their teeth. And they moved on from there. It's such a great story. And he's such a good guy, such a wonderful guy. So we helped him launch his book at Dillard University a couple of months ago. And now here he is, clerk of court.

BERT LOCKWOOD 5:23

Fantastic.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:24

I mean, that, that truly is, you know, the power of democracy.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 5:27

was... It

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:28

You know,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 5:28

is.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:28

he was wrongfully committed.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 5:28

...committed

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:30

30 years in jail for something he did not do. A I read that he went to Angola prison with an eighth grade education. And he dedicated himself to understanding and learning the law so that he could fix his own situation. And also he inspired and helped other inmates when they had constitutional issues from their own cases. And now he is going to be the criminal clerk to make sure that what happened to him doesn't happen to other people.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 5:58

No, that's right. No, very exciting. It's called Jailhouse Lawyer. Calvin Duncan. People should get the book because it's really a great book.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:08

Well, I'll make sure to link that in our show notes for our listeners, um,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 6:11

Great.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:12

which I have so many show notes for them because Sister, I don't even wear it to begin because you have the most incredible legacy in life work, helping others through dignity and spiritual guidance.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 6:23

Yeah, but look, we want to get to the issues. We want to get is the death penalty one of the significant human rights issues of our day? And what I have discovered now... So I've been at this 35 years with the book of Dead Man Walking. Then we had the movie. Then we had the opera. Then we had a play. And now we have the graphic. I mean, it's been in every iteration. The only thing we don't have is the ballet, Dead Man Kicking. I mean, it's been in every iteration. And the graphic is for the young people. So we just launched it at Fordham. We launched it at Loyolian. But it's like people, it's a secret ritual done behind prison walls with just a few witnesses. And they keep the curtain drawn all while they're putting in the needles or all while they're getting the gas ready. And when they open the curtain, the person's already strapped down. The needles are in. They always seek two sites, lest there's a glitch for lethal injection. And what do you see? It looks like somebody's just going to sleep. And most of the people don't see it. So they don't have a chance to reflect on it. And that's been my big mission. I was a witness. And from a regular nun's life, then I feel like I fell down a laundry chute or something, ended up on death row. But I witnessed what it means for an alive human being to count down his last Monday, his last Tuesday, his last Wednesday, and then be taken and strapped down and killed. And people don't see it. There have been two court cases to try to make executions public. And they've both been turned down and refused. So I'm the witness. So that's why I got to stay out there. And you know what my hope is? I found that through storytelling and bringing people through my own process of learning because I started out not knowing anything. When Tim Robbins was working on the screenplay of the film "A Dead Man Walking", his little quip was, "The nun is in over her head," which I was, because I knew nothing.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 8:41

Yeah

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 8:41

I heard it. And you know, maybe that was a gift when I wrote the book "A Dead Man Walking", 'cause people are going, it's not like I came off as an expert, giving a lot of statistics. And they go, "Well, the nun didn't know what she's doing either, let's see what happens to her." And I was part of the lure, I think, for people to read the book. And it's the whole approach that I take when I go to speak to an audience and I just say, "Let me tell you what happened to me. Let me tell you what I learned and I'm still learning." And then to look at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I mean, that's the road we all have. Whether or not people go to church, I have faith. we can all stand in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And that

principal part of that in Article Three is simply by being a human person, we have an inalienable, inalienable right to life, which means governments don't give that human right to people for good behavior, and they can't take it away for bad behavior. And that's what took the Catholic Church 1500 years from the fifth century, where you had Saint Augustine for the first time saying the violent could be coerced with the sword. of introducing violence, because in the nonviolent gospel of Jesus, that there was never to use violence. But the Huns and Visigoths and Anglo-Saxons were banging down the gates of Rome, and there was chaos, and they had no prisons, and so they introduced then the right of a government To kill violent offenders. It was always to protect the public. It was always for defense. It was never this tit for tat thing. There are some crimes by their very nature deserve a death penalty as the only just thing to do, which the Supreme Court said in Gregg. So you want to respond to what I said so far, because I got a lot more.

BERT LOCKWOOD 10:44

of the things is particularly powerful is that you

recognize that the victims' families, which our legal system does not really attend to, you're reaching out to them or

I mean, initially, it was sort of a confrontation. that you

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 11:06

Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 11:06

had, but I thought that was very powerful part of your story.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 11:11

Yeah, because originally, Bert, I made a mistake. I stayed away from them because I

I thought they were so angry, I would be the last person in the world of the people who really wanted to see the spiritual bias to the man who killed that child, right? But I was wrong, and Lloyd LeBlanc, the father of David, who was killed, a 17-year-old boy, was really the one

he approached me. It was very public at a pardon board hearing last

before Pat Sonnier was executed, and he walked right up to He said, "Sister, where you been? Where you been all this time? I'm a good Catholic all this time. I've had nobody to stand with me or to help me. Everybody's for the death penalty. Where have you been?" And I had to just say, Mr. LeBlanc, I'm so sorry. I didn't think you'd want to see me. So that man, he's the hero of Dead Man Walking. And the graphic that's just coming out, that Random House, this publi... boy, he's at the end of the book and his story is so strong of how is it possible for a father to lose his only son and have all that anger that's beginning to consume him, that was eating him alive. And that's really what made him turn and say, "I got to get rid of this. I got it. It's

consuming me and I'm losing who I am. I'm losing all my kindness. I'm losing." And so his story is really powerful.

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:39
part of that was tragedy is

I believe his marriage ended. Didn't they get a divorce?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 12:46
No, that was a rumor around, but that didn't happen to Lloyd LeBlanc. It's a general statistic

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:53
yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 12:54
that over 70% of people who lose a child get divorced, but it was not true of

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:58
I

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 12:58
him.

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:58
see. Okay. That remember the 70%, yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 13:02
Yeah, there you go. Yeah. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 13:04
And, Sister, I was curious, the last scene in Dead Man Walking in the film, you are in the church praying together with David's father. Did that, did that

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 13:14
was

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 13:14
really

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 13:14
it

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 13:15
happen? Or more of the film telling that story?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 13:19

No, no, that's integral to the Lloyd LeBlanc story. So we were at the pardon board hearing, we were walking outside, he confronts me saying "Where have you been?" But then he was the graceful one, 'cause I had done it all wrong by not reaching out to him. And he invited me to come pray with him in this little chapel in St. Martinville. It's a Catholic thing where you keep throughout the hours of the night. And his hours to pray were from 4:00 to 5:00 in the morning. So he invited me. I was there, and we knelt together and we prayed. And then it moved from praying together to having breakfast together to friendship together. And then where he shared with me that journey. He actually taught even if you look at the word "forgive," it means to give beforehand, to turn over. And that was his actual experience, was it was eating him alive with his anger, and he's making his wife cry, and, and he was losing who he was. He realized that. And so he set his face, really, to go down the road, to follow what Jesus had said. You know, you've heard it said an eye for an eye, but I say to you. And that forgiveness was his salvation because he said, "Most people think forgiveness is weak. Oh, like you condone and you kill my son, like it's okay." But it just really meant not being captured by the anger and the hatred so that he lost his own soul. And the way he described it to me. And boy, this really comes out in the graphic. The graphic of Dead Man Walking is really good, and it's got a lot of added information in it that we didn't have in the original book in '93. But the way it happened with Lloyd LeBlanc is that put his hand out like this, he said, "I said, uh-uh, uh-uh. They kill my boy, but I'm not going to let him kill me." And then he sought to go down the road to let it go. Not to condone it, but to let it go. And he was the only one in the town of St. Martinville that showed kindness to Pat and Eddie Sonnier's mother Gladys. She couldn't even go in the grocery store because she'd hear people saying, "There she is, that white trash woman. Her son's killed the LeBlanc and the Bourque kids." And so she was like a little hermit in her house. And she hears somebody on her front porch and opens the door. It's Lloyd LeBlanc. He's got a basket of fruit. He gives it to her and he says, "Here Miss Sonnier, I know you're having a tough time in this town. Look, I'm a parent just like you. And as parents, we never really know what our kids might do. I don't hold you responsible for what your son's did. And here's my phone number. And if you need me, you call me." There you go. Here's my son. And then, to expose more and more the futility, the hypocrisy of promising a victim's family. And the average wait from a person getting a death sentence to execution is 17 years. This family in public, they have no private way to grieve. They have lost a loved one. The promise dangling that at the end of this process, we're going to let you sit on the front row and watch as we kill the one who killed the loved one. You get to watch that violence and it's going to heal you. It's such a false, illusory, hypocritical promise. Victims' families need real help. They need counseling. A lot of the marriages break apart. People lose their jobs. The siblings that have lost a loved one, they all need help. The whole family needs help. And what if we poured all that killing money into healing money to really help victims' families who've lost someone? That's what we need to do.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:32

Absolutely. And I think it's sometimes 50 to \$60 million to keep people on.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 17:37

Oh, yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:38

And if we could. millions and millions of dollars to actual, you know, services, social services to these victims' families so that they

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 17:46

Into

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:47

could,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 17:47

kids at risk, kids at risk, going right in the pipeline to go right into, right into prison. And Louisiana has the harshest incarceration rates in the country. We get the longest life without parole sentences. It's just really, really a tough place. And when you look at the pattern, where these executions are happening, the last 35 over the past month, all ex-slave states, where the racism and the harsh punishments are so strong, uh, and that's what we really gotta tackle.

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:20

Sister, is there any example of a, uh, community that has tried that?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 18:25

Tried what?

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:26

The, the approach of, uh, focusing on the victims' and....

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 18:30

Oh, yeah. No, there are a number of groups. I'm, I'm sorry that I can't single out any particular one. We have a group here that works in Louisiana that works with victims' families, uh, and to heal. Because the other family, of course, that needs healing is the family of the perpetrator. I mean, there you see brokenness too and needs of all kind. But, you know, I'm heartened by what Martin Luther King said about a budget. He said a budget is a moral document. So, look at all the money Louisiana puts in each year to build in a bigger prison system, keeping the death penalty in place, and look at what it could be used for. But it's all about waking people up. That's my job. It's your job too. And what you do in this podcast.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 19:19

It is.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 19:20

To wake up to, because people are good, I found. It's not like they're wedded to the death penalty. They don't know what's going on with it. They don't have any details. Yeah. So, you know, so I'm so glad y'all do this Good for you.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 19:34

Well, and you know... Something I was listening to an interview you gave, and you were talking about a conversation you had with a former warden at Angola. And he was telling you that, you know, a lot of the guys on death row or lifers who did commit murder, i not one of those things that was, like, well planned. They didn't wake up that day and think, I'm going to kill somebody today.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 20:01

No,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:01

But...

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 20:01

that's right. That's right.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:02

It was bad situation, you know, maybe drugs, a fight gone wrong, a robbery gone wrong. But most of them on death row at the prison, they didn't think, I'm going to kill somebody today. That's

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 20:15

No,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:15

my goal today

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 20:16

and that's just what the warden said. He said, you know who makes our best trustees here? People in for murder. They

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:22

Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 20:22

They didn't know when they got up that morning, they were going to kill anybody. And they read books, and now they're in the discipline of a prison. And they changed. In fact, one time I remember with, I was with someone about to be executed. We was in the last hours. And one of the guards working on the execution team kind of whispered to me, You know, it's not that... You know, sister, the man we're killing tonight is a very different man from that young,

brash animal that came into this prison, cursing God to everybody. He's changed. And we've got to kill him anyway. And that's the thing about human beings. We can always change. I mean, that's the deepest spiritual message from Jesus or deepest in the Quran. The dignity of all human life is that we can always change. And so the fallacy of trying to identify a human being with a single action and try to say that's their essence and they can never change is so faulty. Anthropologically, it's just faulty that human beings can't change. Who are we to declare that? And that's part of the arrogance of the death penalty.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 21:37

Absolutely. And I think something that's really important for our listeners who are dedicated to human rights is understanding the racial component to the death penalty. And you are from, you know, the Deep

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 21:51

w

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 21:52

grew up with

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 21:52

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 21:52

up

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 21:52

...Crow.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 21:52

with, you know, Jim Crow. I wanted to educate our listeners about how race shapes nearly every dimension of death penalty sentencing.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 22:03

And which victims' death,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:06

And

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 22:07

they go after the death penalty. Overwhelmingly, it's when white people are killed. Overwhelmingly. 80%. And when black people are killed, if a life isn't worth anything, then you're not outraged over the death and you don't seek the ultimate punishment. It's barely a blip on the screen. But when white people are killed, it's always given top priority to seek the death penalty. It's so clear. For For starters.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:33

It's so clear. It's so clear. Yeah, But a lot of people don't, you know, they don't pay attention to all the details because I think they just don't really know is from jury composition to the political powers that be, you know, with the prosecutors. And,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 22:47

of times

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:48

you know, they don't really talk about the socioeconomic issues. And a lot of it comes from cyclical poverty. And racism is still at play, especially in the deep south. And sister, for our listeners who might be more new to your work, I would love to give them an insight into your early days and your

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 23:12

Yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 23:13

life's calling. Growing up in Baton Rouge during Jim Crow.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 23:16

Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 23:18

Kind of tell us, you know,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 23:19

the

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 23:19

a little bit

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 23:20

Sure.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 23:20

about the racial climate of your childhood. Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 23:24

Sure. And again, the graphic really brings this out. But when I grew up in Baton Rouge, my daddy was a successful lawyer in Baton Rouge. And literally, we lived in a big two-story house. And the only way I knew African Americans during the days of segregation and Jim Crow was as our servants. I never went to school with African Americans, wasn't ever in any social

settings, always as our servants. And mom and daddy were kind and even helped Ellen and Jesse buy a house, helped Jesse get a good job at the refinery, but never questioned Jim Crow. I never heard the word justice, just charity, kindness. And I realized once I did wake up, that's what culture does. It gives us eyes and ears. Here's how we do things. Mama's saying to me, "Well, honey, it's better if they're with their own kind. We'd like to be with our own kind. That way people don't fight". A kind woman, you know, but I grew up with that. And boy, when I did wake up, and it was a spiritual awakening to the gospel of Jesus, that the gospel was not just about being kind. I so privileged and resourced, I'm going to be kind to people. It was about justice. And that led me to move out of the suburbs in New Orleans and move in to the inner city in New Orleans and work at a place called Hope House, where for the first time I saw other America. All the rules were different. And what it meant to go to a public school, kids coming in, I dropped out when I was a junior, you couldn't read a third grade reader. I mean, people not knowing how to read, the education, the lack of health care, your mama would go sit in charity hospital with you for four hours until some tired little intern from LSU medical school would come. Everything, the police, the way they treated people, everything was different. And so I'm learning, cause I'd not been exposed to it at all. And boy, the soil of my soul was tilled for action, and I would begin to act on everything. And it was during that time at Hope House, one day coming out of the Adult Learning Center, when a friend from the Louisiana Coalition on Jails and Prisons said, "Hey, Sister Helen, you want to be a pen pal to somebody on death row?" And I said, "Yeah, I was an English major. I could write some letters. I thought that's all I was going to be doing, was write letters. I knew they were going to kill this person and that I'd be there. I mean, are you kidding me?" So I wrote the letter. And the problem was a guy wrote back. And there you go. Pope Francis kept talking about this thing, "encounter. " When you have encounter, boom, the letter was the encounter. Everything flowed from that. He had nobody to come and visit him. He didn't even ask me to come. H didn't ask me for anything. But my own heart moving toward, here's a man condemned to die. Even his poor mama can't see him. She couldn't stand to walk in the building where they were going to kill her son. And your heart is drawn. It's attraction. I heard that's the whole principle out of the universe works, is attraction. And that's the way the Spirit of God works. That's the way our own good hearts works. We're attracted. Oh my God, I'll go visit this guy. And that led then to being with him when he was actually executed, which changed my life forever.

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:11

Sister, did you have any dealings Father Robert Drinan?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:15

met him once in Washington, D. C. What a guy. Huh?

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:19

He

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:20

was a great guy.

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:21

We did two-week mission to Pinochet's Chile.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:26

Oh, my goodness.

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:27

And, uh, we, we became very close, I remember one of the, uh, things I was educated on was the rivalries amongst the different orders of the Catholic Church.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:39

Dominicans and Jesuits going at it?

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:41

Well, it became clear that the Jesuits were just a little bit better than everyone else.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:46

We'd

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:46

bud.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:47

see the side you took, bud,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 27:49

ha,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:50

ha, ha,

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:51

ha.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:51

Dominicans got Jesuit jokes, Jesuit got Dominican jokes. Yeah, that's true. That's a

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:57

Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 27:57

friendly rivalry. That's a good

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:00

Yeah,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 28:00

thing. Yeah,

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:00

no, he

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 28:01

good.

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:01

was, he was, he was terrific,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 28:02

Let me tell you, uh, unless you want to talk about something

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:05

No.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 28:06

else, about the evolution of how the Catholic Church changed. Because it's like every democratic process. There's a great psalm that says, truth springs up from the ground. We just saw that happening with Calvin Duncan's election. The people got it. The people spoke. He gets elected. and, see, it began, I was one of the first in the 80s going to be with this man, Pat Sonnier. And we had an archbishop in New Orleans, Philip M. Hannan. He was one of the only bishops that didn't sign on to the thing, the bishop's letter saying that you cannot use nuclear armaments. Because he had been in the military, he had a military mindset. He was my archbishop in New Orleans. Here I'm coming out of this execution. So, I couldn't get many hearings to go speak in Catholic churches. Because the priests were afraid to touch this issue with a 10-foot pole. It's so controversial. I mean, they, you just didn't hear it preached in Catholic churches. But people like me, bubbling up from the ground, experience, speaking. And that's one of the gifts of the Catholic Church going on now with what they call the sentence. Everybody's speaking. And they're giving a forum in which a teenager might be sitting next to a cardinal, and they're talking about their experience of faith. And that's what happened with me. So, I write the book, it came out in 93, *Dead Man Walking*, 80% of the American public supported the death penalty in 1993 when the book came out. And we are making great strides. And it all is directly related to what Thurgood Marshall said. He said, a lot of Americans say they support the death penalty, but educate them on it, about what it really is. And they will not, they will reject it. A that is the Marshall Hypothesis, which we've been using. So, the book came out in 93. And then in 97, I was involved with a man, Joseph O'Dell, in Virginia, who was innocent. I don't know if y'all heard anything about the Joe O'Dell case. At any rate, the people of Italy heard about Joseph O'Dell. And the governor of Virginia got 10,000 faxes from the people of Italy. Do not kill Joseph O'Dell. He was, he couldn't wait to kill

Joseph O'Dell and get him out of his hair. And he was, the guy was innocent. A young woman, Lori Urs, got involved with the Centurion Project hooked into the case of Joseph O'Dell. She summons me. I become his spiritual advisor. We're trying to save his life. And in the end, Virginia did execute him. the Italians sent delegation from the Italian parliament to accompany his body.

BERT LOCKWOOD 31:06

Oh,my God

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 31:07

To Sicily, where he was buried. And I was part of that. And that's where I directly met Pope John Paul, directly in person. But I also got to write him a letter, which the Secretary of State said, we put it right into his hands. And I know he read it. And it was key points. He had just written an encyclical in 95. He had pushed the death penalty to the very end, saying it should be rare, if not non-existent. But he left a great big loophole. And he said, but in cases of absolute necessity, the state can execute. In church teaching, they kept holding on to this right of the state to take life, which, of course, the Universal Declaration says you can't get that absolute right. But I got to directly talk to him through this letter saying, look, when I'm walking with a man, do Catholics only believe in the dignity of innocent life? I mean, I've talked to a lot of Catholics and they say they're pro-life, but they mean innocent life, not guilty life. They deserve what they get. And then I brought him through in that letter. I took him. I just said, when I'm walking with a man who's walking to his death, he's shackled, hand and foot, surrounded by six guards. He turns and whispers toward me, "Sister, please pray God holds up my legs as I make this walk". And I said to the Pope, "Where is the dignity in taking an alive human being, strapping them down, rendering them completely defenseless and killing them? We have a way to protect society from violent offenders. That's what prisons are for. Where is the dignity in this death? Can you help our church"? And he was the first to speak out publicly. He did that in '99 in St. Louis for the first time, putting the death penalty in with the other pro-life issues Catholics always used to hearing. And he said publicly, even those among us who have done a terrible crime have a dignity that must not be taken from them. And that happened in '99, and then along comes Pope Francis, and it kept bubbling up. The experience, more and more Catholic deacons were going into prisons. More and more people are having that direct experience of meeting real human beings in prison and recognizing this thing. You can't absolutely crystallize people in the worst action of their life. I mean, you can't. And that's bubbling up, bubbling up. And then by the time you get to Pope Francis, he was ready. And my image is that Pope John Paul in '99, by that public statement, set the volleyball up over the net. And then along comes Pope Francis and then seals it by officially changing Catholic teaching in the Catechism, where it explicitly, it's the first time, states takes away that right of the state to take life. You cannot ever entrust over to a state that kind of absolute authority to decide to kill their citizens, because then they set up the system to do it, which we have now, with its racism and its political, you know, impulses of people like Trump to get points and show how tough on crime they are and all that. It's every weakness, human weakness is in the system because so much discretion. The Supreme Court left up the prosecutors to seek it or not.

BERT LOCKWOOD 34:47

Sister, I remember I've been involved with Amnesty International for many years and within the United States. there was a divide, with respect to, there was no problem, with the question on torture, being against it, and prisoners of conscience. But,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 35:06

yep, yep, yep.

BERT LOCKWOOD 35:07

but for many of the older members of Amnesty, the death penalty was an issue

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 35:12

Yeah, it was a big deal. They had to educate. Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 35:16

Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 35:16

I remember that. And remember, they came out with this teaching book in 89, And that was when I was first beginning to get involved with them because they had to teach their own members. See, torture, the death penalty is definitely torture. I mean, the definition of torture is an extreme mental or physical assault on someone rendered defenseless. The defenselessness is crucial to it. What is the greatest mental assault you can imagine then for you to be put in a tight space and told we're gonna kill you in a week? And here's how we gonna do it. And you waiting to be killed. Or then they take you out in the backyard, put a gun to your head. And then you hear a click. No, not tonight. I mean, I was with Dobie Williams who was brought in the death house three times. Said goodbye to his mama two times. Had a last meal. And then killed on the third time, how do you not recognize that as torture? And see, the way the state, and people who want the death penalty justify themselves, including Supreme Court justices, is they focus on what the person did. Look at their action, look at their crime. But you're setting yourself up as a judge to decide. I mean, they even, in the Gregg decision of '76, when they put the death penalty back, they put an impossible criteria. They said, oh, we only gonna reserve it for the worst of the worst. They don't define what that is. Nobody knows what that is. Not ordinary. What's an ordinary murder? What's the worst of the worst? Nobody knows. So it gets to be up to the individual prosecutors seeking, "Oh, we gonna call this one the worst of it?" Torture. It is torture.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:05

And, Sister, there was an interview I was listening to you, and you were talking about, if I'm correct, it was a red phone in the death

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:15

Oh,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:15
chamber?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:15
yeah. Two.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:17
Two. That can ring. Until they actually put the needle

the inmate, is strapped down, thinking that they're about to die. And then if that one, or the phones, if the phones ring from the governor, they

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:34
The

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:34
could call us,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:35
governor, or also to the courts.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:37
or the

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:37
Once.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:38
courts. And stop the execution. But to me, that alone is

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:42
Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:42
torture.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 37:43
No, you know what? When I was, Pat was, Sonnier was the first person that I was with, you know, through those last hours. And every time the phone rang in the death house, my heart would just leap to my throat. Because it's not like somebody in a hospital dying of cancer or something, where they're fading, becoming, they're fully alive. They're gonna be fully dead. And a phone rings. Is that a phone? Is that a call from the governor? Is that a call from a court? I mean, it's an impossible, just torturous process that that phone call could mean that I get to live. And they're trying to devote and put all their energy into dying with, with as much dignity

as they can summon. It's impossible. It's impossible. And we've got to bring the people close, see. And so we're doing the graphic now to reach out to the next generation. And I have confidence in the people. I know when we can bring them close, they're gonna get it. Cause I can see it happening. And that, but we got our work cut out for us. If y'all know any good, wealthy people that could send us some money, we'd be glad to take it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 38:56

If any of our listeners, anybody know Mackenzie

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 38:58

Thank you.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 38:59

Scott or Melinda Gates?

Yeah. But sister, last my dad and I were talking in preparation for our interview today with you. And, my dad was recounting a story of an inmate on death row who had, you know, a learning disability, low IQ. Dad, do you want to kind of recount that story?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:20

yeah, I want to hear that one.

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:21

it was when Bill Clinton was, uh, governor of Arkansas.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:25

Oh yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:27

And he in New Hampshire running for president.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:31

Right.

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:31

and he wanted to be the, the new Democrat. Tough on crime.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:36

That's

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:37

He

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:37

right.

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:37

made uh, dramatic, scene of leaving the campaign trail to go back to Arkansas to sign the death warrant. Yeah. And. The

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:48

Right.

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:49

person that he signed the death warrant uh, an individual with a low IQ who, as he was.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 39:58

He, he had shot himself in the head and blown out part of his frontal lobe. He barked like a dog and saved his apple pie to eat later after.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:07

Yes. Yes. Yep. Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:10

And here's. Yeah. And here's Clinton going back to Arkansas. Here I am. There's the new South tough on crime.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:17

Yep.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:18

It was unspeakable that he did that.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:21

Ricky Ray Rector,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:22

Ricky Ray Rector.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:24

Yep. And his IQ was less than 70.

I mean. T it.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:27

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:28

and he asked them to keep his piece of pie safe so that when he came back, it would be there for him. And that story has stayed with me.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:38

Me too. Me too, Meredith. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:41

I mean. I don't understand how we can allow this to happen in modern society. There's no

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:47

what?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:47

dignity. Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 40:47

You know, I've thought about this a lot, experienced this a lot, with people. I was just with a man, Ivan Cantu, executed in Texas, and there's a woman warden, hair perfectly coiffed, standing there, presiding over the whole thing. And everybody polite, everybody doing their jobs. I think human beings have a tremendous capacity in us for compartmentalization. Because in their minds, they have to justify what they're doing. They're not being mean, torturous people. They're carrying out, or they find the space in their brain, in their heart, in their conscience, where it's okay to do this, at least I'll be kind to the people, or whatever they tell themselves. But I think compartmentalization is huge. And then you look back at the Nazis and the killing of Jews, something happens in people where they turn a switch. And somehow they're doing something that's good as a human being.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 41:54

And just for our listeners, I just wanted to remind them who Ivan Cantu was, because he was executed last year, February 28th, 2024. And as sister said, he always maintained his innocence. And not only with Sister Helen, but other faith leaders, and even the jurors from his original trial, recanted, and also witnesses recanted, what they had what they had put into the court procedures. And unfortunately, as we know, with Texas, they declined to grant a new trial, or a stay of execution. And most likely, he was innocent, and was killed by a state that is a killing machine, with Governor Greg

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 42:39

what,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 42:40

Abbott.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 42:40

and you know, you know, Texas has fully carried out one third of all US executions. And a lot of people in Texas don't even know they have the death penalty.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 42:50

Really?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 42:50

I mean, they're removed from it. It's done behind the prison walls. They're so removed from it. And so that's why our job, and what you're doing on your podcast, me and the talks, the books, whatever, is to bring the people close. Because once we do bring them close, they do have good hearts, and they want to be fair, and they don't want to be racist, and they don't want to be those things. But our work's cut out for us, but it's not hopeless. It is, it is hopeful. We just got to get in there and do the work. I'm really glad y'all doing this podcast.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:24

Well, I wanted to ask both of well, all three of us actually were raised by lawyers. My lawyer's on our call, my dad. But, sister, your dad was a lawyer, conservative lawyer at that. My grandfather...

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 43:38

No, why are you saying he was conservative?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:41

He wasn't conservative?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 43:42

He was a civil lawyer. I wouldn't call my father conservative

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:45

Was

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 43:46

at all.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:46

his politics more conservative from being in the South?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 43:50

No, he's a Roosevelt man. He was progressive.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:53

Okay.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 43:54

You might just have made that connection because he's in the Deep South

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:58
that might have been it. Jim Crow.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 44:00
No, but he was good for poor people. When he died, he had all this little black book.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:06
I mean, that's pretty... ..credible.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 44:08
No, it is.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:09
And Dad, for your dad... Gan. That's what we call it, my grandfather. He was more of a conservative judge. But I liked that Sister described her parents as kind. I think...

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 44:19
Daddy was fair, too.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:22
Fair. I think you would say the same about your dad... Dad... Who was a lawyer.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 44:28
A lot of

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:28
I

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 44:28
dads in there.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:28
know. I'm like, there's so many dads. But I was just curious.

Both of you, dedicating your life to human rights and helping others and being raised by lawyers, did they help guide you into your work

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 44:44
Yeah, I mean, my dad, I think about him a lot because he was, he was a good, he was very articulate. He grew up very, very poor on a plantation, dropped out of school to help raise money for the family. And made his way through law school. He would take the dictionary each day and learn a page of the words. And then he worked for one of the senators in

Washington and used his law books there to become a lawyer. And being a Catholic in the twenties, He couldn't get in any law school, so the Knights of Columbus for the Catholics started a law school which Catholic Hugh later brought under their aegis. In fact, when I was giving a talk at the law school at Catholic Hugh, and I saw this Columbus symbol, I said, what's this thing with Columbus? And explained to me that Knights of Columbus started a law school for Catholics to go to because they couldn't get in any other law school And that was my dad. And then he came back to Louisiana. It was always poor people he was helping. Sometimes people paid him with a chicken.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 45:58

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 45:58
He'd

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 45:58
right.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 45:59
come home with a chicken. You know, they were all poor. And there was just, and he was a civil lawyer, so he helped people with their estates and stuff.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 46:09
And Sister, I'm not as well informed about in the 1920s because your father being Catholic, he wasn't allowed to get into other law schools. Was that

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 46:17
Yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 46:17
discrimination against, Catholics?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 46:18
I mean, Catholics, you the United States of America was Protestant, big, big time Protestant. Catholics were, you know, the outliers in a lot of cases. And now that Catholics started getting rich and everything and moving up the scale, now we got them on the Supreme Court.

mean, I'm part of the privileged caste now in a lot of ways, but.

BERT LOCKWOOD 46:44
majority on the court.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 46:46

But what my daddy taught me, he taught me how to do public speaking. So I could do that by the time I was a junior in high school. He taught me Robert's Rules and procedures, which we taught to our whole high school of how you conduct a meeting and make a motion and all that kind of stuff. So you have orderly proceedings. And every summer he got, we all got in this family station wagon together and we traveled all over the United States and Canada and then later went to Europe because he believed in travel as a way of education. So I

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:19

Wow.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 47:19

love my father and he's very much inside of me, just very much inside of me.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:25

Well, I, I might embarrass my dad, but I have to give you a lot of credit, dad. You did the same for

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 47:30

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:30

myself and my siblings as he taught us the love of travel and learning other cultures.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 47:35

Nice.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:36

Um, we've traveled all over the world. We used to live in England when he taught.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 47:40

I know. That's so great.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:41

And I think it, you know, it helps with empathy and compassion.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 47:45

Yes, Yes, indeed.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:46

To learn about others.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 47:47

You're a lucky girl, Meredith.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:49

Well, and, you know, Sister getting to meet you all the way back in 2002. Galway, my dad, I both reminisced about that evening with at Bill Schabas' house because you have such an innate talent where you are so captivating. When you tell a story, the room falls quiet. All eyes are on you. And you have such a gift for storytelling, which is one of my biggest passions and why we started the podcast and with my

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 48:17

Yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:17

own.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 48:18

yeah. Perfect.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:19

You have to tell other people's stories because I truly believe it's how we bridge more connections.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 48:24

Well, absolutely. Stories are the way. If I had written a polemic about the death penalty, you no, nobody would have read it. And, you know, I got to tell you this. Bill Schabas just sent me an email. He just sent me an email like two days ago. So I'm going to be writing back to him. Will you believe it? I'm a tell him I'll talked to the two of you.

BERT LOCKWOOD 48:47

Yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:48

Well, and he was on our podcast recently

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 48:51

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:51

and we talked about you. So in that episode, I will.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 48:55

And in full circle.

BERT LOCKWOOD 48:56

Sister Helen. I was. somewhat disillusioned with, um, I'd been telling this story for years since meeting in, in Ireland you're having what I thought was a unique ability to be in a room of very

different people and to talk to each one of them, and at the time you were talking to them that you made them feel that there would be no person at that moment that you'd be talking to in the world, um, than them, he or she, and I mentioned that to you in, in Cincinnati when I was taking you to the, uh, your hotel, and you said to me, oh yeah, we learned that in the nunnery, it's called in the moment, and I didn't realize that it was Nun 101.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 49:52

Nun 101. about, you know, it's a great gift to be able to be present like we are with each other right now. You are the most important people in the world to be right. I mean, that's really true, but I also remember that night, what I was telling this, Boudreaux and Thibodeaux, man, they had never heard those Cajun jokes before.

BERT LOCKWOOD 50:12

that was tough.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 50:12

I remember that. that was, that was, It was a big group. It was fun.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 50:18

I'm gonna take us over to international, death penalty and, and sister, I'm curious to see how much work you might be able to do on the international scale of abolishing the death penalty. no one. This week I read the most heart shattering article in the Guardian, which I'll email it that link to you sister. And for our listeners, I'll put it in our show notes. um, and Amnesty International recently reported, that in Saudi they have executed at least what they can uncover 292 people this year, this year, almost 300 people. Many of them are poor, foreign nationals and migrants convicted of nonviolent drug offenses. Most of them completely innocent.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 51:06

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 51:06

and the Guardian details of many cases this past week in the Tabuk prison, where Egyptians were executed after forced confessions in Saudi Arabia, and they had no access to legal representation. And what the article recounted was one of the Egyptian prisoners who's now been executed calling his mom frantic. I think they're going to shoot us. An

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 51:33

Arabia,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 51:33

in Saudi Arabia they have shooting squads and kill multiple at once. And again, these are poor migrants desperate

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 51:44

Hmm.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 51:45

for work. That are conned to going to Saudi Arabia to provide money to send back home.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 51:51

Oh, yeah. Oh, my God.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 51:54

Um, and most of them are innocent

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 51:54

comparison.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 51:55

that is a That I am deeply passionate about raising awareness because many people do not know the human rights violations of Saudi Arabia and other

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 52:05

Oh,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 52:05

countries in that region.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 52:06

yeah. Oh, absolutely. Good for you. Yeah. Oh, my. You know, they had a niece who many years ago, this would have been probably in the 60s, or maybe the late 50s. Her husband got a job in Saudi Arabia with all the oil stuff. A she, with her children, one time was going into the, to the market. And right there in front of everybody, they were decapitating people. And they, I remember reading an article about one of those executioners. And he said, because for thievery, they would cut off their hands. And he said, in a way, it was easier to cut off a head because you knew they were not going to suffer and they were gone. But the hand, and you'd see that bleeding stub and how much harder it was to cut off a hand than it was to cut off a head. I mean, what happens to these people, you know? And I do have the story of a guard at Angola who pulled me aside after he'd been, he had been supervisor on death row and supervising, keeping order on the tier. And then they moved him to the execution squad and he called me in his office. This is when I was going to see Robert Lee Willie. And he said, uh, I'm going to have to quit this job. He said, uh, I've been part of five executions. I don't even strap them. On a gurney. My job is to go to their cell after they've been executed and get their toothbrush and all their personal belongings. And he said, I get home after these. I'll sit in my La-Z-Boy chair. I can't eat. I can't sleep. My wife knows not to talk to me, and I'm going to have to quit this job. And he did. He's the only one I met in the whole process from the governor on

down that quit because his conscience got to him because he said, in my gut, I know. I'm killing, helping to kill a defenseless man. And he got it.

So those are the stories. We just got to keep bringing them to the people. We got to keep bringing them to the people. And I do have confidence in this arc of the universe that bends. And we are making progress. I mean, most states now, either in law or in practice, aren't killing people anymore. It's down to that rock bottom ex-slave

BERT LOCKWOOD 54:43

Well, one of the things that I think we've in the human rights field is that the telling of one story is more powerful than talking about a thousand people dying, some massacre. Or, you know, it's, that's almost too much for a human to comprehend, but the, those individual stories can be very, very, very powerful.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 55:11

I mean, even Stalin said that. If you kill one person, well, that's a killing. But if you kill a million, that's a statistic. Statistics

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 55:21

Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 55:22

Statistics don't move hearts.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 55:24

And, you know, sometimes I think about in the execution chamber, and I think to quote you, Sister Helen, you once talked about how in an execution chamber, that that's a place where every part of the human spirit is strained. Yeah. And I always think about who is cooking that last meal. I could not go home at the end of a work day knowing I just served somebody their last meal upon their request. I just, I could shut my eyes at night and dream and sleep peacefully knowing that. But then people have to work and you get lost in the system. And then I think about the nurses and the medical staff that Liquid death in persons and the medical-

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:15

It's not every nurses that do that, you

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:18

Okay.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:18

know. They just have these prisoners prisoners and they're terrible at finding veins. They don't know what they're doing.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:25
Did

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:25
You

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:25
you say

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:25
know, it's

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:26
prisoners,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:26
all

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:26
Sister? Like a prisoner?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:27
Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:28
Wait,

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:28
Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:28
really? It's

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:29
Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:29
not a medical licensed

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:31
No.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:31
person? Like that doesn't have to- I just-

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:33

They train people because medical people by the Hippocratic Oath. That's first do no harm.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:39

Right.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:40

So they will never participate directly in an execution.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:44

Oh, because I thought that

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:45

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:45

was always so hypocritical. So they train other prisoners?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:50

Yeah. Yeah. And they're bad at what they do.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:54

Of course.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:55

They're They're not accomplished in doing that by any means.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:58

Oh Oh

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:59

It's God.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:59

my

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 56:59

And it's all so secret. The Supreme Court is allowing all this. They are not demanding transparency of states, even of what- drugs they use. They go to these compounding factories because the drug manufacturers found out they were using their drug to kill people. Not for, you know, for surgery. So they withheld their drugs. And, uh, so now they're just going to these compounding places, throwing these cocktails together. I mean, we saw that with Oklahoma, uh, using midazolam, just working on a supposition that, and it's, it's not a sedative. It's not an

anesthetic. It's just a, basically a relaxer. And they just use the logic. Well, if we up it 500 times, it must be effective. And, um, and then when they had the hearings, this is. *Glossip v. Gross*. Before the Supreme Court. And look at this. The Supreme Court has now got to be pharmacist. And they're going to have to say, oh, I'm going to say, oh, I'm going to say that. We're going to say, oh, I'm going to say, oh, I'm going to say, oh, I'm going to say, oh, well, it's effective. And they got to decide this. What do they know about pharmacology to be making these decisions? Everybody! Everybody's in over their head on this thing and nobody should be touching it. And that's what we got to work to end this

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:35

Absolutely.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 58:35

thing.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:36

For our listeners who might not be aware, they also in some states have brought back the firing squad. In

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 58:43

Yep.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:43

South Carolina, they executed a man

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 58:47

executed

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:48

November 14, 2025 in a firing squad. And even in some states, electric chair is still authorized as a method to put people to death.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 58:58

Any method will do when you think of how the Supreme Court thinks.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:01

Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 59:02

They do not recognize cruelty. They don't recognize, they come out of privilege, when they read those words and bring their life experience to that word, they don't see it or recognize it as cruelty or torture. And that's where the problem is. Because we have the highest level of the Supreme Court not recognized. But boy, when you bring it close, the people get it. And that's what's gonna change it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:31

I think one thing people will get, is how Amnesty International. Teaches people that the first step in a case is to create doubt. And I know that was what happened with Richard Glossip's case

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 59:45

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:45

and Sister for our communitiy, if you could share a little bit about Richard Glossip, I would love to educate them on his recent case, which I believe he called you in 2015 and said, "Sister, I think they're gonna put me to

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 59:59

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:59

death". And he's innocent.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:00:01

Richard Glossip almost killed three times, had three last meals. And Oklahoma had a terrible practice. He'd bring you into this waiting room next to the killing chamber, 35 days ahead of your execution. So you've lost contact with all your fellow inmates and all on death row. And Richard went through that three times. Yes. He called me. It was early in 2015. And he was very apologetic, very sweet guy. He just said, "Look, Sister, I didn't ask you permission, but I'll put you down to be with me. I'm sorry. I didn't ask you permission, but I'll put you down to be with me. I think they're going to kill me". And so anyway, so I started looking into his case and I went, that guy's innocent. And so we just started acting. First two phone calls I made, one was to Susan Sarandon, so we could start getting on media. She and Robert Redford had done this series on CNN, Death Row Stories. And the second call was to my friend in the Vatican to get Pope Francis. he came through for him. He tried his best. And then we just started working. We got lawyers, great lawyers in there, Don Knight, Mark Olive. They started digging into the case and even reached the point where the attorney general of the state, Gentn Drummond, agreed with the defense that a mistake had been made at his trial. He didn't get a fair trial, filed with them to the Supreme Court. And that's got to be one of the main reasons why they took the case and actually called for a new trial and Richard right now is Oklahoma County Jail, awaiting a new trial.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:01:47

And our hope is he will absolutely be exonerated

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:01:50

Absolutely. He's absolutely.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:01:53

I think that's going to be the outcome, Sister. And you've been so generous with your time. If I could just do one final question, and I want to make sure that we are promoting the new graphic edition of Dead Man Walking. One thing I think is incredible that our listeners can be able to speak with you is if they have a book club, th next

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:02:12

Yes,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:12

book

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:02:13

sure.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:13

club- ...selection should be the graphic novel. Again, I will put all the links in our show

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:02:18

Great. Oh, that's

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:19

And the illustrations are so unbelievably incredible.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:02:22

Oh, they're excellent. That's a real artist boy, and it really gets into race and the death penalty, you know?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:29

Absolutely.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:02:29

It gets into the whole court system and how it works. Uh, how you got to go through state court and then you got to go through, and then this decision of the Supreme Court in Furman in '72, find the death penalty unconstitutional because it's arbitrary and capricious, then backlash from the Southern states that went mad at the feds for desegregation and, and the whole thing, and put pressure, blow back from the Southern states, just like in slavery. And then four years later, we got the Gregg decision of the Supreme Court that put it back, and so it explains so much of it. And just my own journey as well. So it's excellent, excellent.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:03:15

Yeah, so for all your listeners- That should be your next book club book. And even for community members and high schoolers and- Law school students, this is a wonderful new

book. And you can engage with Sister Helen on her website. And Sister, are you still offering, if somebody, if a book club reaches out to you via your website, you can actually meet with them on Zoom?

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:03:38

I'll do my best on that. I can't make any promises though, 'cause it's just so many, but, but that is a possibility. And if they ask me to do it, me and the Holy Spirit will talk it over. Well- Well- Well- It's a chance, yes chance. 'Cause I'm

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:03:54

Well-

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:03:54

such a softie. God, I'm such a softie.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:03:57

I know we have a lot of incredible, like, professors and teachers listening, so invite Sister Helen to your institution, your university, your school. Let's bridge the gap between younger generations so that they can learn about these atrocities and how we can stand up for what's right and justice. A Sister, my last and final question was an actual question to you. You show up so much for your community and the persons that you are spiritual guide and you help them die with dignity. Could I ask you, Sister, who supports you?

Oh- I know. I know with your faith in God, but who helps you? Faith in God comes through, well, of course, prayer. So, I know. I think that's the way that you can learn through how we can learn about these atrocities and how we can stand up for what's right and justice. And, Sister, my last and final question was an actual question to you. You show up so much for your community and the persons that you are spiritual guide and you help them die with dignity. Could I ask you, Sister, who supports

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:04:30

God,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:04:30

you? I know with your faith in but who helps you

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:04:35

Faith in God comes through, well, of course, prayer, th connection with God, but community. I have a wonderful community of nuns, fellow nuns, and all these great human rights lawyers. We have a whole community here in New Orleans. They are really good friends and they're great support to me. And so, all those people. All

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:04:59

it's

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:04:59

those people.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:00

Yeah.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:01

Community always matters. You can't do it at all. You can't do it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:05

Part of that community. Anything you

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:06

I'm

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:06

need.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:07

glad.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:07

Whatever you may need.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:05:10

This has been such a That's a privilege

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:12

And to you with Bill Schabas in Galway.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:16

And Marc Godsey. Ohio Innocence Project. Work.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:21

Yeah. I remember that.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:22

know, we love Amnesty. We love Ohio Innocence Project and Sister, this is our utmost honor.

And we are just so proud to be in conversation.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:30

Thank you.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:30
And in community.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:32
Keep up the good work.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:34
Likewise. Thank you for your

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:35
Bye.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:35
generosity.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN 1:05:35
Thank you for yours.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:05:37
Thank you, Sister.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:39
Thank you so much for tuning in today to listen to our interview with the remarkable Sister Helen Prejean. My dad and I encourage you to watch the documentaries about her life, life, including Radical Grace and Rebel Nun. You can visit her website, sisterhelen.org to learn more about her ongoing work. We hope you will support the launch of the new graphic edition, Dead Man Walking. Furthermore, if you would like to learn more about abolishing the death penalty, both here in the United States and around the world, make sure to check out Amnesty International, as well as the Innocence Project. I have included all of these links in our show notes. And as always, if you enjoy our podcast, please subscribe, leave a rating and a review, and share it with your family and friends. If you have any suggestions for topics you'd like us to discuss or interview with certain guests, send us an email at humanrightsconversations@gmail.com. And you can visit my website, meredithlockwood.com, to learn more. Next time.