

Clemency is not a popular word

Mary Ann McGivern | Mar. 12, 2012 NCR Today

Clemency is not a popular word. While candidates talk a lot about religion, I don't hear words like compassion, forgiveness and mercy.

The Missouri legislature has two clemency bills under consideration, HB 1175 and HB1067. These bills, both sponsored by Republicans, the super-majority party, would establish parole hearings for inmates who have long sentences, even life without parole. The Parole Board would hear their cases every three years and could recommend clemency to the governor.

This is not a very big deal. It gives men and women a hearing. It gives hope, for instance, to a 19-year-old, certified as an adult when he was 16, and sentenced to life plus 300 years. If the bill passed, he would know that when he turned 55 or 60, he would get a hearing. I have no idea what the boy did, but offering him a little hope would be a gift of clemency in its own right.

The bills are in limbo. One had a hearing in committee, but the committee chair wants tighter legal language and the sponsor doesn't want to make the changes. The other has not had a hearing and the sponsor is seeking support from the Speaker of the House. No word yet on whether that support is forthcoming.

There are plenty of men and women in prison right now who clearly deserve clemency. Women generally get longer sentences for the same crime; so do rural residents; so do African-Americans. At the hearing, a committee member asked if the bill challenged the wisdom of judges, and the sponsor, to his great credit, said yes, judges are not the sole repository of wisdom -- and they may not even have wisdom. He spoke of two women who have clearly reformed their lives in prison. And then other committee members gave accounts of inmates they know who deserve parole.

Governors don't grant clemency frequently. Two who have, Haley Barbour of Mississippi and George Ryan of Illinois, were roundly criticized. Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon was attorney general for a dozen years and has a strong law-and-order mentality. Even if the Parole Board heard a thousand cases and recommended 100 clemencies, he wouldn't have to grant any of them.

How do we lift ourselves up from this determination to punish and punish and punish? I think a good step is to contemplate that word clemency, sit with it for 20 minutes or so, identify ways to be more clement ourselves, and talk with others about clemency, forgiveness, mercy and second chances.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/24/2017 - 02:22): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/clemency-not-popular-word>