

Use “The Scene” to introduce “Pardon Me?”, the Young Teen Sunday school lesson for August 30, 2015. The lesson is found on page 79 of *Young Teen Teacher* by Standard Publishing.

the SCENE

Viewing the latest news through the lens of Scripture

Earlier this month, some expected a death sentence in the trial of James Holmes, who killed 12 and wounded 70 in a movie theater shooting in Colorado in 2012. The plea had been “not guilty by reason of insanity.” But the jury rejected the insanity defense, determining that Holmes had understood right from wrong at the time of his crime. Still, the jury could not reach a unanimous decision on the death penalty. Verdict: life in prison, no parole.

In February, Kelly Gissendaner was the only female death row inmate in Georgia. Friends and family asked for clemency to reduce her punishment to a life sentence, which was denied. Gissendaner’s crime? She enlisted the help of her boyfriend to murder her husband. In her clemency petition, she wrote: “There are no excuses. . . . I will never understand how I let myself fall into such evil.” A *Christianity Today* article reported that Gissendaner found God in prison. She said: “I have learned first-hand that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God’s grace and mercy. I have learned to place my hope in the God . . . whose plans and promises are made known to me in the whole story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” Prison guards, pastors, and other inmates testify that genuine life change has occurred, that this is not just a “jailhouse conversion.”

Gissendaner recorded her “last words” just 90 minutes before the scheduled execution: “Love beats out hate.” But the execution didn’t take place: bad weather and scheduling issues. The rescheduled execution also didn’t take place: lack of proper drugs. Gissendaner’s lawyers now claim that the extended waiting in “mortal fear” has rendered this execution unconstitutional. DeathPenaltyInfo.org lists the status of this execution as “stayed” (postponed).

At this writing, death row executions are scheduled for August 26 in Texas, August 27 (two; “stay likely” on one), August 28 (Pennsylvania, “stay likely”), September 1 (Missouri) . . . Richard Glossip (Oklahoma) is scheduled for execution on September 16. But efforts are being made, including help from actress Susan Sarandon, to get a delay in order to prove his innocence.

There are approximately 3,000 prisoners on death row in the United States. During the twentieth century, US presidents granted pardons or clemencies to 20,000 prisoners. President Obama has pardoned (or reduced the sentences of) 60 people during his term.

As students arrive, give each of them a copy of the above news story to read. After all teens have had the opportunity to read the article, discuss it in this way:

Can you imagine the “mortal fear” of being on death row? What would it be like to receive a reduced sentence or a full pardon?

What do you think are the chances of a prisoner deciding to follow Jesus? Why?

When you’ve done something wrong, do you mostly wish to get away with it, or mostly wish you could wipe the slate clean and start over? The Bible tells about a full pardon available to everyone.