

Pastor Lets Father's Murderer Testify in Sunday Church Service

When Phillip Robinson's father, Wayne, was gunned down by an armed robber 29 years ago, Phillip was consumed by rage against his killer.

"I wanted him dead," Robinson told Nashville's *The Tennessean*.

Now, Robinson and his father's killer, Ron Hammer, are friends, and are set to share their compelling story of forgiveness and redemption to the congregation of Murphreesboro, Tennessee's New Vision Baptist Church—where Robinson is a pastor—this Sunday.

"This is a story about life and living it fully," Robinson said. "I do that by forgiving. Ron benefits, but I benefit too."

After Wayne's death, Hammer received a life sentence for murder, along with a further 35 years for armed robbery, even though, at the time, he maintained his innocence. But the fact the man who had stolen his father from him was still alive while his father was not continued to grieve Robinson.

"That took away the vengeance part," Robinson said. "That placates that emotion to some degree. But certainly not closure. My dad's dead and they're alive. And their family has contact with them."

Eight years later, he finally came to a place where he could forgive Hammer, though he was unable to tell Hammer as such unless the convicted felon contacted him first.

That finally happened a further 13 years later, when Hammer wrote Robinson from prison, finally accepting responsibility

for the murder and asking forgiveness. Robinson, who had by this point become a pastor, began to write Hammer, and the two developed a friendship.

Robinson and his mother, Wayne's widow, later testified on Hammer's behalf at his parole hearing last year, eventually helping to secure his release this past March. Then, last month, Robinson traveled to Hammer's home in Virginia to talk and pray with his father's killer, now a cherished friend.

"I reached out two hands," Robinson said. "And it was powerful to think last time he had physical contact with my family, it was death. And now it was life. It was pretty overwhelming."

The services with Robinson and Hammer telling their story at New Vision Baptist will stream live this Sunday at .