

**Reformation Sunday**  
**October 26, 2008**  
**Plainfield, MA**

**Scripture:** Romans 3:19-28  
John 8:31-36

### **Breaking with the Past**

Regardless who wins next month, both candidates for President have promised to close the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. This facility has gained notoriety with its legal limbo and as a site where the government practiced torture upon some of its prisoners. Government documents indicate that some of these practices were later applied at other U. S. detention facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Torture has been one weapon used in the current war on terrorism. We cannot deny the reports prepared by our own government that documented its use. As a nation we cannot turn our heads away and make believe it did not happen.

Many people who committed these acts of torture have been prosecuted, but many believe, however, that more should have been done to pursue the charges up the chain of command to include both military and civilian officials. The difficulty to prosecute them lies in the lack of definitive orders to implement a strategy using torture and a clear definition of what constitutes torture. I would even add that the fog of war also contributed to the complexity of the issue.

Nevertheless, at some level in some official capacity, this nation has tortured people. Doing so has diminished our international standing, particularly in the Middle East, especially in Muslim communities. It has increased the difficulty of achieving peace and reconciliation in this part of the world. Domestically, torture has opened divisions in this nation to heighten an already partisan atmosphere.

While torture has been a fixture in the current war, it is not new in our history. The historian, Alfred McCoy, traced torture's use in American foreign policy back to CIA research from 1950 to 1962 on mind-control. He described the research as producing "a new approach to torture that was psychological, not physical, perhaps best described as 'no-touch torture.'"<sup>1</sup> He also noted that during the Vietnam War we had forty interrogation centers in Vietnam where more than 20,000 were killed and thousands more were tortured.

We've had, however, an ambivalent relationship with torture. Immediately after World War II, this nation's diplomats had a major role in drafting the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners. Both documents ban torture. Yet, during the Cold War we backed away from our commitment, only to return to it after the Cold War's end. We found torture acceptable once again after the attacks on September 11.

The capability to use torture taps into our worst instincts. It is not only punitive. It exploits the power dynamic between the captor and the captive. Its control of the powerful over the powerless seduces both the interrogators and their superiors in different ways. Interrogators succumb to its inherent domination over the victims. Their superiors seek to use it as an all-powerful weapon. As a result, it easily moves from its use on targeted individuals to any suspected enemy.

Paul would attribute these instincts to our own nature and proclivity to sin. Bearing in mind Paul's words, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23) theologically, we all are slaves to sin and only through the dying Christ are we freed. Our sinful nature has fed our ambivalence with torture, but the inclination of our better selves to reject it

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred W. McCoy. **A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation from the Cold War to the War on Terror.** Metropolitan Books: New York. 2006 Page 7  
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gets undermined in a time of fear. When we succumb to fear and grasp sinful behaviors for our comfort and salvation, we've let our faith lapse. We've forgotten the psalmist's words: "Because he is devoted to Me I will deliver him; I will keep him safe, for he knows My name. When he calls on Me, I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will rescue him and make him honored; I will let him live to a ripe old age, and show him My salvation." (Psalm 91:14-16, Tanakh)

Torture's corrosive effects touch us all directly or indirectly. Those who torture can suffer emotional and psychological disorders through the expansion of their egos and escalating cruelty. Indirectly, our international standing has suffered. We may not realize, however, that the state must weave a complex web of lies to maintain its integrity and that over time this web will weaken the bonds of trust and the rule of law that are paramount in a healthy democracy. Furthermore, making torture an acceptable strategy of war implicitly condones it in other circumstances, such as its use upon domestic suspects held by local police departments. The other day a retired Chicago police officer was arrested in connection to 100 cases of police brutality dating back to 1982.

We must not condone torture as our response to fear. We have to free ourselves from its sinister attractiveness by confronting its truth, torture contravenes God's law – it is sinful. The moral philosopher, David Gushee, cited five theological reasons to ban torture entirely<sup>2</sup>:

- It violates the dignity of human beings, especially as God endowed every person with dignity, value, and worth (Genesis 1:26-28)
- It mistreats the vulnerable and violates the demands for justice (Exodus 21:22-23)
- Authorizing torture trusts governments too much (Romans 3:10-18)
- Torture dehumanizes the torturer
- Torture erodes the character of the nation that tortures

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<sup>2</sup> David Gushee. *5 Reasons Torture is Always Wrong*. **Christianity Today**. February 2006. Pages 35-37  
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We can be relieved that Gitmo will close and that both candidates have come out on record to oppose torture. Regardless of the administration, however, the next president should strive to end this nation's use of torture once and for all. As a nation we must confront the truth around the way torture has been used in prosecuting this current war as well as its use in previous times of fear. Perhaps, confronting the truth can take shape along the lines of a truth commission to achieve accountability and to balance justice with political feasibility so that by acknowledging our flirtatious relationship with torture the silence and deceit around it will end. Such a commission must go beyond those interrogators who used torture in our current war. It must not so much as go up a chain of command, but trace back through a chain of decisions and circumstances to understand why torture became acceptable after we repudiated it through international bodies and conventions. It should name those who should be held accountable for ordering torture as well as broaden accountability to identify how our institutions that should check these abuses failed, thus becoming silently complicit. We must ask ourselves what we fear so much that we would place our trust in such a dehumanizing strategy.

Torture's gains are elusive and ineffective. As Christians we don't have to look too far – Pilate had Jesus flogged. Pilate may have had the upper hand in Jerusalem for a few days after that, but ultimately, Jesus prevailed.

We will always struggle in the tension between enduring Christian values and those expedient ones of our own devising. Christian discipleship is not always easy, especially loving our enemies and praying for our persecutors. We'll never be free, however, of our collective and silent complicity with torture, unless we realize that torture's power dynamic appeals to our own sinful nature and confront it squarely as a dehumanizing practice that contradicts all that we know as people of faith.

I realize that in this peaceful place we're far removed from torture's practice. I also feel pretty confident to believe that no one here has had a direct hand in practicing torture. Even without direct involvement, though, when torture is a strategic policy its stain touches us all. We can end its practice, but we cannot end it by remaining silent. We should study it, speak about it, and bear witness to its perversion of all that we know as faithful Christians. We can organize with other brothers and sisters of faith, regardless of denomination or religion, to press our government to face torture squarely because the Holy Spirit will enable all of us to speak truth to power. Shouldn't we do that? Wouldn't ending our government's use of torture bring our world another step closer to the kingdom that God desires for all people?