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Done to the Least of These
Sermon: Matthew 25:31-46

Rev. Barbara G. Green

I would rather talk about just about anything else more than what I feel compelled to talk to you about today. There is no joy in bringing it before you. But I feel we must bring it into the midst of our lives as a Christian community, even into the heart of our worship itself. This painful topic is the growing legitimacy in our society of the use of torture as an instrument of policy by representatives of our government.

About a year ago I heard powerful personal testimony from persons who are survivors of torture. One was a Catholic sister who has over one hundred burn scars on her back from when her captors during the Guatemalan civil war ground their lit cigarettes into her back. From them I learned that torture is not an event, or a series of events. Rather, it is a watershed, breaking life into before and after. The reflex to cringe never entirely goes away. The fear, the nightmares never entirely go away. Torture survivors are extremely vulnerable to suicide, with most suicides occurring between five and ten years after the torture itself has ended.

Now we have had public documentation of harsh interrogation techniques by the CIA, for example reported by ABC News November 18, 2005. They include: "Long Time Standing": prisoners are forced to stand handcuffed and with their feet shackled to an eye bolt in the floor for more than 40 hours. Exhaustion and sleep deprivation are effective in yielding confessions. Standing still that long means that blood can pool and clot in the feet and lower legs, and can lead to death. "The Cold Cell": prisoners are left to stand naked in a cell kept near 50 degrees. Throughout the time in the cell, prisoners are doused with cold water to induce hypothermia. "Water Boarding": prisoners are bound to an inclined board, feet raised and head slightly below the feet. Water is poured over their faces. Unavoidably, the gag reflex kicks in and a terrifying fear of drowning leads to almost instant pleas to bring the treatment to a halt.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch offer extensive documentation of these abuses, based primarily on first-hand accounts by U.S. military personnel stationed in Iraq. Rabbis for Human Rights, a prominent organization decrying these abuses, document the following kinds of torture in use:

- Sensory deprivation
- Isolation
- Detention in damp, frigid cells
- Denying sleep
- Withholding water
- Suspending people by their wrists, hands cuffed behind their backs
- Forced nudity
- Sexual exploitation

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- Punching, slapping and kicking
- Beating with a broom handle or chair
- Breaking chemical lights and pouring phosphoric liquid on bodies
- Using dogs to instill fear
- Threatening violence and death
- Threatening to harm or kill family members
- Mocking religious beliefs and degrading sacred texts.

There are many reasons which grow out of our faith that we may not turn away from this horror.

We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God. The recent Jewish document on Christian-Jewish relations, *Dabru Emet*, says: “Central to the moral principles of Torah is the inalienable sanctity and dignity of every human being. All of us were created in the image of God.” No matter how we understand that image, we believe that everyone, everyone has a spark inside them which is created in the image of God, even criminals, even terrorists, and especially even those defined as our enemies. Even when violent behavior has to be restrained or punished, that image of God requires that we respect the basic human rights of all persons, including the right not to be tortured.

We are called to care for the powerless among us. If ever there were an immediate human situation where the experience of power and powerlessness is unjustly skewed, it is the experience of applying and enduring torture.

We are called to hospitality to those who are not like us. Abraham opened his tent to the strangers, and we are called to extend hospitality to those whose faith and values are different from ours, or who have none at all.

But for us as Christians, and for me the clearest guidance from our faith, comes from Jesus in Matthew’s gospel: whatever we do to the least of these, we do to him. This goes for the good and the bad things we do to the least of these.

Whenever I hear the line “the least of these,” I remember Clyde Edgerton’s wonderful novel *Walking across Egypt*. In it the heroine, an elderly southern woman named Mattie is always feeding people wonderful home-cooked food and taking care of people, even though she is always saying, “I am slowing down, and I can’t do as much as I used to.” The town dogcatcher tells her about his sixteen-year-old nephew in jail for stealing a car:

Mattie thought about that Wesley boy and how she used to visit her late husband’s cousin in jail. Jesus said to do that. It was clear, in the Scriptures. And that kind of visiting made sense for some balance in the world, some balance against all those people with so much money who all the time buy, buy, buy. Greed, greed, greed. Never doing anything for anybody. “You think you’ll be visiting your nephew?” she asked. “Wesley? Wesley. Yeah, I’ll probably go see him sometime,” said [the dogcatcher]. “Take him some cigarettes.”

“Well, when you go see him, stop by and I’ll send him a little something to eat.” That scripture, Jesus talking about visiting prisoners and all, was “In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Mattie decides not to wait for Wesley’s uncle to visit him in jail, but to go herself, even though she has never met Wesley. She fixes him a plate with a big slice of pound cake and a big piece of apple pie and a Mason jar of iced tea.

Mattie walked through the gate and toward the young man. She’s headed at me, thought Wesley. He looked over his shoulder again. She’s got to be coming to one of them guys. I ain’t done nothing to her. He don’t look like Jesus, thought Mattie. I’m getting the heck out of here, thought Wesley. She was headed right at him. Headed right between his eyes, carrying a covered tin pan and a paper sack. . . .

Thus begins a wonderful developing relationship between these two unlikely characters. Again and again appears the refrain of Mattie’s deep sense of responsibility for this scruffy, unloved kid. Whenever she thinks about what she is going to do next, in her mind she calls him, “one of the least of these my brethren.”

There are at least two pragmatic reasons to oppose the use of torture. First, experts agree that statements gathered using torture is notoriously unreliable. Prisoners quickly figure out what their captors want them to say, and they will say *anything* to get the torture to stop. Second, countries opposed to us look at us and say, “Well, they’re doing it, so we can do it, too.” So our brave young military service people overseas are much more vulnerable to being tortured if they are caught, because the U.S. is known to be applying torture. We know that this has already happened.

Until now, the use of torture by the United States was authorized only by executive authority. But in September of this year, the “Military Commissions Act” passed both houses of Congress, and the President signed it into law on Tuesday, October 17. This law is over 100 pages long and contains ambiguous language. But it is clear that it does not prohibit three things: torture, extraordinary rendition (where prisoners are turned over to other countries to be tortured), and secret prisons. And why would anyone want secret prisons unless things were going on in them that they did not want to be known?

The law contains many troubling provisions beyond the scope of our time this morning. Let me just mention them briefly.

1. The President has the sole authority to define who is an “enemy combatant.” That designation is the fork in the road where a prisoner loses all constitutional protections.
2. An enemy combatant loses the right of *habeas corpus*, the right to protest one’s imprisonment, and may be held in detention without access to a lawyer.

3. An enemy combatant can be sentenced, even to the death penalty, without even common sense understandings of justice in place. Anyone so designated can be sentenced without knowing what charges are brought against them, without knowing what evidence is used against them or who brought evidence against them, and without the right to mount a defense. Evidence may be used to convict which is gained by coercion or hearsay.

4. The law immunizes retroactively interrogators who may have engaged in torture. This includes the military, the CIA and private contractors.

Religious leaders have joined together over the last year and formed the National Religious Campaign against Torture. That campaign has issued a public statement called “Torture is a Moral Issue,” which was published in the *New York Times*, and in the Congressional journal, *Roll Call*. It has been signed by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, former President Jimmy Carter, Rick Warren (author of *A Purpose-driven Life*), Cardinal McCarrick, Ted Haggard (president of the National Association of Evangelicals), Sayyid Syeed, (general secretary of the Islamic Society of North America), Bishop William S. Skylstad, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and a wide variety of other leaders.

As you prayerfully consider these issues, beware the pitfalls of mutating definitions of torture. You will hear the U.S. administration declare, “The United States does not torture.” But they use a very different definition of torture than the commonly accepted international definition, as it is expressed in Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. The administration’s first definition stated that only “organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death” constituted torture punishable by law. Everything we have heard about this morning was permitted under that definition. It has since been expanded somewhat, but still leaves open a wide swath of inhumane procedures in conflict with the Geneva Conventions. On September 12, 31 retired generals and admirals issued a strong statement calling for strict adherence to Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.

As I was preparing this sermon, I admitted to my college-student daughter that I had some trepidation about bringing this issue into worship. She said, “Cut it out, Mom! This isn’t some partisan debate on some obscure budget amendment. This is torture!” That directness is what I would bring to you this morning. Torture is a military issue, and a hard-nosed political issue. But it is also a profoundly moral and spiritual issue. It is wrong. When it is perpetrated in our name “unto one of the least of these, my brethren,” it is the responsibility of all of us.

Amen.

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