

## On Not Taking Vengeance Against Our Enemies

Sermon by Tom F. Driver,  
First preached at Old Parish Church (UCC),  
in Sheffield, MA, August 31, 2008

### Scripture readings:

Matthew 16:21-26a  
Romans 12:9-21

### Sermon text: Romans 12:20:

**“Beloved, never avenge yourselves .... / No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. / Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”** (Rom. 12:19-21)

### Introduction

In January and February of this year I made a pleasure trip to Morocco, a beautiful and tourist-friendly country. In August I sat in my living room to re-watch a 2007 film called *Rendition*, because it's about the terrible subject of torture that I will address today. The title refers to something the CIA calls “extraordinary rendition,” which means flying a suspect to a foreign country to have him tortured there. Having seen this film in a theater when it was released, I watched it again on DVD, the better to prepare for this sermon. The disk contained also a 30-minute documentary film and other special features. From these I discovered two surprising things.

The first was that much of the movie was filmed in Marakech, the fascinating medieval Moroccan city that I had so much enjoyed visiting and photographing.

The second surprise disturbed me. I learned that one of the places to which the United States has sent prisoners to be tortured is Rabat, the capital of Morocco, another city I had visited with pleasure.

I mention these things in order to point out that the subject of my sermon is not as far away from us as we might want to think. The torture of human beings is

something our own government does, and sometimes asks other governments to do for us. It is going on under our noses.

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Give ear to my Biblical text, taken from Paul's letter to the Romans:

**“Beloved, never avenge yourselves .... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

[Rom. 12:19-21]

Paul, following Jesus, held the belief that there is no gain from others' pain.

The Christians in Rome, to whom Paul wrote, were living in very real danger of persecution by the mighty Roman Empire. But he might have writing to us, living as we are in another empire which for seven years has been seeking the physical destruction of evildoers. Perhaps Paul is trying to tell us that there is no gain from others' pain.

We should have no hesitation in calling torture a sin of the worst kind.

The movie *Rendition* tells a fictional story. I will tell you a true one. It is among several actual cases that inspired the movie:

On September 26, 2002, shortly after the first anniversary of September 11, a Canadian citizen was detained by U.S. authorities at Kennedy Airport in New York City. He was changing planes after a trip abroad -- on his way home to his family in Canada. Government agents drew him aside for questioning. Sensing danger, he asked to see a lawyer but was told he had no right to have one. Nor was he allowed to phone anyone. He dropped completely out of sight. He was put into solitary confinement for nearly two weeks. Then he was put on a secret government airplane and taken to Jordan. From there he was driven blindfolded across the border into Syria. The Syrians put him in an isolation cell six feet long by three feet wide and five feet high. There was no plumbing and no light except for a small hole in the ceiling. There he spent ten and one-half months. On the second day they began to beat him. He was forced to put his hands palm-up on a table, where they hit him so hard with a metal rod that the pain lasted for six months. He underwent torture time and again. Finally he told his torturers that he had attended a training camp in Afghanistan. It was not true; but he was desperate to stop the torture.

After nearly a year, the Syrians released him, stating publicly that they had found nothing to link him to any criminal or terrorist organization, or to any such activity. To this day, he has not been charged by any government with any crime. His own Canadian government has, I believe, apologized to him. But Syria has not, and the United States has not.

His name is Maher Arar. Too bad for him it is not Joe Smith. How would you and I and Joe Smith like to be kidnapped and tortured for ten months?

What do we gain from othes' pain?

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"If," said Jesus, "If, you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me."

Well, it WAS done to Jesus. He also was detained without cause and tortured. In fact, he was put to death by torture. Does that mean that torture is all right?

And what if Maher Arar had actually BEEN some kind of terrorist? Would that mean that torture is all right?

I have been greatly disturbed by the silence of most of our churches about this subject. In January of 2006, Anne and I attended a conference at Princeton Theological Seminary about the religious response to torture. We learned that discussion of torture is harder in churches than anywhere else. We learned of a national public opinion survey which showed that there is less opposition to torture among church-goers than among others.<sup>1</sup> It is been a shocking silence about a shocking develoment in American life.

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1. In October of 2005, eighteen months after the photos from Abu Ghraib were made public, the Pew Research Foundation conducted a survey using this question: "Do you think the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information can often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified?" The results were partially tabulated by The National Catholic Reporter in 2006 and can be seen online at: [http://ncronline.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2006a/032406/032406h.htm](http://ncronline.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2006a/032406/032406h.htm)

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We hear the argument that if torture is done in the name of national security, it can be justified. It seems that St. Paul did not think so. He himself had served jail time for preaching about Christ, which was considered subversive. He wrote: **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

Since September 11, 2001, our country has taken the path of trying to overcome evil with evil. Speaking in the National Cathedral in Washington three days after the terrorist attacks, the President, while declaring a war on terror, said that it is the responsibility of the United States to “rid the world of evil.”

It was a statement that should have been repudiated by Christians. Ridding the world of evil is not a human project but a divine one. And the way that God works to rid the world of evil is not the way of war. Rather, it is that of overcoming evil with good, as St. Paul clearly saw.

One of our best commentators on the morality of public life is James Carroll, the former priest turned novelist and historian who writes a regular column for *The Boston Globe*. Here’s what he said in that paper:

**“The worst manifestations of evil have been the blowback of efforts to be rid of it. ... The most noble ambition has invariably led to the most ignoble deeds. ... The record of this deadly paradox is written in the full range of literature, from Sophocles to ... Dostoyevski to Ursula ... LeGuin, each of whom raises the perennial question: What is permitted to be done in the name of "ridding the world of evil"?”**

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On September 16, 2001, the Vice President of the United States said on *Meet the Press*, “We’ll have to work ... the dark side.... it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal...”

It has been four years since America first saw pictures of the sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib near Baghdad. I remember how stunned I was when I

saw them: People stripped of their clothes and forced into pornographic poses. A naked man, trembling with fear, cornered by an attack dog, while our military guards laugh. A hooded man standing on a box, arms outstretched, with wires for electrical shock dangling from his fingers -- an image that is a gross caricature of Jesus's crucifixion.

Investigative reporting has revealed that these scenes were not exceptional. Instead, they came from decisions made at the highest levels of government to work the dark side.

**if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.**

[Pause]

Many people have wondered what Paul meant by heaping burning coals on the heads of one's enemies. To us it's a very strange image, but to Paul's audience it probably had a double meaning.

For one thing, the words contain an allusion to Psalm 18, where the poet speaks of God's appearance to him in storm clouds, thunder, lightning, and "coals of fire." In other words, God's appearance is like the eruption of a volcano. Hence, to say "coals of fire," was to say, this is something from God.

But the words also mean something very different. "Coals of fire" is also an allusion to the smelting of metal. Think of how the hot coals of a furnace cause metal to soften in the smelter's crucible. The idea is that acts of kindness will melt the heart of the enemy.

Put these two thoughts together, and you get this: The true outpouring of God is not something fearful and destructive like volcanic lava. Instead, it is kindness and love poured out where you would least expect it.

There is no gain from others' pain.

Yes, I know, you are thinking this is lovely and ideal but irrelevant to what goes on in real life and in war. We think this because we do not know, or do not remember, our history.

In the American Revolution, George Washington's men were "unlawful combatants." They were fighting a guerilla war against the British, using actions that the British regarded as terrorism. So the British tortured and killed the Americans they captured. Instead of retaliating in kind, George Washington ordered his troops to treat the British soldiers well. They should be treated, he said, "with humanity." He said they should be given "no reason to complain of us copying the brutal manner of the British Army." He went on:

**"While we are contending for our own liberty we should be very cautious of violating the rights of conscience in others, ever considering that God alone is the judge of the hearts of men, and to Him only in this case, are they answerable."**

Some historians give this policy of George Washington credit for turning the tide of the war in favor of the Americans. It boosted the morale of his men, and it increased the rate of desertion among the British. George Washington knew that there is no gain from others' pain.

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The shock I felt when I first saw the pictures from Abu Ghraib has been matched by dismay at the silence of the churches. Do people not care? I think it possible that many Christians find themselves in a conflict of loyalties:

On the one hand, loyalty to Jesus and to God requires us to repudiate torture. This was clear to John Thomas, the President of the United Church of Christ, when he said:

**"Christians believe that all people, by the very fact of their creation, are endowed with the image of God, a source of dignity and worth that cannot be erased by thoughts or behaviors, no matter how reprehensible or dangerous. ... no threat is so great as to justify our surrendering the most central values of what it means to be a Christian."**

On the other hand, our Government justifies the use of torture, which it calls “harsh interrogation,” telling us it is needed in order to keep us safe.

Pulled this way and that, many congregations seem like deer caught in headlights: they do not know which way to go, and so they freeze.

However, a growing number of churches are taking a stand. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture was formed at the beginning of 2006 and now has nearly 300 churches and other faith communities as Participating Members. All have subscribed to the following Statement of Conscience:

**“Torture violates the basic dignity of the human person that all religions, in their highest ideals, hold dear. It degrades everyone involved -- policy-makers, perpetrators and victims. It contradicts our nation's most cherished ideals. Any policies that permit torture and inhumane treatment are shocking and morally intolerable.”**

More than 18,000 individuals have also signed on to that statement, and I urge everyone to do the same.

The month of June was designated as Torture Awareness Month. About 350 churches in all 50 states hung out large anti-torture banners saying, “Torture is Wrong,” or “No to Torture,” or “Torture is a Moral Issue.”

In May the UCC Conference Ministers of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island called on all “clergy and members of United Church of Christ congregations in our six New England Conferences, to join with us in ... witness to abolish US-sponsored torture.”

Currently the National Religious Campaign against Torture is engaged in an Executive Order Project. The idea is to ask each of the presidential candidates to agree to ban torture by issuing an executive order as soon as he is inaugurated. We are trying to get many signatures to a Declaration of Principles which give the rationale for such an executive order. If you want to lend your name, you can go online and do it.

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Behind our modern words that oppose torture for the sake of human dignity and human rights, a discerning ear can hear the more poetic and prophetic words from the Bible. In today's Lectionary readings, we can hear the poetry and the prophecy in words of Jesus and Paul:

"... those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

"... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink ...."

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

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