

Sermon at the Unitarian-Universalist Meeting House
“Torture: Morality and Accountability”
January 10, 2010
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“Do not do unto others what you would not want done to yourself.” – The Golden Rule

“Remember them that are in prison, as if you were imprisoned with them; and them that are being tortured...” Hebrews 13:3

I want to begin by thanking you all for the somewhat courageous invitation to ask me to talk to you about the unsavory topic of torture. And I want to thank each of you who actually showed up this morning. This is a difficult topic. It is a tale of immorality and illegality. And I want you to know that I speak with you this morning with my own sense of trepidation and humility as I explore with you a dark side of our human species.

Let me begin with a bit of personal history. How did I get involved and committed to the study and prevention of torture?

Like many of you I grew up in the 1950s during the Korean War that we generally considered was part of a wider war with China. And one of the often-repeated pieces of propaganda about why we were fighting that war is that “those people” didn’t care about life, and they tortured people by running bamboo under your fingernails. This made a very strong impression on me at age 9 or 10, and I thought that torture must be the most awful thing that could happen to you, and “those people” must be very awful people indeed to commit such things. Could I ever stand to be tortured myself? Do you remember any of this, those of you old enough to remember?

Now jump ahead to the photographs and disclosures of torture committed by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib. During that time I was having lunch each week with one of my primary mentors at my work with the Maine Council of Churches. Charles Arbuthnot was then well into his eighties and not well. He had retired to Maine after working many years with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. Charles had been a Presbyterian chaplain in WWII and had accompanied the troops in the landing in Italy, and he was one of the few chaplains who survived that disastrous invasion. He went on to work with the WCC and he represented them at the Geneva Conventions. He told me that he had a special interest in the topic of preventing torture because he had argued so many times with the soldiers in the field that no matter what the temptation, they were never to torture a prisoner. That one of the main reasons we were fighting this war was because we were fighting to establish a sense of human decency on the earth where human life was respected, even the lives of our mortal enemies.

The news of Abu Ghraib was devastating to Charles. As he took in the travesty of Abu Ghraib he said he simply couldn’t believe it was true, and if it weren’t for the photos he still wouldn’t believe it. It felt like such a personal, spiritual, and national betrayal. My response to his distress was to assure him that I would take up on his behalf my own

effort to confront our use of torture and try to secure the laws of the Geneva Convention against torture that he had help to establish. Charles died two months later.

So here I am trying to abolish torture in 2010. To do so I have joined cause with a number of others. I am a regular member of Washington State Religious Campaign Against Torture which, in turn, is an affiliate of the national, DC based, National Religious Campaign Against Torture. And I am also on the Executive Committee of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, also based in DC, and we helped initiate the NRCAT organization. And even beyond that I work with our Quaker organization specifically dedicated to ending US torture, the Quaker Initiative to End Torture or QUIT. All of these organizations work with a network of other organizations also trying to end torture: Amnesty International, the ACLU, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Human Rights Watch among many others.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

It has been said that even thinking about torture runs chills down most peoples' spines, *and* it also freezes the ability to act. The crime is too big, too secretive, too heinous, too gruesome to contemplate let alone try to address.

That's why I like to begin by thinking in more general terms about the wider spectrum of violence which I define, in the succinct mode of the ten second sound bite, as "any force that inflicts or threatens uninvited harm." Torture, of course, is at the brutal end of that spectrum of violence, beyond murder, even perhaps beyond war, I think, because it involves a prolonged, personal engagement with another person while causing them unbearable pain and suffering, either as punishment or to hear confessions or attempt to retrieve by force information which the tormentor assumes the person being tormented possesses.

The basic morality regulating any level of violence is summarized in one of the only teachings that is referenced in all of the 21 major religions of the world, the "Ethic of Reciprocity," or, as it is commonly called in Christian teaching, the Golden Rule. You all know it. We begin teaching it to our children when they were tiny babies: A baby bites you. You yelp out of pain and to let the baby know it hurts. When the baby is old enough you explain that biting is wrong because it hurts - and you don't want to hurt someone because you don't want to be hurt. At a universal level the Hebrew text says it succinctly: "What is hateful to you, do not to others. This is the law: all the rest is commentary. (Talmud, Shabbat, 31a) Or "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you." This is repeated time and again in all major religious teachings.

So if it is so universally wrong to bite and inflict all sorts of abuse and harm on others because we don't like that sort of treatment done to ourselves, and if torture is the absolute dregs of this violation of the Ethic of Reciprocity, if it is such a basic wrong, so universally condemned, why am I standing here in 2010 trying to get my own government and people throughout the world to stop it? How could we have justified torture as a U.S. policy? And how did it come to be done in our name within our so-

called “god-fearing country?” And how is that there are still those who defend it, allow it, condone it, and rationalize it, yes, even after Obama has declared that we not longer allow torture?

The simple answer is, with all acts of violence, we humans have the ability to place ourselves sufficiently beyond or outside “the other” that we can justify abusing “the other” because we are “bigger, stronger, more righteous or simply meaner,” or because we simply don’t consider “the other” worthy of our respect as a human being.

I am now reading the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Known World, by Edward Jones that chronicles the culture of slavery in a fictitious small town in Virginia in the 1830s and 40s. Slaves were most often referred to not even as slaves but as simply “property.” And as such they need not to be treated as human beings. They could be whipped, separated from their families, sold or hung with impunity because they were not just “the other” as human beings, but in a whole category that defined “the other” as non-human “property.” One way of avoiding the Golden Rule, then, is simply to disregard the humanity in “the other.” Disconnect. Rationalize. When we think of “the other” as property, as unequal, undeserving, unworthy, threatening subhumans, we can do awful things to them. Over history people have been able to say, “I have a right to do violence even to my spouse, my child, my employee, my neighbor, and especially ‘my enemy’ because they are below me, less than, held in utter contempt, despised and hated.”

To be able to torture someone you have to disconnect from the other person, to disassociate yourself. As you inflict pain, however, you also need to disconnect and disassociate from yourself. To abuse someone, especially to torture them, does terrible violence to your own humanity because torture is a bedrock violation of a bedrock moral principle. Those who have studied torture say that a disproportionate number of people who commit torture also commit suicide; they can not live with the memories of their inhumanity to another person and apparently their own sense of inhumanity. And most are not able to function in normal relationships when they return to society.

Although members of the Bush administration and their minions – and now the it seems, unfortunately, some members of the Obama administration as well - who develop and support torture policy never have to face those they cause to be tortured. But their efforts to legally justify torture is actually the greatest crime of all because it gives permission and direction for those who actually carry it out. And perhaps even worst of all, all Americans are now implicated in this crime, and continue to pay a price in terms of our sense of shame and our loss of our moral bearings, individually, as a nation, and in the eyes of the world. It is not unlike the lingering sense of moral complicity and shame felt by many Germans who lived during the Nazi regime.

[I need to interject at this point that the other end of the spectrum from violence is non-violence. The principles of nonviolence, in contrast, emphasize connection and unity with “the other,” with empathy, compassion, and kindness. It is to honor, as Quakers and others say, “that there is that of God in each of us.” For many of us, this is the basis of

our peace testimony: we refuse to commit violence against another human being who is also seen as carrying the image of God, even if they are our enemy.]

So back to our topic of torture and the moral disconnect. I have tried to convince you – if you even needed convincing – that torture is essentially a moral issue, an issue of the spirit and the heart, and to commit torture is an egregious assault on our hearts and our moral bearings.

Here we are on January 10, 2010, trying to figure out how we can prevent and abolish this practice of torture in our own nation and throughout the planet. Astonishingly we find it is hard work. The United States has been taken prisoner by such a terrible immoral “Tar Baby” of governmentally sanctioned torture that we can’t seem to figure out how to get away from it.

Here are some facts:

- 1) No matter how our government tries to rename it (“enhanced interrogation,” for example), we have committed, as a sanctioned part of our national policy, acts of torture. This has now been documented and confirmed in various testimonies and research and photos. It has been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that we have committed torture. We have committed, as a nation, a crime against humanity.
- 2) The Obama administration declared in the second day of the administration that the U.S. will not conduct acts of torture. But there are reports that acts of torture continue in places like the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, and our country continues the practice of rendition, of sending prisoners to other countries where torture is likely to occur.
- 3) These acts of torture are in direct violation of international law that that the US has ratified. The prohibition against torture is among the most firmly anchored principles of human rights law, codified in more than ten international treaties. In 1966 the torture prohibition was given prominence in the cornerstone postwar human rights treaty, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that was ratified by some 160 countries and clearly stipulates that the prohibition against torture cannot be attenuated or suspended, even in times of public emergency. [A terrorist attack against the U.S., for example.] The most well known document against torture is included in the Geneva Conventions but it refers only to the conduct of war. The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (the CAT Agreement), however, organized in 1984 and signed by President Reagan in 1988, extends to all political circumstances, including war, and explicitly applies to what is arguably the most threatening situation for people worldwide – imprisonment, abuse and torture by their own governments.

- 4) It is very difficult to enforce these laws. As with the U.S. right now, and other countries like Chile in the past, national governments do not want to expose their own sinister complicity in illegal and inhuman acts such as torture. Those most likely to be prosecuted, moreover, may continue to personally hold great power within the government, or governmental agencies such as the CIA may totally resist a trial or Commission of Inquiry because of the information and the culpability it would undoubtedly expose. Unfortunately we have yet to establish the necessary international court and enforcement system that is capable of trying, convicting and punishing those who commit torture.
- 5) Failure to prosecute the illegal and immoral policies and implementation of torture, however, establishes a precedent that normalizes the use of torture and puts our nation apparently above the law. Without accountability, it will be easier to commit and justify torture in the future. Any government that can operate with impunity and disregard of the law establishes the basis of tyranny and a police state. What is most at stake in the debate about torture, then, is whether we as a nation are outside the law, and if so, are we then not becoming a police state subject to despotic tyranny and lawlessness?
- 6) So, my final point – my final fact - is that we have to do something, don't we, if we don't want to end up in a police state? Can we find the courage and political will to abide by and enforce such a basic code of law such as the prohibition of torture or will we allow ourselves to slide into a worsening condition of tyranny, lawlessness and a police state?

What recourse do we have within our democratic system that will help us address this crucial question of stopping the immoral and illegal practice of torture?

- The first thing we recommend is that you help bring the topic out of the closet. Talk about what is at stake in our social circles and at work. We suggest writing letters, either personally or collectively, to our congressional reps – Larsen, Cantwell, and Murray – expressing our concern about the U.S. sponsored torture and accountability for it, pressing them to support anti-torture legislation and other means of accountability, stating your expectation that they will work personally to abolish torture; specifically we encourage you to write AG Holder and ask him to appoint an independent Commission of Inquiry which you can also learn more about at the NRCAT website.
- In terms of continuing to learn about torture, we suggest a 20 minute video and study guide, “Ending U.S. Sponsored Torture: A Study Guide for People of Faith,” produced by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture which available to download at their website, www.nrcat.org. I also have a

copy of the full length documentary, Ghosts of Abu Ghraib, to loan to those interested

- Another suggestion is that you support one of the organizations working to prevent torture. Our own organization, WSRCAT or our national affiliate, NRCAT, of course, but the ACLU and Amnesty International among other organizations are equally active. Or even closer to home, inquire how your own denomination is addressing this issue at a national level.
- Continue to pay attention to the continuing saga of disclosures about U.S. sponsored torture and the ongoing efforts to investigate and prosecute those responsible.
- Write your thoughts about U.S. sponsored torture in a letter to the editor, a personal blog, Facebook, or other sources of social communication.
- Another suggestion, closer to home, is to write a prisoner in Monroe prison. Although this prisoner is hopefully not being tortured, this personal contact would engage the correspondent in the life of not only the individual prisoner, but with all those who are incarcerated throughout the world.
- A final suggestion – the most challenging of all – would be to form a small working group to continue to address the issue of torture within your congregation if there were sufficient interest to do so.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity for me to share this concern with you and for your attentiveness to this extremely difficult topic.

I would like to close in a spirit of prayer for all those who have been subjected to torture; for those who have planned, justified, and committed the torture; and for all of us who have been implicated in this crime. May we all find a way to abolish torture from the face of the earth.

Amen.