Who Are We Really? Breaking with the Past to Become God's Children

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Good morning. It is a tremendous privilege – and also very humbling and a little daunting – to have this opportunity to speak with you about a topic that is important, but that I am also keenly aware can be difficult to hear about and think about. Anyone who has tried to engage others in a dialog about torture knows that it can feel a bit like finding yourself at a cocktail party and suddenly realizing you forgot to put on your deodorant when you were getting dressed. You can sort of feel the people you're trying to talk to scoping out the nearest exit.

It's a very understandable response. Yet I've found nothing more heartening and life-affirming than advocating for torture survivors and for measures to stop and prevent torture. I believe this is so because standing up to cruelty, in its basest, crudest forms, means honoring and embracing the dignity of every human being, without exceptions. I believe this challenge is central to our identity as Christians, because respecting and defending the dignity of every human is the essence of what Christ calls us to do.

June, in addition to being a month of graduations, weddings, and family vacations, is also Torture Awareness Month for survivors of torture and their loved ones. This stems from the United Nations General Assembly's designation of June 26 as International Day in Support of Survivors and Victims of Torture, because it is the anniversary of the date the Convention Against Torture entered into force in 1987. President Ronald Reagan signed the Convention the following year, and the U.S. Senate ratified it in 1994.

Through my 30 years as a volunteer human rights activist, I've learned what a deeply entrenched global phenomenon torture is. Sadly, human beings have been very resourceful in inventing ways to inflict physical and emotional pain on others. Human rights monitors have documented torture in far too many countries. My own work with Amnesty International included campaigning for accountability and justice for victims of torture and political and ethnic-based killings, first in Central and South America, and later in the former Yugoslavia. In that context, I became accustomed to viewing my own country mainly as a refuge for torture victims and as a potential influence on other governments' human rights practices. Those remain important roles for the United States.

As we all know, though, we have never been the same since September 11, 2001. Within a few years after the evil murders of that tragic day, allegations began to trickle out about human rights abuses by U.S. personnel in the "war on terror." Although most of us were horrified by the evidence of torture at an American-run prison in Iraq, called Abu Ghraib, we eventually learned that some of the abhorrent tactics used on prisoners there were not dramatically different from treatment that was authorized by officials at the very top of

our government. These tactics included sleep deprivation, stress positions, exposure to extreme temperatures, slapping, forced nudity, and sexual humiliation. In a few cases, the President also authorized waterboarding, sometimes known as simulated drowning, although those who have experienced it say there is nothing simulated about it. I began to feel that it made no sense for me as an American to work only against human rights violations in other countries when my own house was so in need of cleaning.

In 2006, I attended a conference convened by a new faith-based organization called the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, or NRCAT, which had formed to oppose U.S.-sponsored torture. I saw a couple of especially compelling reasons to join their efforts. First, although there were other periods in our history when U.S. personnel had committed human rights violations, including torture, to the best of my knowledge, the post-9/11 period was the first time the U.S. had made torture part of official policy.

Second, not only was it becoming clear that torture had been authorized at the highest levels, government officials including the President and the Vice President – even as they refused to call it torture – justified torture by asserting that it was necessary for our protection. Because I was convinced this was a simplistic and misguided assumption – as well as illegal and immoral – based on my previous human rights work on other countries, and because I was among the intended beneficiaries of this cruelty, I felt I had to do something to separate myself from it, even if doing so had no effect at all on the government's policies. In my view, hearing that it was being done for my protection meant that if that was not OK with me and I did not say so, I was complicit.

I was especially glad to see the emergence of NRCAT as a faith-based response to these policies because I believe people of faith, and Christians in particular, have an especially resonant voice when it comes to torture, if we choose to use it.

Many of you may recall that, at our annual meeting in January 2009, Little River UCC voted to become an endorsing member of NRCAT. It's been a long time, though, since we've paused to look together at what that means.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture works to build a culture in the United States that opposes torture and inhumane treatment in all circumstances. This includes working against religious bigotry, especially anti-Muslim bigotry, which has helped fuel an increased acceptance of torture in our society since 9/11.

NRCAT also opposes indefinite detention, including at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and prolonged solitary confinement in U.S. prisons. Both of these are undeniably cruel, often with serious and lasting mental health consequences. Of course, indefinite detention without trial also violates our obligations under international law and our own Constitution.

The plight of the 166 inmates remaining at Guantanamo is desperate. Most of them have been on a hunger strike for nearly 5 months, and many are being violently force-fed in contravention of medical ethics standards. I welcome President Obama's newly kindled

interest in closing Guantanamo. But the actions that must be taken to achieve that won't happen unless we who are uncomfortable with the face of the United States that Guantanamo presents to the world step up, speak out, and keep speaking until every detainee's case is resolved.

I want to come back for a moment to the refusal to call torture by its name when we are the ones doing it. What is torture? The legal definition under the Convention Against Torture is a little long to quote verbatim here, but, in essence, it's any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person to obtain information or a confession, or to punish, intimidate, or coerce that person or a third person. There is also a definition in the Torture Convention of "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment", a lesser form of abuse that is also illegal. The Convention Against Torture is a crystal clear prohibition of all forms of cruel, coercive treatment in all circumstances. This is why definitional arguments about whether a particular form of abuse is torture are blind alleys that cause us to miss the point of the fundamental prohibition of torture. And, especially for us as Christians, definitional issues about torture distract us from God's message for us.

In today's scripture reading from Matthew, we were reminded that Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

We begin to see the pointlessness of arguing about the definition of torture when we think about Jesus's challenge to us and the purpose of ill-treatment, regardless of whether we call it torture or something else. Whenever we choose to inflict pain on another person over whom we have complete control, for the purpose of coercing that person to say or do something he or she would be unwilling to say or do, but for the pain we are inflicting, does it really matter what we call it? Can there be any doubt that it is wrong? Can we imagine Jesus beating his enemies, subjecting them to sleep deprivation or freezing temperatures, or forcing them to stand for hours on end without moving, or waterboarding them for any reason? I surely can't.

Cruelty profoundly changes our relationship with God. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus did not say, don't be too cruel to your enemy, but a little cruelty is OK. He said love your enemy, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He identified kindness – even to our enemies – as the means by which we fulfill our destiny as children of God. Respect for the basic human dignity of our enemies is necessary in order for us to be the children of God. Cruelty estranges us from God. It destroys our own dignity as humans created in the image of God, just as surely as it crushes the body and spirit of the one who is tortured.

So why do we argue about the definition of torture and whether particular forms of cruelty amount to torture? Why did President Bush and Vice President Cheney and any number of officials in their administration vehemently deny that waterboarding was torture, even though waterboarding historically had been prosecuted by the U.S.

government as a crime? I don't think it was solely to avoid legal liability, though that was surely part of it. And why do U.S. media outlets parrot this refusal to call waterboarding by Americans "torture", even though they have labeled waterboarding by other governments "torture"? I believe this is partly because denying our waterboarding was torture is necessary to make it compatible with our benign image of ourselves. I believe this is also why we are unwilling to hold ourselves accountable for torture. And yet, accountability is a crucial ingredient of turning away from sin and moving towards God.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of Maher Arar. Maher Arar had dual Canadian and Syrian citizenship, but settled with his wife in Canada many years ago, where he worked as a computer software engineer. In 2002, when returning from visiting relatives in Tunisia, the Arar family transited through JFK Airport in New York. Maher Arar was detained there for several days, not allowed to see a lawyer, and then transferred secretly to Syria. There, he was held in a tiny 3-by-6-foot cell and severely tortured. Largely because of a campaign led by his wife, Maher Arar was returned to Canada after a year in prison in Syria. A few months later, the Canadian government appointed a commission to investigate the role of Canadian authorities in his rendition to Syria. The Canadian commission fully exonerated Maher Arar, published a very detailed report of its investigation, apologized to him, and paid him financial compensation, as required by the Convention Against Torture. The United States still refuses to do anything similar. Maher Arar says all he wants from the U.S. government is an apology and an admission that he is not a terrorist.

It may be easy to understand the political difficulty of holding accountable those responsible for the treatment of Maher Arar and other torture victims, but we should recognize that we are paying a price for the absence of accountability. Lack of accountability for torture has reduced torture to a policy choice available to future American presidents, rather than the inconceivable crime it used to be before 9/11. And public opinion polls show a near doubling of public acceptance of abusive interrogation techniques in the last 6 or 7 years. Most concerning of all, support for torture is reportedly higher among young people than among older Americans. Meanwhile, we have a former President and Vice President who boast of having ordered acts that our government used to prosecute as crimes. That fact alone, I believe, has a very corrosive effect on our collective conscience.

When we reflect on the role of confession, atonement, and forgiveness in our own experience, we can all think of examples of the healing power of confession and remorse, both from the perspective of the one seeking forgiveness and the perspective of one who grants it. How much easier it is to let go of anger and hurt when faced with a remorseful offender. And although asking for forgiveness makes us vulnerable, exposing us to the possibility of rejection, it also helps us separate ourselves from past behavior we are not proud of. Most important, I think, repentance is essential to demonstrate to the one we have wronged our intention to change. It signals that we can be trusted again, that we want things to be different next time. We need to do this, too, as a nation, to own our

past practices and policies and demonstrate the will to change. So we can truly be the people we claim to be.

Thomas Merton was once asked what was the contemporary face of evil. He replied that it was dehumanization – the inclination to see certain lives as less valuable than others. I think the same is true of our time. You don't need me to tell you that we live in a society that does not value all lives equally. We see evidence of this every day. We see it in differing responses to gun violence, depending on who the victims are. We see it in the alacrity with which Congress acts to shield the privileged from some of the effects of budget sequestration, while seeming indifferent to the impact of spending cuts on those who are most dependent on government programs. And we certainly see it in the increased acceptance of torture by Americans and in the relative silence that has greeted each passing anniversary of the creation of the prison at Guantanamo.

If we want to change this tendency to value some lives more than others, we need a new vision of what a truly pro-life society looks like. This is a much broader goal than ending torture. But surely it must include standing against cruelty, especially when cruelty is justified as necessary for our protection. And I would add, it requires repudiation – not just someday, but <u>today</u> – of a view of the entire world as a battlefield in a war with no boundaries in space or time, the logical consequence of which is that we cede to our leaders unlimited power to incarcerate and kill on our behalf, and create a dangerous precedent that is ever more likely to be turned against us.

There are many facets to working for a genuinely pro-life society. There is much to be done, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Many of us face a daily avalanche of pleas to support this and that cause. Trying to keep up with our email inboxes can make us feel like Lucy Ricardo in the chocolate factory. But all of us, no matter how busy we are, can do <u>something</u>. There will be opportunities here at Little River in the months ahead to explore the issues I've raised this morning more deeply and discover opportunities for meaningful action. Let's begin with a commitment to spend at least 10 minutes every month on sending a message to elected officials or calling them about a matter that we care about that is related to building a community and a country that value all lives equally. I especially ask you to join me in urging our leaders to take the steps that are needed to ensure that the United States never tortures again and renounces indefinite detention without trial. I believe that if every caring person in this country accepted this modest challenge, we would see some important changes. And it just might inch us a little closer to truly being children of God.