

He Suffered under Pontius Pilate: Jesus and Torture

Matthew 5:43-44; Hebrews 13:1-3

Scott Black Johnston

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York

Matthew 5: 43) “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44) But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Hebrews 13: 1) Let mutual love continue. 2) Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3) Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

This past week, a good deal of attention has been paid to the release of high-level memos and legal documents that describe American interrogation methods in aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. For the most part, government officials (past and present) are not denying that the treatment described in these memos actually took place. Instead, the argument that is raging (probably on Sunday morning, pundit-thick television at this very moment) regards whether or not harsh interrogation methods are ever warranted—justifiable.

This morning, I think it is important for us to take some time to talk about a Christian perspective on torture. It is not, I realize, an appealing subject for people who are hoping that church will be an escape—a little respite from the world after a hectic week. To tell you the truth, when I heard that it was going to be such a gorgeous weekend here in New York, I almost bagged the subject. Surely, I have got a flowers-are-blooming, Frisbees-in-the-air, life-is-good sermon somewhere in the file!?

Then, as I was thinking these cowardly, but happy thoughts, I listened to last Sunday’s sermon by Randy Weber. Randy preached on the story of “doubting” Thomas—the story of the risen Jesus inviting the disciple to touch the holes in his hands and the gash in his side. It was a powerful sermon on a powerful story. It also reminded me that our Lord, the resurrected Christ, is not some pristine, blemish-free human, but has a body that still bears the marks of his suffering—his torture and execution at the hands of the Roman government.

Yes, Easter is our glorious celebration of the open tomb. He is risen! Risen indeed. Yet, for all its joy, this season does not offer us an escape from hard truths. The marks of Good Friday linger. Among other things, this means that, today, in the context of a national debate on interrogation techniques, Christians cannot ignore the fact that we worship a God who was once tortured.

To begin our discussion this morning, it is probably helpful to put forth a definition. According to international law, torture is the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, for whatever reason.¹ It is a pretty simple definition. Although, I have also been helped by looking back at the root of the word. “Torture” comes from the Latin word *torquere* which literally means “to twist.” It

seems appropriate, for not only are human bodies and spirits intentionally twisted through torture, but those who plan for and administer the torture are twisted by these terrible practices too.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970 for his work on *The Gulag Archipelago*, a description of his own imprisonment and torture by the Soviet state. In reflecting on his time in the gulag, a sentence imposed for his criticism of Joseph Stalin, Solzhenitsyn wrote, “Our torturers have been punished most horribly of all They are departing downward from humanity.” There is something insidious that surrounds acts of torture. It seems like all who are touched by the practice (the person tortured, the torturer, and even the person who rationalizes it in a legal memo)—all become twisted by it.

Torture has been around for a long, long time. There is no society of which I am aware that has not, at some point in time, practiced torture. Early Christians were tortured for being Christian. Later, once they had the blessing of the state, Christians became torturers themselves. In the Spanish Inquisition, Jews and heretical Christians were tortured for not converting to Christianity and not professing orthodox beliefs. In Medieval Europe, torture was practiced by many rulers who saw it as an effective way to crush political opposition. In the 1690’s, in this country, magistrates in Massachusetts subjected women, who were reported to be witches, to various tortures, including partial drowning—a precursor to what we now call water-boarding.

State sponsored torture is not confined to any one end of the political spectrum. Rightist and leftist governments, communists and fascists, dictatorships and democracies have all employed torture. These governments have used torture to instill fear, to punish, and to try to extract information. That is, of course, the reason that officials of the American government have given for authorizing practices that we have been hearing about this past week.

All of which brings us to the so-called ticking time bomb scenario. The scenario (right out of the television program “24” or the recent installments in the James Bond franchise) goes like this. A bomb has been set to detonate that will kill thousands of people. A terrorist who has knowledge of the bomb is in custody. An interrogator is aware that the terrorist knows the location of the bomb and also knows that the only way he will reveal this information in time to save countless innocent lives is if he is tortured. What would you do?

Ethicists and pundits have a field day with this, but as Christians, we need to tread very carefully in these waters. As Dr. George Hunsinger, theologian at Princeton Seminary and longtime friend of this church, puts it, we never do have a perfect ticking bomb scenario in real life. We never know that torture will be the only effective means of getting information. We do not know if prisoners actually have valuable information. We are human. We make mistakes. We don’t always even know if we have the right bad guys.

During the reign of Augusto Pinochet during the 1970’s, it is estimated that over 31,000 people were tortured in Chile. During that time, a dark joke was told in the bars of Santiago. One night a military police officer was guarding a road and captured a fleeing rabbit. “Why are you running away, Bunny?” asks the guard. The rabbit responds, “They are killing all the elephants in Santiago.” The border guard soothes him, “That’s ok, you’re a bunny.” To which the rabbit responds, “And how am I supposed to prove that?” The joke was meant to point out the mistakes made by Chilean police

who purportedly arrested and tortured the wrong individuals, individuals who insisted that they were not at fault, but who were thought to be liars by the police.

No intelligence system is perfect. Decisions about employing torture are made by flawed individuals. What's more, says Hunsinger, once you introduce torture, it never stays confined. It creeps. It spreads. It increases in severity and scope. It is witnessed by others who decide to use it in ever expanding ways. This is the insidious nature of torture. Once we authorize degrading, debasing, and humiliating treatment of another human being, we introduce a toxin that will spread. This is the true ticking bomb, says Hunsinger, the moment when torture becomes accepted by some segment of a society. When we do this, as John McCain indicates on the cover of today's bulletin, we lose the moral high ground.

One of the most frequent confessions that we affirm together here in worship is the Apostles' Creed, an early statement made by Christians about their beliefs, perhaps as early as the first century. At the center of the Apostles' Creed is a paragraph about Jesus of Nazareth, a few sentences that include the haunting words "he suffered under Pontius Pilate." In other words, at the heart of this ancient confession is an acknowledgement that Jesus was tortured by the Roman government. This is the same Jesus who admonished his followers with the most uncomfortable (almost impossibly difficult) ethical charge of all time, "love your enemies."

I am not, I like to think, naïve; I realize that there are people in the world today whose hatred knows no bounds. Yet, as Christians, when we think about protecting ourselves and those whom we love, we must also grapple with the torture of Jesus. I believe that when we are lured by the promise of "a greater good" into using dehumanizing treatment, we have been tempted into walking down a very dark path indeed.

Yes, there are twisted people out there in the world—people who are even now dreaming up terrible possibilities for the citizens of this country. Of this I have no doubt. Yet, despite the great burden that this places on our leaders, we must not become what we despise. We worship the gentle Jesus who was tortured by the government of his day, and because of this we simply cannot condone either the "aberrant" abuses that have been the result of illegal actions (Abu Ghraib) or "officially sanctioned" interrogation practices.

Sometimes people speak as if our nation has a soul. If it is true that something as incredibly diverse and complex as a country can have a soul, then I believe our nation's soul is at risk as we consider how we will treat those—yes, even those who hate us—who are in our custody.

Note

1 Kenneth Roth, "Getting Away with Torture" in *Torture is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims and People of Conscience Speak Out*, edited by George Hunsinger, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Press: 2008), p. 4.