

Saturday Keynote Address

By Rev. Carol Wickersham

Torture raises many issues: legal, political, strategic, pragmatic; all are complex and all important, but the issues I'm going to talk about this morning are moral and, in many ways, they are simple. I have repeatedly said that as a person of faith I wade into the murk of politics because the issues moral issues are crystal clear. Torture is always and everywhere wrong.

I got involved in this issue the day the photos from Abu Ghraib were released. In some ways it was not a complete shock; I had known that the US had sponsored torture in Central America. Still this was different, on the front page, in our faces and even more shocking than the photos themselves, was the relative lack of outrage, especially from the faith community. In the days following the pictures I waited for the outcry, but there was nothing strong enough to get above the media noise—until a grassroots movement within the Presbyterian Church, No2Torture, began to work together and with similar groups from other faiths. That was almost five years ago, we've been working to generate outrage ever since.

Still, given the poll taken by the Pew Survey published last week, we still have a long way to go. That survey showed that those who label themselves as religious are more likely to support torture as a national security measure; and that practicing, worshipping believers are most vehement. Friends, I hope we go away from this day with the tools we need to turn this around. We are not in a position to speak the truth to power, unless we first tell it to the not-so-powerful, to ourselves and those standing next us at coffee hour.

We have everything we need to turn this around, but we need to raise the volume. You know who you need to talk to. Think of 6 people—your pastor, your neighbor, your newspaper editor, your brother-in-law. Then do it. And listen to them. Listen for points of commonality. The anti-torture coalition is very broad—pacifists and military chaplains, Evangelicals, Quakers, Presbyterians, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews.

I first want to be up front about two assumptions about how we all approach this issue. First, we each reach the common ground by different routes. By this I mean that I came to the conclusion that torture is always and everywhere wrong as a Protestant Christian using Reformed theology, but others got here by way of the Torah, the inner light, canon law, or a commitment to reduce suffering. The anti-torture coalition is very broad including military chaplains and pacifists, evangelicals, Muslims, Jews, Unitarians and people whose faith doesn't have a name. Sometimes it takes discipline to stay on common ground and not veer off into territory where we disagree. My job today is not to try to get you to take my path to the conclusion. We don't have time to argue about the route; people are still being tortured, held without charge and without hope. So I will speak from my tradition and I invite you to do the translation into yours. Throw out what doesn't work, but please think hard about what language will work to move your communities to action. This is not an intellectual exercise, there are lives at stake, souls at stake, perhaps even our own. So, the first thing that I suggest we have in common, is that we don't have to get to the finish line by the same path.

The second claim, strongly resonates where I now live in the heart of the heart of the country, but may sound more radical here in what people from Wisconsin refer to as the "left coast." What I want to claim is that that the anti-torture movement is a profoundly conservative movement. Conservative in

that it seeks to conserve or preserve what is best in our faith and in our nation. It is not a revolutionary movement, but a whistle blower movement, seeking to call us back to our ideals, back to our own best selves. This is about love of God and love of country. We are not going to hand that rhetoric or those ideals to anyone.

In social movement theory there is a profound difference in a revolutionary movement that seeks to supplant the old with something radically new, and a revival movement. Of course, I know enough history to be aware that the good, old days before torture, never really were. As a nation we have always tortured, but in the past we have done so in the shadows and when it has been called out, it has been prosecuted. What is new is that now we torture in the open and we have legalized it and legitimated it. Through the media, the stories we tell ourselves, we have normalized it. But it may not be too late to come to our senses and repudiate this story as anathema to whom we claim we are.

So because the time is short, I'm going to raise a number of spiritual, moral issues almost in a bullet point fashion, in hopes that they will help equip us to reclaim the story of who we really are and turn the poll numbers, public opinion and public policy around.

What I'm going to do is to bust open the current dominant popular myth, the myth that has come to supplant the religious narratives in all of our traditions, a myth that is not merely an alternative version of reality, it is a myth that is antithetical to a faith-based perspective. Simply stated the myth is that torture is sometimes justified because it works. Or to put it another way, torture is sometimes the lesser of two evils.

Let's look at some of the components of this claim. First, I would posit that there are some things that are wrong even if they work. For instance, slavery works as a cost-cutting labor practice; it's still wrong. The question is: what do we mean by "work"? We could argue that keeping down labor costs is not a bad thing, so maybe a little slavery is worth it. Of course, this is morally reprehensible. And we could argue that gathering intelligence to protect national security is a good thing, so maybe a little torture is worth it. This is indeed the argument made. Within this big myth are many embedded smaller myths.

For instance, the notion that torture works to gather intelligence. There are others at conference better qualified than me to argue this point and I'm going to leave them to it. Instead, I'm going to stipulate for the sake of argument, that in general torture yields almost no useful intelligence, but we can concoct a fictitious scenario where we can imagine it could, a *gedankenexperiment*, if you will. And, if we tell ourselves this story over and over and over again, we can begin to believe it is true. Week after week, year after year in episode after episode, Jack Bauer on "24" save us by torturing our enemies, to some of the highest ratings the industry has ever known. And Dick Cheney tells us the same scary story, last month at the American Enterprise Institute, saying that torture kept us safe 9/11, 9/11, 9/11—twenty times, he said 9/11 in a 20 minute speech.

It is fear that drives the narrative. The story begins by asserting that everything changed on 9/11, but it did not. As people of faith, we have been frightened before. We have been at the mercy of the empire and persecuted. We know how to resist this fear. This is from my tradition, the I John 4.18-20, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, *'I love God, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.'*"

This passage was written to Christians who feared detention without trial and torture at the hands of the Roman Empire. How did they deal with their fear? They remembered that they had been here before when the Assyrians had overrun their cities, when Babylon dragged them in chains into exile. How did the exiles learn to sing the Lord's song in a strange land? They remembered that they had been here before when they were slaves in Egypt. People of faith know how to resist fear—not with torture, but with love.

Our current secular story twists and perverts our faith story. Jack Bauer is cast as suffering servants who torture for our sakes, even though he'd rather not. We are supposed to feel sorry for Jack Bauer. Nobody knows the trouble Jack's seen, nobody knows but Jesus, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. But in my tradition we know it is Jesus Christ not Jack Bauer who saves us. We remember that it was Caiaphas, acting as prosecutor for the Empire did the cost-benefit analysis and concluded at Jesus' tribunal, "For the sake of the nation of one person must die." Thus, Jesus bar Joseph of Nazareth was tortured to death as a national security risk. It is imperative that people of faith retake control of our story and not allow it to be twisted. And, if you don't believe this is a problem, just google "Jack Bauer and Jesus" and listen in on the conversation equating the two.

Two years ago I was at a conference with a young man who had been an Army Intelligence Officer and a contract interrogator who had tortured a detainee once and then immediately resigned. Also at this conference was a woman who had been tortured. I had the privilege to listen in as he invited her to ask him anything she wanted to know. She asked, "I have always wanted to know what goes on in someone's mind when they torture?" His answer was twofold. First, he said that he began the questioning as a professional out of a sense of duty, still the lines were blurred. He was told that the threat was immense and immanent, and there was no limit to what was permissible to extract information. He said anger and fear took over and in all honesty, it felt good to slap the man harder and harder, adrenaline the man's screams fed it and the beast within him was unleashed until the man fell unconscious and the interrogator realized what he had done. He said he has nightmares every night. The woman said she did, too. They were both crying.

This leads to another version of the myth that torture works. It is the idea that a little torture is okay. There is no such thing as a little torture. There are many legal nuances of torture, though most adhere closely to the Geneva Conventions, Article 3 or the '84 UN Convention against torture excepting, of course, the dark convolutions of the Bybee memo. But the definition that works best for me is simple: torture uses a person's body and mind to destroy their soul. For people of faith, this can never be acceptable a little torture is a little soul destruction. There is no such thing.

In Christian scripture there are a number of stories of Jesus encountering demons. I've always stayed away from preaching about demon stories, they seemed primitive and superstitious. But after focusing for so many years on the issue of torture, I'm revisiting the demon stories. What you notice is that when Jesus encounters demons, he exorcises them, throws them out. Jesus does not negotiate with demons. When demons try to tempt him by promising power, even power to do good, he utterly rejects them. Torture is demonic. And the demonic myth that the demon of torture tempts us to believe is that we can use the evil of torture to accomplish a greater good.

One version of this myth is the myth of American exceptionalism. This is how we can denounce torture when it is done by Sadaam Hussein or Al Qaeda or the Taliban, but embrace it when it is done by Jack Bauer or our interrogators, because we will use for a good purpose and then we will stop. What we know from scripture as well as social science is that it doesn't work this way. There is no

such thing as torture lite. You can't domesticate a demon and keep it on a leash. It will always turn around a bite you. The Stanford experiments done right here in your own back yard showed that 80% normal, decent people given the opportunity and tacit permission by authorities will torture.

In my tradition we call this sin. You don't need to use our language. And we believe this sinfulness is part of our nature and we need that grace of God in many forms—grace, law, social sanctions—to keep it in check. In other words, torture is not the result of a few bad apples, torture is the result of not taking seriously the need for constant vigilance against the possibilities that lurks in us all. Could I be a torturer? Could you? Stats say 80% of us would under the right circumstances. I know that if you told me that one of you, any of you were going to harm my children, all bets would be off. The demon would be unleashed.

To use language that is new and still stiff on my tongue, I have come to say that the issue of torture has convicted me of my sin. When I saw the pictures of Abu Ghraib, and to this day when in prayer I visit the cells of those whom God has laid on my heart, I wonder why this issue? For a long time I thought it was because torture is so blatantly and baldly wrong. Perhaps God realized that I'm not a subtle thinker and decided to hit me with an ethical two-by-four. I thought that torture was the most obviously evil thing imaginable, but I have come to believe that it is actually just a manifestation of a deeper issue. In the books of Daniel and Revelation there is an image of a many headed beast or dragon. This beast is meant to be a symbol of empire; in Daniel, the Babylonian empire, in Revelation the Roman empire. The many heads are the many manifestations. I've come to see torture as one of the heads of a rising new empire. I now believe that torture is the direct offspring of the marriage of power and secrecy that has come to characterize the way our way of life. It is most obviously manifest in the unitary executive, in signing statements that flaunt intentions to implement the law, in widespread wiretapping, in the proliferation of black sites and ghost detainees, in the attempt to establish tribunals where habeas corpus is set aside and hear-say is admissible, in the proliferation of classified documents, in propaganda and restricted access by the press. Am I paranoid? I wish. Anyway, my point is that as we faithfully organize against torture, it is important to see it as part of a larger push toward empire. Why? Doesn't this just make it seem too much. No. What this does, as I've said before, is allow us to switch gears and to recognize that people of faith know how to do empire. Babylon, Assyria, Rome, under national socialism, while enslaved, while in exile. As Dorothy Soelle put it, we know how to sing the Lord's song in the belly of the beast. We've been there and done that. But we need to remember and we need to recognize that this time it's different, because this time we are on the side of the Empire. What is being done in Guantanamo is being done in our name, with our tax dollars. If we live in Pharaoh's household we need to decide whether our job is to go along to get along, riding in the belly of the beast.

It is for this reason that I have worked hard with my denomination to call for a non-partisan, authoritative Commission of Inquiry that would investigate instances and allegations of torture up the chain of command and hold those accountable, up to and including the possibility of criminal prosecution. I do not agree with President Obama that we can move forward without looking back. The law works by looking at what has been to establish the foundation for a just future. As Jesus said, "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be come known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light' and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." Matthew 10. 12-27.

I am especially appalled by the prospect of preemptively detaining people who are suspected possibly committing crimes in the future. The fact that Mr. Obama has suggested such a law is an indication of just how insidious the combination of power, secrecy and fear can be. Without prosecution of those

responsible, Executive Orders are merely good intentions and admonitions. The law becomes a fig leaf for no law at all. Torture will always wait in the wings for the next time of fear or threat. Law is not the end of morality, but it is a good start. Good law is us at our best, preparing to restrain ourselves at our worst.

There is one more point I wish to make since this is the beginning of a long day, but this is maybe the central point. A friend of mine who is a rabbi says that perhaps it is the only point necessary. When we consider torture we who are steeped in the Abrahamic traditions must remember that all people are indelibly stamped with the image of God, Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 27. God created humankind, in the God's own image. In the image of God we were created, male and female God created us. In addition to the very clear legal definitions of torture in domestic and international law, this is the working definition that I use: torture is using a person's body and mind to destroy their soul. It is a foundational violation of a person at the most essential level, therefore, therefore torture is a fundamental violation of the sacred in every person. There is no such thing as a little bit of torture. There is no cost-benefit analysis to be done. It is wrong and must stop.

How? Well, we can get into the nitty gritty of strategy--turn off the TV campaigns, congressional visits, hanging banners at the state capital or on our steeples. But our first and foremost job is to refuse to allow our national and religious story to become perverted into tales of ticking time bombs that justify preemptive detention and extraordinary rendition. We need to take back our story. The one our nation is currently telling is full of fear.

What are we afraid of? We are afraid of saying outloud what we have done. We are afraid to know General Taguba who saw the photos that are still classified says that what we would see are children sexually assaulted in front of their parents, young men sodomized with florescent light fixtures, bits of bone and brain on prison floors. We are afraid of the hatred this will unleash. What are we afraid of? We are afraid that there is no way forward that upholds due process and the rule of law? What are we afraid of? We are afraid that not only through deception and usurpation, but through legislation with public approval, we have eliminated our system of checks and balances, overturned the rule of law, affirmed the unitary executive and de facto, we have become an empire. We are afraid of what we have become. What are we afraid of? We are afraid that if we talk about this from our pulpits that people will go somewhere else. Torture does not make for easy listening, uplifting sermons, and given the economy don't people have enough to worry about. Still, a young man now 19, who was 12 when he was apprehended in Afghanistan, sits in a cell in Guantanamo without charge, but with little hope of release. What am I afraid of? I'm afraid that one day my grandchildren will ask me, "When this was going on, where were you? What did you do?" I'm afraid of my own complicity.

In other words, there is enough fear to go around, and it comes from all angles. At the time the epistle of John was written the Roman Empire was at its most repressive. The people by whom and to whom it was written knew all about fear close and personal. Still they wrote these these unequivocal words, "God is love" and "There is no fear in love."

So, as we move forward on whatever front, we hold these foundational truths because the foundational moral issue is about whether fear or love will determine our actions.

"Torture is a Moral Issue" was sponsored by the Council of Churches of Santa Clara County (www.councilofchurches-scc.org), the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (www.nrca.org), No2Torture (www.no2torture.org), Bay Area Religious Campaign Against Torture, Network for Spiritual Progressives (www.spiritualprogressives.org), California Council of Churches, Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Palo Alto, and MicahsCall.org.