

“For the Soul of a Nation”

Valley Community Presbyterian Church

Portland, Oregon

June 22, 2008

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 58: 1-9

Christian Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

I can only remember one time when my Presbyterian minister father could not finish his sermon. It was a Sunday morning probably on November 23, 1969, when from the pulpit of the Chazy Presbyterian Church, my dad confronted the truth that the answers to life's problems cannot always be neatly found in the Scriptures and the Reformed tradition.

And what was the cause? The reporting of the My Lai Massacre to the American public. After a 20-month cover-up of an event that had actually occurred on March 16, 1968, the massacre was vividly brought out in the open to the American public. We finally learned what our government's highest ranking officials did not want us to know: The fact that between 300 and 500 Vietnamese men, women and children were systemically killed by members of the US Army's Charlie Company led by Lt. William Calley. The reports and images in the media of dead fathers and mothers and their children lying on the roads and in ditches ripped our hearts.

And our souls. For my dad, it was the soul that mattered. As a southerner growing up in the segregated south, he was not naïve and Pollyannaish about what our government could condone. But he, like most US citizens, believed that our nation was guided by a moral compass that put us on a course much different than the one that guided the rest of the world. While he understood the horror of war, I don't think he, like many Americans, truly believed that we could perpetrate such heinous acts against humanity—acts that we believed could only be carried out by our enemies. His faith was further challenged by the cover up of a crime so barbaric that the powers at the top knew that the public's confidence in the war and our place in the world would be weakened if the facts were made known. His faith was rocked by powerful questions such as, “How could our nation's highest representatives be engaged in such acts?” and, “What do these actions say about the soul of our nation?”

Today, we still face these questions. On the issue of torture, we face head-on the disconnect between our nation's democratic and human rights rhetoric and our contradictory practices on the ground. Torture Awareness Month—observed in June—is a national initiative to promote awareness about the problem of torture and to gain popular support to end the practice worldwide. Supported nationally through the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, this movement is supported by scores of religious and community groups, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In Oregon, hundreds of congregations, individuals and interreligious organizations are lifting up the simple message “No to torture.” Or, as was stated in a letter sent earlier this year to Oregon Senator Gordon Smith signed by more than 170 Oregon clergy and laity, “Torture is universally condemned by people of faith and conscience as contrary to our most deeply held values.”

So why is this an issue of concern to the church? What are those values and reasons that compel a broad spectrum of religious and community leaders and everyday citizens to call for an end to the use of torture? This morning I will share the foundation upon which the religious call to action has been developed.

First, and most importantly, the call to end torture is based on the shared religious belief that all people are created in the image of God, and as such, what is done to the people of God is ultimately an act in support of or against the God whom we profess as creator, redeemer and sustainer. For

Christians, as the National Council of Churches states, opposition to torture is based “on the fundamental belief in the dignity of the human person created in the image of God and in the rights accorded to all persons by virtue of their humanity.”

This belief is further developed in the *Rabbinic Letter Against Torture* signed by 600 North American rabbis. It reads in part, “We understand that the most fundamental ethical principle, which results from our belief in God as Creator of the world and Parent of all humanity, is that every human being is seen as reflecting the Image of God. Torture shatters and defiles God’s image.”

This point is clearly brought to the fore in Ellie Wiesel’s novel, *Night*—his account of life in Nazi concentration camps. He writes about the torture and eventual execution of a young boy who was the assistant to a Dutch Jewish overseer appointed by the SS in the Buna concentration camp who was accused of blowing up an electric power station. While the overseer was eventually taken out of the camp and presumably killed, the young boy was executed in front of the prisoners in the camp. Wiesel writes that as the noose was placed around the child’s neck, someone in the crowd yelled out,

“Where is God? Where is He?”

As the noose pulled tight, the boy struggled between “life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face.”

“Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

‘Where is God now?’

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.”

Torture, you see, is not only an attack and defamation of God’s creation, but a defamation and distortion of the image of God. For these reasons alone, torture has no place in this world.

Yet, there are other important reasons for the opposition to torture including the faith community’s strong commitment to human rights. For the Presbyterian Church, this commitment dates well before the creation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that states in Article 5, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” The 1937 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA affirmed, “Every person being thus infinitely valuable in the sight of God ... are to be regarded as equally entitled to the rights granted by society inherent to them as human beings.” (PC (USA), *Resolution on Human Rights in a Time of Terrorism and Torture*)

More recently, in 2006, the 217th General Assembly of the PC (USA) approved the *Resolution on Human Rights in a Time of Terrorism and Torture*, which states that the church “opposes the use of torture and all forms of “cruel, inhuman, or degrading” interrogation by all agencies, employees or agents of the United States government ... and supports the application of the Geneva Conventions to all enemy soldiers and the humane treatment with due process for all combatants held by U.S. forces anywhere in the world.”

The act of torture is in fact an act of force whose purpose is to invade the physical, psychological and even spiritual aspect of the subject—acts that deny one’s basic human rights and dignity. Undoubtedly, we find it appalling to learn about other governments, drug dealers and terrorists who torture their victims. We do so because we know that there is something inherently wrong—albeit evil—when a person’s basic human rights—his or her basic personhood—is violated in such a manner. Thus, the church argues that we should reject our government’s use of torture, as we would object to the use of torture by others.

The third reason for consideration of the rejection of such practices is rooted in the fact that many experts believe that torture often does not work. Consider again the young boy in *Night* who was hung. Prior to his hanging, he was “put to torture, (but) he would not speak.” Think of the many times we have heard the stories of U.S. service personnel who were tortured but said nothing or gave up insignificant or false information to their captors in spite of brutal physical and psychological attacks.

So, why do we assume this will differ with our so-called enemies? Why do we think that somehow they will be different, believing that if we beat the skin off of them, as was done at Abu Ghraib, they will confess and turn secrets that will help us? The experts attest that torture simply is not worth the effort. It is very costly with very little return.

And related to cost, the fourth reason for the call by faith leaders throughout the country to ban torture is the degradation of the tortured and torturer alike. The pictures from Abu Ghraib clearly show images of degradation of the captives. But as we heard the testimonies and confessions of those who abused prisoners, shame, confusion and regret are the legacies left with the torturers. The oft used line, “It was not my choice but orders from higher up” does not erase the scars of the “casual and widespread use of inhuman techniques of ‘interrogation’ and imprisonment, including hanging detainees by their wrists, beating their legs to pulp, and kicking and punching prisoners until they collapsed” (*Oregonian* editorial 6/17/08). In the end, it is the abused and the abuser—the victim and the perpetrator—that lose their dignity. Why in God’s name would we as Christians endorse such practices that lead to such lifelong pain and suffering? Why would we condone—either explicitly or implicitly—policies and practices that will ruin a person’s life forever?

The final objection to torture I would like for us to consider today relates to our national health and wellness. The prophet Isaiah observed and Jesus confirmed that the disconnect between rhetoric and practice is neither healthy nor pleasing to God. The prophet says, “... the house of Jacob ... seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God ... Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day ... Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist” (Is 58). In other words, “You say you support democracy and human rights, but you abuse and torture your enemies”—actions that fly directly in the face of Jesus’ admonition to “love your enemies as yourself” and “to do unto others as you would have done unto you.”

Our national health depends on consistency. We cannot champion human rights and object to the tortuous practices of some of the most heinous regimes in the world, and then turn around and do the same ourselves. The contradictory practices and the company we keep surely keep us from ever fully living into the image we have of ourselves. Torture Awareness Month calls us to account and provides an important opportunity to think about, discuss and act on an issue that frankly most of us would rather not act on, discuss or think about. For our national self-interest, it is time to end practices that ultimately weaken, not strengthen, the United States of America. As the National Religious Campaign Against Torture’s statement of conscience entitled “Torture is a Moral Issue” reads, “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. Nothing less is at stake in the torture abuse crisis than the soul of our nation.”

As Christians, people of faith and citizens, we have a chance to act and push for congruency between our religious and political principles and our actions. Today, I ask you to consider joining with the more than 18,000 people—including more than 600 in Oregon—and sign the Statement of Conscience that can be found at www.nrcat.org. I also want to invite you to attend the “Interfaith Forum on the Ethics of Torture and Human Rights,” featuring Dr. George Hunsinger from

Princeton Theological Seminary and founder of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, to be held on July 23 at Westminster Presbyterian Church. I hope that as part of the Banners Across America initiative, Valley Presbyterian Church will keep your “No to Torture” banner up until there is a complete ban of the use of torture in this country.

Finally, in the spirit of the PC(USA)’s *Resolution Against Torture*, I hope that you will join the movement within the church to “encourage members, sessions, presbyteries and synods to pray for all victims of human rights abuse and those who persecute them, particularly in their observances of Human Rights Day (each December 10), to seek ways to assist these victims and prevent further abuse of others.” As I have learned through our ministry with refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers who have been victims of religious and political persecution, I have learned that prayers and tender acts of mercy are vitally important to the restoration of healing and human dignity.

The other night I spoke with my father about the sermon he could not finish on that fateful Sunday in November 1969. As he thought about the impetus for his sermon and the wall he hit that day, he recalled both the picture of a child who had been killed lying in a ditch and his disgust with the behavior of a nation that engaged in the same tactics as our so-called “enemies.” Cover-up, denials, abuse, torture and murder were undeniably what our government was guilty of practicing and condoning in spite of rhetoric to the contrary. Yet, in spite of his turmoil that day, he did not lose his faith in the God he followed or in the country he admired. In fact, his faith and resolve were ultimately strengthened to help all he touched strive for higher values and better practices to make sure we live up to the expectations that God has for us both individually and collectively.

While we cannot undo previous actions, we can repent and change behavior. We can become a nation that practices torture no more. We can be a place where our actions speak louder than words. And we can be known as champions of human rights and democracy without contradiction, confident in the words of the Prophet Isaiah that when we stop “going our own ways, serving (our) own interests and pursuing (our) own affairs,” we will then “ride upon the heights of the earth” and recognize the fullest possibilities of peace and justice as God intends. Say no to torture.

David A. Leslie, Executive Director
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
0245 SW Bancroft, Suite B
Portland, Oregon 97239
(503) 221-1054
dleslie@emoregon.org