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February 19, 2006
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Torture Is Simply Wrong **Acts 2: 23-25; Matthew 25: 34-40**

On our St. John's trip to Oberammergau in the year 2000, we stopped in southern Germany in an authentic medieval town known as Rothenberg, a quaint, walled city. We had some browsing time, and I chose to enter a medieval cultural museum that included a rather large exhibit on instruments of torture and punishment. There were all manner of thumbscrews: it didn't take much imagination to envision the sharpened metal piercing someone's fingernail. There was a well-worn whipping post, with a sinister black lash beside it, responsible for shedding immeasurable blood. I stood before the strappado, an instrument that twisted the victim's arms behind his head, then raised him high into the air before dropping him suddenly and stopping, so as to pull his shoulders out of their sockets. I stood before the rack, a simple device featuring a couple of large rolling pins, to which were attached ropes designed to pull one's joints in opposing directions. I thought of the great Catholic theologian Edward Campion, subjected to the rack several times by his Anglican tormentors, the muscles in his hands and arms stretched so severely that he couldn't sign the confession that they had managed to wring from his screams. I stood before the Iron Maiden, that crypt-like device, with a couple of tiny air holes. I tried to imagine myself standing inside of it for thirty minutes. The very thought made me tremble. I suspect that when the top of that tomb clicked upon me, I would have become a raving lunatic within thirty seconds. These tortures were not simply used to punish evildoers, though that would have been heinous enough. No, these instruments of cruelty were used by civil governments to interrogate suspects, even to interrogate witnesses, in the pursuit of convictions. Worse, these instruments were used in the name of God. When I slipped out of that museum I felt soiled, my soul disturbed at the thought that the capacity for cruelty is embedded so deep within our human psyche. I left knowing in a way I had never grasped before the profundity and clarity of a simple moral truth: torture is simply wrong.

This is not a message that I want to preach. But when the Word of God falls upon my heart, I cannot but speak. We do not practice our faith in a vacuum. We are meant to practice our faith in the real world in a way that touches, nay, transforms the world. When the world has lost its ethical and moral bearings, people of faith must stand to speak simple truths and say them with power and courage: torture is simply wrong!

It seems strange that I should even have to say such words. True, as the Pauline passage from Acts indicates, torture as an arm of the state and of the church has been engrained in our western civilization. It is a practice deeply engrained in the history of humankind. But by the late eighteenth century, governments of the West had expressly outlawed torture as a moral evil. By the nineteenth century, these prohibitions had even reached Russia, where torture had long been an instrument of the judicial process. This official outcry against torture was so widespread, so universal and clear, that the writer Victor Hugo in 1874 could declare, "Torture is dead." No sentient human being can say the same today. I walked away from those medieval instruments of torture grateful to God that I did not live in such a day when such instruments would be used by one human being against another. But my brothers and sisters in Christ, the instruments of torture used today are in many ways far more barbaric than used by earlier generations. Sure there are the old mainstays, the clubs, bats and truncheons, which are horrible enough; but there is the practice of tying people to red hot bed frames, attaching electrodes to people's private parts, submersing them repeatedly in water, ripping out fingernails, pouring acid in eyes – let me stop there, not because the list is exhaustive but because some practices are so bestial that they do not warrant mention in public company. But know this: these horrors are not practices of the past: they are going on today, going on this very moment as we gather in this sanctuary to worship God. These practices are

taking place in the name of our nation; in a very real sense they are taking place in the name of our God. And the only voice these screaming, anguished people have is the voice of people of faith like you and me, people who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We bear the responsibility to rise and say: Torture is simply wrong.

“Ah, Dr. Kremer,” I can hear someone say, “you live in a comfortable, ivory tower world. You have never served in the military. You do not know what steps have to be taken to ensure your safety, the safety of your family, the safety of your country. War is messy, and sometimes gaining information vital to our survival is brutal.” Perhaps all that is true. However, I have great faith in the power of this country. I do not believe that the stability of our great democracy hinges on having to course electric current through another man’s body. I for one do not want my safety preserved through the anguished screams wrung from another man. If hanging a man by his wrists until he dies is crucial to the safety of our country, then our nation’s claim to greatness rings hollow. In the depth of the Civil War, when our nation’s future hung in periled balance, Abraham Lincoln would not relax the government’s prohibitions against torture. His example should be a lesson in this dark hour.

One of the moral justifications for our military intervention in Iraq was the fact we saw compelling evidence of a leadership and political system that ruthlessly tortured and terrorized its population to protect its power. To remove such a psychopath from political leadership was a justifiably moral act. Several million Jews might have been saved had Europe done the same to Hitler. But we undercut the morality of our claim when we mirror the very torments that we have endeavored at great cost of life and resources to oppose. We are trying to export to that region the Biblical (and Jeffersonian) ideal of the dignity of the individual, maintaining that each person is endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights. When we subject those we detain to practices resembling the indignities of those we have deposed, we violate the very ideals we have adduced as our justification for armed intervention.

Some of our young men from this church have served our country in Iraq; God forbid, but they may fall into the hands of our enemies. Yes, there has been established in this century certain rights for any prisoner of war. Chief among those rights is the right not to be tortured. Their captors bear a responsibility not to torture them. But how can we expect our captors to treat our young people with dignity when we use legal semantics to say that the detainees we apprehend are not POWs, but terrorists whose lives do not warrant protection by the humane strictures of the Geneva Convention? Nor do we ease our culpability by the cowardly practice of shipping detainees off to countries who will practice those bestial tortures that our own interrogators are prevented by law from perpetrating. The blood of those poor people is on our hands.

Our military is beginning to realize something that is true of all wars in the Middle East: we are engaged in a religious conflict. Middle Eastern wars may start as strategic conflicts, but they invariably devolve into religious ones. Our interrogators have been perplexed at times by the theological questions that their captives have posed to them. Indeed, those interrogators who have truly been able to connect with their captives have done so because these detainees through their treatment experienced something of a religious conversion. These prisoners have been indoctrinated to believe that Christians are invariably cruel. When met with kindness, when we do not torture them, these prisoners find reason to discard a long-held prejudice, opening up doors for helpful dialogue.

Many of our best military minds are coming to assert that not only is torture wrong, it is not fruitful. In the first place, for every body that we break under brutal tactics, for every scarred soul that we spill back on the street, we sow the seeds for more hatred, fueling the cycle of violence we are trying so desperately to quell. Our best military minds are seeing this. Yet there is that probing ethical question: say there is a terrorist who has planted a bomb in a major city capable of killing millions of people – then the terrorist falls into our hands. Would we

not have a moral obligation to torture them? This question is now hotly-debated among serious ethicists. It is also the recurring plot-line of the popular TV show 24, where the dashing, American counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer saves the world every Monday night. The plot line of 24 is always thus: a terrorist has a bomb, or poison gas, or Jack's wife, or Jack's daughter or Jack's girlfriend, and somehow the terrorist or the terrorist's friend falls into Jack's hands and Jack invariably tortures them – and the day is saved. Here is what disturbs me. The show is constructed in such a way that we are conditioned to root for the torturer. I think maybe why the Lord has placed this word upon my heart, because what should seem simple and clear to us does not in this post 9-11 age seem simple anymore. Yet I say to you again, "Torture is simply wrong."

We assume, as always happens in 24, that the tortured person always tells the truth. That is what always happens on 24: the tortured person tells the truth – the day is saved. But John McCain, the Arizona Senator who was tortured often by the North Vietnamese during his years as a POW, said that when asked to name his co-conspirators in crime, he gave his torturers the names of the Green Bay Packers' offensive line. There is no doubt torture can make a man talk; there is no guarantee torture makes a man tell the truth. And they may be too broken for us to tell the difference.

What can we do? We can speak out. We can write to those we have elected to represent us. Our President is an evangelical Christian, as are many of his key aides. Many of our elected officials closer to home profess strong religious values. We can write them not as Republicans or Democrats but as residents who belong to another kingdom, that of the eternal God. We have an obligation to say that for the sake of our country's character we must renounce torture as a policy of war. Our young people talked eloquently last week about loving your enemies: here is where the water hits the wheel. Our enemies are not merely those who badmouth us around the water cooler; our enemies are those hardened terrorists stuck in Guantanamo Bay or some secret CIA interrogation cell, those people who actively hate us and seek our demise. If "love your enemies," means anything it means realizing that our Christ calls us to see that what happens to these prisoners is what happens to Christ. We as a community of faith have a responsibility to say to those who represent us, "Let us recognize that torture besmirches the dignity of our national honor, vitiates the power of our national morality, and does violence to the very integrity of the faith we claim."

This atmosphere of 9/11 will not always be with us. This crisis, too, shall pass. And as compelling as seems the case for torture in our present paranoid time, I do not want our posterity to look back upon the actions of our country during this post-9/11 era with the same shame that history looks back upon the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Hunts, the Gestapo and the Cambodian Pol Pot regime. Those who took part in those infamous regimes of torture in times of national hysteria were convinced at the time that they were acting to preserve country, to preserve truth, to protect the cause of God. Yet we now look back upon such periods of horror with disgust. May people not have to do the same of us. I do not want our progeny to shiver with shame at what we have done to other human beings during a time of fear and uncertainty.

You have heard me often say that ours is not a Christian nation. We are not to look upon our government as an arm of our faith. But that distinction is lost in the Arab world, which has no model for understanding such a distinction. Like it or not, in this war, the values of our faith are on trial before the eyes of other cultures, before other religions. I have a Lebanese friend in Beirut who is sure that the aftermath of this present war will lead to more just, stable and democratic societies in several Middle Eastern Arab countries. I hope to God that he is right. But if he is right, it will not be because we practice the tactics of violence better than those we oppose. It will be because we ultimately embody for that region the power of compassion. In truth our military knows this: they are endeavoring to do good things: feeding children, rebuilding infrastructure, resurrecting communities. But we undermine the power of such efforts when we replicate the very tactics of terror under

which these poor people have cowered for so long. They will know we are Christians by our love. May they know the power of our Christian faith by our love. As God is my witness, I know of no other path to peace.

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