

Because It Is Wrong

A sample sermon for Torture Awareness Month, June 2011

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Note: This sermon presumes that the speaker has read the book, Because It Is Wrong: Torture, Privacy, and Presidential Power in the Age of Terror (Charles and Gregory Fried, 2010) but that the audience has not. You might want to consider distributing copies (either before or after the sermon) of Scott Horton's interview with the authors (www.harpers.org/archive/2011/01/hbc-90007924), which summarizes key points, and/or of the painting Interrogation 1 (http://mugwump.pitzer.edu/~bkeele/CLASS/PA/Spr04/Interrogation_I_1981.jpg). The authors draw upon language in Genesis describing humans as created in God's image, one way of articulating the belief that God created each human being with dignity and worth. This sermon also uses that language.

Introduction

Note: Because It Is Wrong includes a lengthy discussion of Leon Golub's painting Interrogation 1 as a means of conveying through art the value that torture distorts the image of God. You might want to consider beginning your sermon with a similar tactic. Feel free to use or adapt the text below.

Imagine a naked man, hung upside down by his feet, face tilted back, mouth open in a scream, being beaten with sticks by two uniformed officers. We don't know who the man is, or why he is being beaten, but he is clearly being tortured. What questions are running through your mind about the man? Who is he and how did he get here? What did he do or what do the men who are beating want from him?

This image is found in Leon Golub's painting *Interrogation 1*. Now that we know that it is an interrogation, we know some more about the man, or at least we think we do. He's being beaten for the information he knows that will help the officers. Perhaps he is a terrorist. If he knows something that will save a life, maybe that justifies the pain he is in, though a nagging feeling at the back of our brains tells us that he might say anything just to get the beating to stop. Or maybe he is the friend or neighbor or child of a terrorist, guilty by nothing more than association. Can we justify beating him, innocent as he is, to save a life? We can't see the face of the man hanging between the two officers, and that makes it all the more difficult to watch his torture. This unknown man could be any of us. The man, in his full humanity is sacred. As Charles and Gregory Fried write, "The image of God is hanging between the two officers." (p. 25)

Introduce the book

Charles Fried was Solicitor General under President Reagan. His son Gregory is a professor of Philosophy. In the years since the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, they spoke together at length about both the outcry over erosions of privacy (such as the increased use of electronic surveillance) and the relative public silence over the use of torture against detainees held in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo. They regarded the American public's acquiescence to the legalization of use of torture as a sign of the weakening of long-held moral values about safety and security. It was not correct to argue that these were necessary acts

done to protect the greater good, since torture could never be justified. Their book, *Because It Is Wrong: Torture, Privacy, and Presidential Power in the Age of Terror*, is a summary of their discussions. The Frieds' argument about the differences between the cases of torture and warrantless wiretapping can be summarized as "Torture is illegal because it is wrong and electronic surveillance is wrong—when it is—because it is illegal." Their key finding against the use of torture—which they reason can be made from both religious and humanistic grounds—is that the use of torture desecrates the image of God.

Created in God's image

Note: In this section, your aim is to convey the religious and moral values that connect your faith with the interpretation of the book.

One of the shared values that bind the Abrahamic faiths together is that God has created all human beings, bestowing each of them with dignity and worth, sacred in God's sight. Some scriptures describe humans as being created in God's image. In Genesis 1:27, we read: "God created the human in God's image, in the image of God, God created him; male and female God created them." Being created in God's image is not an ideal reserved for a specific subset of people, for your neighbors or those you agree with. Every human being is created in the image of God, friend and enemy. Since the creation of the human being represents the pinnacle of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, one could argue that humankind's creation in God's image is the cornerstone of the blueprint of the universe. It is an overriding value.

Some additional texts from Genesis on God's image that you might want to use:

Genesis 5:1-2: This is the record of Adam's line: When God created the human, God made him in the likeness of God, male and female God created them.

Genesis 9:6: Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall his blood be shed. For in God's image did God make the human.

Note: This is a good place to bring in additional texts about creation in the image of God from your religious tradition.

Making the contemporary connection: the image of God and the use of torture

The Frieds' argument comes from the point of deontology: namely that an action is good or bad whether or not the end result is good. In other words, Machiavelli is wrong: the end does not justify the means. They insist that torture is *absolutely* wrong, and note that the word *absolutely* gives us pause. In the back of our minds, we can think of justifications for it like the ticking time bomb, and then we react to the ticking time bomb by saying that it will never happen. But that ignores the question of whether torture would be justified if the ticking time bomb scenario did happen. And what if the person being tortured is not the terrorist, but the child or spouse, who is guilty by association but is in fact innocent? Arguing innocent or guilt is not the point, argue the Frieds, because there is no ambiguity in what is being violated: the image of God. (p. 37)

The Frieds argue that the use of torture is worse than the act of killing your enemy in wartime on a battlefield. The battlefield assumes a certain equality between parties. Torture is a brutal disrespect for human dignity, a violation of the image of God, which at that moment is a helpless and powerless prisoner. Invoking God reminds us that the victim has infinite value, a value and

significance of which nothing is greater. It also means that every person has something of God in them. “The transcendent nature of God is present in the human form, and so its value is transcendent, beyond price, absolute...as the image of God is inviolable, so are we.” (pp. 37-39) This is not a scale of priorities (i.e. the image of God is important unless a nuclear bomb is about to go off) but an absolute prohibition. It is a constraint on how goals are pursued at all time.

If the human being is sacred—and people of faith believe that the human being is sacred—it is plausible to claim that to torture, to do to another what is being done to the man in *Interrogation I*, should not be done, for any reason, not ever, no matter how wicked the person or how urgent the purpose. An appeal to the sacredness of the human person does not deny that there are evils in this world but prohibits us from being the agents of that kind of evil.

Note: The Frieds ask this question: Do we abhor brutality because we believe in God, or do we believe in God because we abhor brutality?(p. 51) Ask the following key question: As people of faith who take God seriously, what does that imply about our obligations for taking the image of God found in every person seriously? What does that imply for the use of torture?

For more on the ticking time bomb, see: www.progressive.org/mag_mccoy1006

Why torture is dangerous to our society

Today, the appeal to moral values in a dangerous world is sometimes made out to be weak or trivial, but it is actually a sign of strength, a counterbalance to the impulse for revenge. Acting out of revenge is easy. Finding God in every human being is hard. To say that a human being is created in God’s image means that nothing can justify the desecration, not even our own survival, because, argue the Frieds, if we are willing to desecrate God’s image, what have we survived as? As monsters? (p. 43)

The Frieds write: “Torture is the habit of tyranny, not of free republics, and it cannot simply be switched on and off. It inculcates a conception of state power and human worth that directly conflicts with our founding principle of an inalienable dignity to the human person, even the most culpable.” (p. 164)

In other words, torture damages the soul of our nation. Or as Gregory Fried said in an interview with Scott Horton of Harper’s Magazine (www.harpers.org/archive/2011/01/hbc-90007924;

Note: you will not want to quote the whole text):

We should be alive to the question of what we survive *as*. We are mortal, we cannot live forever, and we have the freedom to choose to live, not merely to survive, according to principles that we believe make life worth living. And we have to have the courage to live according to those principles, not to discard them when it seems convenient. To paraphrase Judge Aharon Barak, for a democracy to remain a democracy, it must sometimes fight with one hand tied behind its back — we must not use all the tools that might be available to us to defeat an enemy if some of those tools undermine the core principles that govern our own political and civic life. We would argue further that fighting this way, without resorting to torture, will in fact make us stronger, because it upholds the convictions that define us as a free republic by respecting the fundamental dignity of all persons, even the worst ones. Just as we expect soldiers to display courage in war, to risk

their lives in a cause, we must ask for a similar courage from all citizens of a free country: to renounce tools of war and interrogation, such as torture, that seem to promise increased safety, but which in fact constitute a poison pill for democratic values.

Note: Take a moment to talk about ways the values of your religious tradition intersect with American values. What are the values you cherish as a community? Why is it important to hold to these values in difficult times?

Repentance

Note: the key question for your conclusion is: How should our nation repent for having desecrated the image of God through the torture of detainees held in the war on terror? Why is this moral reckoning necessary to move forward as a nation?

The Frieds differ on whether or not there should be prosecutions of the Bush Administration officials who authorized the use of torture. Charles believes that to do so would be destabilizing to our democratic system. Gregory believes that accountability is essential to ensure that torture is not repeated. The Obama Administration thinks that moving forward is critical. But moving forward without acknowledging and repenting for what we have done as a nation means that we have not fully healed.

Note: Many religious traditions require someone who has erred to admit their sin and to repent for it directly with the person they have wronged, rather than just asking God for forgiveness. What does your religious tradition have to say about public confession of sins? How do you repent? When do you know you can move forward?

Gita Gutierrez of the Center for Constitutional Rights says the following about our collective responsibility:

I ask you to consider this; that our nation did not torture because of the Bush Administration. Our nation tortured because of the American people, we allowed it to happen, I allowed it to happen, you allowed it to happen... We all knew what was going on in Guantanamo... We saw photos. Certainly by 2004, when the photographs from Abu Ghraib came out and the stories of men particularly some of the British citizens who were released and told what happened to them were out there, we knew. And I still went grocery shopping, saw movies, and watched TV and got hooked on the Lost series... when we look at this from an international perspective and what we could have done, we didn't. We are very comfortable in this country and we didn't. We did not do enough eight years ago, we did not do enough six years ago, or four years ago, or even two years ago, and the men are still imprisoned there. (December, 2008, Statement at the Rabbis for Human Rights-North America Conference; www.rhr-na.org/files/Beyond-Guantanamo.pdf)

We have a collective responsibility for our nation's use of torture. Now, as we accept that responsibility, we must use it to call for a public accounting of what was done. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture has called for a non-partisan, government-sponsored

Commission of Inquiry to fully assess what happened and how to prevent it from happening again in the future.

Note: You might want to quote from the NRCAT call for a COI:

The United States must never again engage in torture. Torture is immoral, illegal and counterproductive. It causes profound and lasting harm, especially to its victims but also to its perpetrators. It contradicts our nation's deepest values and corrupts the moral fabric of our society.

We call for an impartial, nonpartisan, and independent Commission of Inquiry. Its purpose should be to gather all the facts and make recommendations. It should ascertain the extent to which our interrogation practices have constituted torture and "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment". Understanding the causes, nature and scope of U.S.-sponsored torture is essential for preventing it in the future and eliminating it from our system without loopholes. U.S. law will determine the extent of any criminal culpability.

As people of faith, we know that brokenness can be healed – both in individual lives and in the life of the nation. All religions believe that redemption is possible. Learning the truth can set us on a path toward national healing and renewal.

The United States must never again allow itself to be driven by blinding fears and bitter resentments in responding to national tragedy. The use of torture only serves to undermine our security in a dangerous world.

Nothing less than the soul of our nation is at stake in confronting U.S.-sponsored torture and completely renouncing its use. Let the U.S. reaffirm its values by establishing a Commission of Inquiry.

For more on the NRCAT call for a COI, visit: www.nrcat.org/COI.

Conclusion

Note: Ask your community to sign the petition and to contact their Members of Congress. Remind them of the values found in this statement from Eli Wiesel and our imperative to act on those values:

We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph. (*The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code*)

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