

**CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF CHICO  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
Chico, California**

**"Being Outraged"**

May 3, 2009

Preached by: Jim Peck, Pastor

Scripture Readings: I John 3: 16 - 24

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Will you pray with me? Guide us, O Lord, by your Word and Holy Spirit that we will continue steadfast in the living of our faith. Amen.

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My visit to Minneapolis last week was a good one. It was for continuing education purposes, not vacation. As fully as I can, I will take advantage of the continuing education leave you provide me. Ministry is not a fixed field, and in that way, it is like any other field. Pastors learn things from one another, and certainly scholars of theology and ministry regularly have new insights. I enjoy learning them. It is refreshing to me.

Actually, I enjoy learning in general. A good vacation for me includes a visit to a museum, or an historic site, or some other place where I will learn something.

So, last week, at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, I attended three events. I attended the spring meeting of the Alum Council. I have one more year as a member of the Council. I took Butte County almonds, walnuts, pistachios, and dried cherries to share with my friends on the Council. They like me even more now.

And I attended the annual reunion events for UTS alums, always a great time of reconnecting with friends, and making some new ones. An alum from the class of 1959 came over to me, introduced himself, and told me he lives in Woodland. And he told me we have an alum from the class of 1949 in Sacramento. I enjoyed that.

And I attended the Spring Convocation, a continuing education event, this year focused on making worship more significant and meaningful. A busy few days, but full of good times and new ideas.

The Wednesday afternoon seminar focused on worship as a spiritual practice. Martha Postlethwaite, the seminary chaplain and professor of spiritual formation, led the seminar. She spoke about the role of singing, and she spoke about the importance of the words of worship, such as the shared prayers.

It was not her intent that we focus so much on the Prayer of Confession. But we did. Actually, about half the seminar was taken up by comments from us about the Prayer of Confession.

Now you will note that we do not have a Prayer of Confession in our worship service every Sunday. I tend to include it only during Advent and Lent. I don't really have an explanation about why I omit it most Sundays. Maybe I have bought into the idea that a Prayer of Confession is a downer.

Or maybe I have bought into the very California idea that, like, anything that might, you know, detract from our positive self-image is, like, you know, something we don't want to do.

Or maybe I have bought into the idea that guilt has too often been used by the church against people, and I don't want to perpetuate

that practice. Certainly, last week, those observations were made in the seminar.

Others observed that avoiding Confession is a way of avoiding some realities about ourselves, including the reality that we are sinners. It was a lively discussion.

Towards the end, Martha remarked that she was surprised Confession had become so much the focus. She wondered why, what was going on to prompt so much conversation about the place and purpose of Confession in the worship service.

Warning: abrupt change in direction of the sermon is about to happen.

Many of you know that I do not watch television. I gave it up for Lent in 2001 and I have never reconnected my cable service. For my news, I rely on National Public Radio, several print sources, a couple of online newspapers, and three or four weblogs I find reliable. I do not watch television news. I am a news junkie, but I do not watch television news.

The only time I watch television is when I am traveling. I watched a good bit of television last week in my hotel room, including some television news programs. At least they say they are news programs. Mostly, they are, in my view, entertainment programs using current events to frame their sarcasm, opinions, and fear-mongering. I would say that about all of them, even the one or two I enjoy watching.

What I cannot grasp is the attitude of outrage expressed by almost all of the people on these news-as-entertainment programs. Constant outrage about every thing.

Over and over again, outrage, outrage, outrage. No particular focus. Just outrage, outrage, outrage.

Outrage is a form of anger, a strong emotion each of us has from time to time. Unfocused anger is one of the most destructive forces in our lives. Dealing constructively with anger has been a key part of my own spiritual and emotional journey. Learning to convert anger about injustice into passion for justice, for example, is one of my constant struggles and constant hopes.

So last week, I pondered Martha's question about why Confession had become so prominent in her seminar. And I watched television news personalities be outraged about one thing or another.

The leading outrage was about the A1N1 or swine flu outbreak, outrage as in "How dare this disease infect Americans!"

There was some lingering outrage about President Obama's decision on April 17 to release Department of Justice memoranda from the Bush Administration related to enhanced interrogation techniques used by the CIA on prisoners and detainees suspected of terrorism against the United States. Mostly, though, that was further down, later in the program.

Warning: abrupt change in direction of the sermon is about to happen.

Five years ago, in May of 2005, we learned about the abuse of prisoners in American custody at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Many of us were outraged and ashamed to see what had been done in our country's name. We were assured by our leaders that this was an aberration, that abusing prisoners of war was not a policy of the United States.

President Bush made a speech at the time condemning the abuse and assuring us that it would not happen again. Both before and after the Abu Ghraib abuse became public, President Bush repeatedly insisted that torture was not the policy of the United States of America.

On June 26, 2003, President Bush said in a prepared statement, and I'm quoting, "The United States is committed to the world-wide elimination of torture and we are leading this fight by example. I call on all governments to join with the United States and the community of law-abiding nations in prohibiting, investigating, and prosecuting all acts of torture and in undertaking to prevent other cruel and unusual punishment. I call on all nations to speak out against torture in all its forms and to make ending torture an essential part of their diplomacy." Close quote.

It is clear from the memoranda released on April 17, and from a report issued by the United States Senate a few days later, that President Bush endorsed, promoted, and approved the use of torture by the CIA against persons held in U. S. custody. In doing so, he violated American law, broke several international treaties which we signed, including the United Nations Convention on Torture which President Ronald Reagan signed and championed.

The euphemism "enhanced interrogation technique" doesn't work anymore. People were tortured by the United States of America as a matter of policy approved by the President of the United States. And that President lied to us about this policy, lied to the whole world. And we knew it. We knew he was lying. We knew we were torturing. Some of us protested and objected and some of us did not.

There has been outrage, outrage, outrage over these revelations. There have even been debates on news-entertainment shows

about the efficacy of torture, about whether it works, and how it can be justified.

So let me just tell you, those debates have outraged me. Why are we debating torture? What is there to debate about torture?

Torturing people is wrong. It is ethically and morally wrong. It is always wrong. The principle underlying torture is that some people are less than fully human and can be used, can be treated as objects.

For us, the teachings of Jesus point in a completely different direction. Jesus teaches us that we are not to use people, we are not to treat people as objects. Our enemies, yes, our enemies, are included on the list of people we are told to love.

Jesus was mocked and abused and tortured before he was executed. The torture he underwent before he was put to death should have been the last time anyone on this planet was tortured.

But we are sinners, prone to wander, and nothing creates more temptation for us than our enemies, real or imagined, near to us or far away, names and face we know or names and faces we do not know. Nothing creates more temptation for us than our enemies. They are the easiest to hate, the hardest to love. Our enemies tempt us to sin more than anyone or anything else in our lives.

With regard to the way we as a nation treat our enemies, the last eight years have been hard on us. We tortured some of our enemies, thinking that would benefit us. It did not. All it did was gain us more enemies. Worse than that, torture made us more like them.

Matthew Alexander is a former senior military interrogator. In Iraq, he conducted more than 300 interrogations and monitored more than 1000. In an article published April 23 in The National Interest Online, he writes about those interrogations:

“I heard numerous foreign fighters state that the reason they came to Iraq to fight was because of the torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Our policy of torture and abuse is Al-Qaeda’s number one recruiting tool. These same insurgents have killed hundreds if not thousands of our troops in Iraq, not to mention Iraqi civilians. Torture and abuse are counterproductive in the long term and, ultimately, cost us more lives than they save.

Still quoting: “The more important argument, however, is the moral one. One of Al-Qaeda’s goals is to prove that America does not live up to its principles. They assert that we are a nation of hypocrites. By engaging in torture and abuse, we are playing into their hands. This war has two fronts – protecting our security by thwarting terrorist attacks and preserving American principles. We cannot become our enemy in seeking to defeat him.” Close quote. I have the whole article if anyone wants to read it.

Warning: seemingly unrelated sermon parts are about to be tied together.

So, last week, I’m watching television news-as-entertainment personalities be outraged, outraged, outraged that the memoranda on torture were released. And, I’m reading commentary and analysis online from a variety of news sources I trust, don’t always agree with, but trust. And, I’m attending a seminar on worship. And, at that seminar, the role and purpose of Confession becomes a hot topic. And, at that seminar, Martha, the seminar leader, wonders what is going on to make Confession such a hot topic of discussion.

Early on Thursday morning, all these things came together in my mind and heart: Confession became a hot topic because we, as a people, as the American people, know that people we call enemy were tortured in our name. We know what was done. We know it is wrong. We sense it is sin. We are brimming with a need to confess that sin and ask God to forgive us.

Enemies they may be, and harming us may be their goal, but our torturing them violated a core principle of our democracy – that all people are created equal. Our torturing them made us hypocrites.

As Christians, this torture broke one of our deepest beliefs: even our enemies, even our enemies, are children of God, loved by God, offered grace and forgiveness, called to repentance and new life. Even after we have responded to that call, received that grace and forgiveness, we will wander away, sin again. Confession turns us around. Confession begins undoing our hypocrisy. Confession brings us back to grace.

Our elected leaders can apologize for it, can even take steps to prevent torture from happening again, but they cannot make our confession for us. Confession is a spiritual practice, not a political one.

Next Sunday, we will have a prayer of confession. Actually, I'll probably be revising our Communion services to include a prayer of confession as a regular spiritual practice before we come to the table of grace.

Next Sunday, we will have a prayer of confession focused entirely on confessing the horrible acts of torture done in our name by our government. I'll spend a good part of the week writing it, probably more time on that than on my sermon.

Next Sunday, we will confess our sin of torture. Even though I have never personally lifted a hand to torture anyone, my government's hand was lifted in that way, and my name is attached to that hand.

Next Sunday, we will confess our sin of torture. Someone has to start. Might as well be us. Tell your friends and invite them to come and pray with us. God knows we need it.

Amen.