

Will Heal

A Sermon by Rev. Adam Blons

First Congregational Church of Berkeley

June 14, 2009

Scripture: Mark 2:1-12

This past Thursday, the UCC's own General Minister and President, Rev. John Thomas, along with 32 other religious leaders met with senior Obama administration officials. They were advocating for a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the use of torture by the United States since September 11, 2001. Administration officials restated President Obama's opposition to such a commission. President Obama has been supportive of the efforts to end the use of torture signing an executive order banning torture two days after taking office. However, he has also said that we need to look forward and not backward on this issue. That's a lot easier for him to say than it is for the survivors of torture to do.

Thanks to the leadership of Louise Specht and the TEARS ministry team many of us have declared our opposition to the use of torture under any circumstances. But let's review. Though we have heard reports about the use of torture throughout the world for a long time, things changed when in 2004, we learned of the horrible torture of prisoners by US Army and CIA personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The shocking images of US Soldiers posing proudly next to abused and humiliated Iraqis still linger and bring shame to our nation's conscience. But even more shocking has turned out to be the approval of the use of torture by the Bush Administration and the support of the use of torture by the American public.

On April 17 of this year, memos were released which indicated that the Bush Administration had sanctioned the use of torture. The memos describe the use of tactics such as waterboarding, holding prisoners in small dark boxes, exploiting prisoners' fears of insects, forced nudity, and shackling and depriving them of sleep for as many as eleven days. They also include extensive legal arguments as to why these tactics do not amount to torture under US and international law.

Yet all of these practices are illegal under the Geneva Convention and are prohibited by our military's own policies and procedures. There is no grey area when it comes to torture. Torture is illegal.

Still, almost 49% of the American public approves the use of torture on suspected terrorists according to a recent poll. And even more disturbing for us should be that 54% of weekly church going Christians approve the use of torture. Why such high levels of approval?

First, and perhaps most significantly, there is the myth that though it is illegal, torture works to get important information. In fact, the important information obtained thus far from detainees in Iraq has all come through legal interrogation techniques. Moreover, the information that was obtained through torture included false information like Iraq having weapons of mass destruction. There is no evidence that torture yields helpful information. Instead it leads to false information and fuels the recruitment of resistance groups.

Second, I think we expect horrible things to happen during war and we so we look away. Once the violence begins, we imagine it must be hard to limit it or stop it. We believe war can bring out the worst in human beings. And the success of war, including on the homefront, **DEPENDS** upon the some dehumanization of the enemy otherwise, why would we be

willing to kill them. Torture can seem like just an extension of seeing the enemy as “in the way” of your objective. Unfortunately, the fact that many of us were not surprised that people were being tortured in the midst of war gives us a clue as to why many see it as a necessary evil.

But why are Christians so understanding of torture? Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, a theologian at Chicago Theological Seminary points to some White Evangelical theology that bases Christian salvation on the severe pain and suffering undergone by Jesus in his flogging and crucifixion. This is called the "penal theory of the atonement"--that is, the way Jesus paid for our sins is by this extreme torture inflicted on him.

I also think that people who are taught to fear God—literally God fearing people—are ready made to give up their own rights in the name of safety and security and are more easily persuaded that the rights of others should be sacrificed as well for a greater good.

I, however, cannot reconcile being a Christian and approving of the use of torture. If you love and follow Jesus, then how can his torture and crucifixion be anything but a sign of the brutality of morally bankrupt powers and principalities. Jesus taught us to love one another, even our enemies. We believe that the body is a sacred temple. Torture is a violation of basic human rights and a desecration of God’s temple in us. It dehumanizes both the victim and the perpetrator. Christians should not even have the possibility of viewing anyone as less than human. God made all of us in God’s image. Jesus said, what you do to the least of these, you do to me. Therefore, as Christians, we must declare torture to be immoral and oppose its use of torture in all cases and places by all people. Obama’s executive order can be overturned. We must end the possibility of the use of

torture forever. But as Christians, we have more to offer than just our protest.

I have been given permission to share with you a little bit of the story of someone in our congregation who has known personally the realities of torture. Salvador, would you please stand up? We don't always know the life stories of the people around us. I feel especially privileged that you have trusted me with your story, Salvador. I struggled with whether or not it was even my place to share your story. But in the end you wanted your story to be known here and we are so grateful. Thank you Salvador, you may sit. Salvador is a survivor of torture. He was arrested in 1989 on suspicion of subversive activity because of an activist Uncle during the civil war in El Salvador. He was physically and psychologically tortured for three days as they tried to get him to sign papers to declare his guilt. At one point, they put a hood over his head and he began to suffocate. Sure he was going to die, he imagined saying goodbye to his friends and family. Eventually, after his spirit and his body were broken, he signed the papers which led to him being held in prison for one and a half years.

His experiences of torture and wrongful imprisonment shattered his faith in God. In spite of this, someone from his church came and visited him every Sunday. After a year and a half, his church raised enough money to pay for a lawyer and bought his freedom. Salvador survived his experience of torture and has found new life here in the United States. More than just surviving, he has begun to heal.

He says that part of that healing began with the members of his church visiting him in prison and buying his release. Part of that healing has been identifying with Jesus as a torture survivor. Part of that healing has been starting a new life and creating a family here in the US. Part of that healing

was coming here to a church that fully embraced him and his family. And part of that healing was discovering that this church was actively working to end the use of torture without even knowing his story. Today, his story is about healing, but he wonders about the other survivors of torture.

Often when we talk of our call to work for justice, we think of protests, and activism, and social change and simply working to stop the injustice. Today's scripture and Salvador's story reminds us that the work of justice must also include healing. In fact, Christian discipleship invites all of us to be instruments of healing in the world.

There are actually two healing moments in today's scripture story and each one teaches us something important. The first happens when the four people bring the paralytic to Jesus, refusing to be stopped by the large crowd blocking the door to Jesus' house. Instead they lower him down through the roof to Jesus. Jesus responded to THEIR faithful persistence by forgiving the sins of the paralytic. It was not the faith of the paralytic that mattered, but the faith of the small group bearing witness to his suffering, those standing in solidarity with him, those committing fully to compassionate action on his behalf. Forgiveness usually involves a reconciliation with the past. Forgiveness of sins in Jesus time meant not only restoring one's personal integrity but also restoring one's relationship with the community.

The second healing in the story happens when the scribes challenge Jesus' authority to forgive the paralytic's sins. Jesus responds to their challenge by going even further than forgiveness and heals the paralytic so he can walk. Jesus gives him the gift of freedom and the possibility of a life he didn't think possible. That is the miracle of healing.

By these two accounts, then we might conclude that healing begins with the truth and reconciliation of the past and then leads to the gifts of

freedom and new life. What would it mean for these same things to happen in the case of torture. What would it mean for the US to acknowledge the truth about its program of torture and bring wrong doers to justice? What would it mean to let survivors tell their stories or offer reconciliation to perpetrators? What would it mean for Christians to be seen as agents of healing instead of supporters of torture?

Jesus invites us all to be instruments of healing, to carry the suffering of people we care about to the feet of Jesus. What would it mean to think of yourself as a healer—in your family, with your friends, within our community, in the justice you are seeking. For a moment, imagine you are one of the four who brought the paralytic to Jesus. Who is on the mat you are carrying? To whose suffering are you a witness? Do you have an opportunity to demand truth and encourage reconciliation? Do you have an opportunity to help someone find freedom or new life? Even if you can't think of something right now, all of us will find ourselves suddenly and in surprising ways facing an opportunity to be healers in the weeks to come. Are you willing to respond to what is right in front of you? Are you willing to hold up your end even in the face of closed doors? Will you be ready to respond when the call to be a healer comes?

One of the most powerful images in our faith is water—the birth waters of all life, the cleansing waters of baptism, Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, the living water offered by Jesus to the woman at the well. The fact that water is also being used as a tool of torture with practices like waterboarding demands our response. It is time for truth and reconciliation to roll down like a mighty river and time for all of us to be living water for the healing of each other and the nations.

Amen.