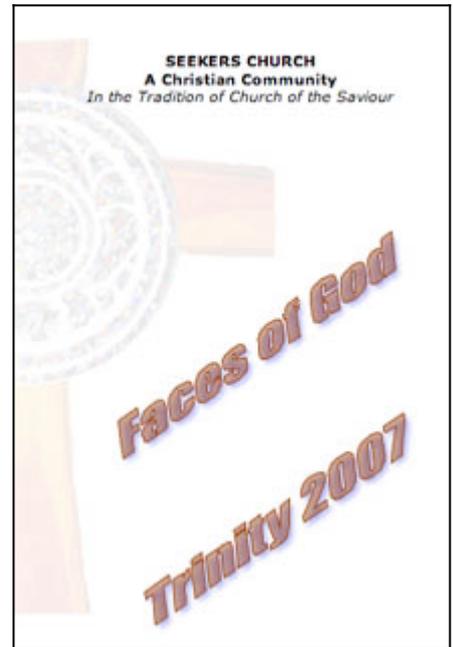


# Torture In Our Midst by Pat Conover

I found myself dragging my feet when it came to writing this sermon. I didn't have writer's block. I had a heart blockage, a constricted artery, too much cholesterol – sin, and enough denial so I didn't even want to go the doctor.



When I proposed to myself, and then to Celebration Circle, that I would preach a sermon about torture I thought to myself, "How hard can this be? I've already preached a sermon on seeing what you don't want to see. I know this spiritual path. I just need to take a few more steps." I didn't take those steps. I was happy to have many other priorities and concerns to hold my attention.

Then I made myself work with the lectionary scripture. I felt a small whiff of connection to Psalm 5 but not enough to find a bridge or connection to what is needed today. Feeling the pressure of an approaching deadline I decided to take a nap.

When I lay down on my bed I got to thinking about the cross in our sanctuary. The image had peeked at me several times as I was busily resisting getting down to sermon writing. So let's begin. Maybe it can be an entry point for you as well.

So just look at the cross for a minute.

What did you see? What did you think?

Did you think about how it is the perfect symbol for a do-it-yourself church as you remembered the story of the saved wood, the craft of a Seeker's alumni? Did you notice the sense of compatibility with the table and the lectern? Did you appreciate the look and scale as part of the overall design of our beautiful worship space?

Did you reflect on our empty cross in the Protestant tradition in contrast to the cross-with-body of the Roman Catholic tradition? Did you think about the empty cross as a sign of resurrection that draws us away from the existential confrontation with death?

Did you go in for the more abstract projections of the joining of the horizontal life in this world with the vertical connection to God?

[Get out hammer and large nail.]

Now suppose I was to hammer this nail into our cross to remind us that the cross is a symbol of torture. [Turn and take a step toward the cross. Pause. Put the hammer and nail on the altar.]

[As if it was an aside] Maybe we should have a congregational meeting and hammer out a policy about the propriety of defacing the cross...

[Get out small bottle.]

Maybe you would be okay with me pouring some body fluids on the cross to remind us of the pain and suffering that was, and occasionally still is, the purpose of the cross as an instrument of torture. It would be only a temporary defacing.

[Put the bottle on the altar.]

Those of you who join me after church to watch The Ghosts of

Abu Ghraib will see an image that is strikingly reminding of crucifixion. It is a kind of torture called the Vietnam that was invented by Brazilians and has been carried forward in the torturer's lore.

Abu Ghraib, that dismal prison where Saddam Hussein had his torturers do so many awful things, where the United States added to the horrid legacy of that awful place, seems far, far away. We don't know the locations of all the secret CIA jails where prisoners can be brutalized without any oversight, hidden away from the light of the Geneva Conventions and its attempts to civilize the treatment of prisoners. Hard to imagine. Easy to forget.

So let's stay with our beautiful sanctuary. Suppose we decided to crucify one of our worshipers right now. Who would you pick? Who would volunteer for the committee to pound the nails?

You don't want to crucify a Seeker? Well, who would you be willing to crucify? Who would you be willing for the United States to crucify in your name? Who do you want to crucify for your protection, for the protection of the people you love?

If you think these questions are overly dramatic, or beside the point, or just generally objectionable, I want to tell you that I was convicted by the stories of the wholesome young people who were arrested and convicted of torture at Abu Ghraib, who bore the weight of the coverup to protect those in charge. I think of what I was like at 17 when I was in the Army, at 18 when I was on stand by alert to go to Lebanon. I think of the brutality I saw with my own eyes against fellow recruits, the abuse I personally received. I think of a Sergeant who threatened my life. And I think of the young woman who was a guard at Abu Ghraib just a few weeks after completing basic training. The film will help you understand why good young people could become torturers.

If you are having a breakdown in your imagination when it comes to being a torturer, maybe it will be easier for you to imagine being tortured.

I had a lot night mares about being beaten and/or killed when I was a teen. I was in a lot of fights and I was deeply stigmatized as a "nigger lover" by some of the really rough youth of Tallahassee. I was frightened enough that I carried a sawed off shot gun in the trunk of my car. In my mid 20's, as a minister with two small children living in the Woodlawn ghetto in Chicago, I felt threatened enough by some neighbors that I kept a loaded .45 pistol slung over the head of our bed. There were enough incidents in and around Tallahassee, in our neighborhood in Chicago, that my fears were at least partly grounded in reality.

The South I grew up in was not that far removed from the time of lynching. Some of the Freedom Riders who came to Tallahassee left with serious and permanent disabilities. In Chicago, our Boy Scout leader was shot between the eyes by a Blackstone Ranger. Both in Tallahassee and in Chicago I was as afraid of the police as I was of the criminals. I learned there were good police and bad police, good Blackstone Rangers and bad, good Ku Klux Klan members and bad, good Sergeants and bad, good officers and bad. I was learning that there is bad in the best of us and good in the worst of us. I was learning that a lot of good people don't want to know about a lot of bad things. I was learning that a lot of injured people have a hard time thinking and feeling past the points of their injuries. And I was learning how easy it is, how distracting it is, to blame others for the bad things. I was learning you can't trust children's stories and Hollywood script writers. I was learning that my church dodged the hard questions.

I was angry enough as a teenager that I twice tried to kill people in moments of anger. One effort was pretty comical, but only in retrospect. And I learned the erotic thrill of hitting someone hard in the face and seeing them go down. And I almost

castrated myself and thought regularly of suicide. I guess I was sort of a typical president of my Presbyterian youth group.

But torture is about a lot more than mere violence. The film makes it clear it is also about humiliation. The stories of the crucifixion of Jesus are stories of humiliation. The lynchings were about humiliation. When the mother of the child my Daniel played with in Chicago was murdered she was stuffed in a trash can. When my Sergeant broke the leg of another recruit in our basic training company it followed a long period of verbal abuse that was supposed to humiliate the boy. My fighting in school was almost always accompanied by humiliation of one kind or another. Part of the torture in Abu Ghraib was humiliation. Both times that I tried to kill a boy I was responding to being humiliated. When I almost castrated myself I was responding to feeling humiliated for having feelings and desires before the word transgender was even invented. When I was thinking of suicide I was at a point of not being able to see a path out of the dismal place I was in. And when my company commander tried to break me after I unintentionally launched court martial proceedings, humiliation was a major part of his plan. Fortunately for me, I was so sleep-deprived from extra guard duty that I was unable to respond to provocations.

There are moments in life that seem crazy, that are crazy in the sense of being outside of the usual civilized scripts we write for social interaction. When people are trying to kill each other in racial confrontations in the South, in youth rebellions in the ghettos, and in the multi-faceted war in Iraq, the civilized scripts seem to become irrelevant, dangerous to safety, unsatisfying to immediate feelings. In the Abu Ghraib film, one soldier tells of asking for a clarification of the rules of engagement, a script supposed to lead to civilized military action. He then reports that he got no answer and that it seemed to him that the question was

outside of consideration. What is going on in Iraq is not neatly packaged. Identification friend or foe is a lot harder than any training manual can anticipate.

Think about it. The great majority of Blackstone Rangers grew up into everyday citizens. Several of the youth I fought with joined the Tallahassee Police Force. Most soldiers are decent human beings. Even those who bore the humiliation of conviction to protect the military intelligence officers and CIA at Abu Ghraib were decent people in overwhelming situations.

One way of thinking about sin is that it is a kind of derangement, a loss or confusion of moral grounding, often an emotional state that closes down awareness of the rational and constructive options. We can think of sin as being within individuals but we can also think of it as the scripts we create between people, and the breakdown of such scripts.

To the extent that sin is derangement, grace is rearrangement. For we who are Christians, including the many kinds of Christians we don't understand very well, the primary landmark for grace filled rearrangement is the cross.

How can a symbol of torture be the landmark for ending torture?

Jesus faced up to his coming death on the cross and modeled the truth that the only way through derangement, the only way through injustice, the only way through humiliation, is through.

**Luke 13: 31-33a,34**

(Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.)

*A number of Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Get out of here and be on your way. Herod wants to kill you. He replied, "Go and tell that fox, 'Listen, today and tomorrow, I shall be*

*driving out demons and working cures; on the third I will reach Jerusalem. I understand that Jerusalem kills prophets.*

*Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that murders the prophets and stones the messengers sent to her. How often have I longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*

**Luke 18: 34a**

(Jesus speaking, crucified on the cross)

*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.*

(These scripture passages are presented in a paraphrase by Pat Conover based on the Revised English Bible.)

I quote for you now, as best as I can remember it, a bit of a speech by Stephen, hippie guru for awhile of a commune in Tennessee. He said something like, "If you want to change the world, the first thing you have to do is buy it for perfect, just the way it is."

We Christians are living after the revolution. Jesus has shown us that terror and torture is not the last word. We can get on with the work of loving and caring no matter how awful the situation is, even if the only work we can do is to stand there and cry. Nothing else has to happen before we can love each other the best ways we can. Do you remember the story of Bonhoeffer caring for his guards before Hitler had him killed? Nothing is stopping us from learning the harder truths, from recognizing that parts of life are deranged. We can get on with the work of forgiveness and remember to start with people where they are. We can look in the darker places and practice seeing beyond our stereotypes.

We can be thankful that we are sitting here today and are distant from the times and places of torture. In our

thankfulness we can do some of the work needed to reduce the torture and the violence in the world. We can remember the story of Jesus going to the cross and refuse to be paralyzed by our fears. We can be hens for Jesus and gather his children under our wings. We can be thankful that there are things we can do as a free people to make our United States more caring and more responsible.

The path of Jesus was not safe. When we make safety our idol then we become hardened to the people who are crying out for our attention and caring. Don't misunderstand me, I regard fear as a friend. But it is when fear helps us see more clearly that we are helped. Because I fought so much in high school, because I survived the brutality of my Army experience, I was better prepared to move in some dangerous situations in the Woodlawn ghetto. Instead of just being afraid of the teenagers in my neighborhood I got to know them. Instead of being paralyzed by the fighting in our neighborhood we figured out how to stop it. Instead of being paralyzed by the Chicago mob that was running numbers in our neighborhood we figured out how to get rid of them. The one time the mob personally threatened me my fear helped me make a very quick exit. When we figured out that one precinct of police were being paid off by the mob we found a way to close the bars that were the sources of the payoffs.

I have gained a certain kind of sympathy and respect for the young soldiers at Abu Ghraib, and for the reserve general in command of Abu Ghraib. They needed to perform better than they performed. We needed to perform better in opposing the war in the first place, the war that put them in their dreadful circumstances. We need to do better now to hold President Bush and his administration responsible. We need to do much better with soldiers who are returning with emotional and spiritual scars. We need to do more to help the victims of torture in the United States and around the world. We need to do much more to make sure that the military and CIA stop all torture,

stay closer to the rules of engagement that are so crucial when we occupy another country. There are some things that need rearrangement. We don't need to debate about utopia but we do need to take the next steps to make things better.

I ask you to come stand with me at the foot of the cross. Let's have the conversations that help us not get too crazy. Let's join in prayers that push back the fear, that open space for caring, that lure us toward repentance and forgiveness, that strengthen us for seeing the things that are hard to look at and doing the things that are hard to do.

And I thank Jesus for giving you and me a meeting place, for loving me and you enough to accept his time on the cross.