

Sermon and Worship Suggestions for the Gospel Readings for Torture Awareness Month

June 10, Luke 7.1-10, "Out of Bounds Compassion"

June 17, Luke 7.36-8.3, "Subversive Mercy"

June 24, Luke 8. 26-39, "Demon on a Leash"

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The following brief reflections are meant to help preachers and worship leaders connect the lectionary gospel texts for the last three weeks of June and a faithful response to the constellation of issues surrounding torture. All three pericopes from Luke depict Jesus interacting powerfully, respectfully and compassionately with people who would be considered deviant by the social norms of his day. If we transpose these texts on to our time and place, we can ask ourselves, "How is God currently reaching out to those whom society labels wrong?"

The challenge in each story is to decide which point of view to take. Do we invite those in the congregation to see themselves as Jesus, the one Jesus touches, or the one Jesus challenges? Point of view is crucial as we reflect on the issue of torture. In what ways are we complicit? In what ways are we called to offer healing? In what ways are we to challenge the status quo and speak truth to power? The texts could build on each other and could be used as a short sermon series or preached singly. Each reflection is followed by a suggestion for continuing the theme into the rest of the worship service.

To keep these notes succinct, background on current events surrounding the issue of torture will not be given here, but may be found at www.no2torture.org. Find policies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#stoptorture.

June 10, Luke 7.1-10, "Out of Bounds Compassion"

This passage could be viewed as Jesus fraternizing with the enemy. The centurion was a high level military leader in the employ of the Roman Empire under the command of the Herodian dynasty, which managed the Roman occupation in Palestine. Jesus had every reason personally and politically to despise and fear everything the centurion represented. Herod the Great had tried to kill him as an infant (Mt. 2.1-16) and Herod Antipas has imprisoned, and will eventually behead, his cousin, John.

And yet, this particular Roman soldier does not fit the stereotype of the "enemy." This short passage paints a compassionate portrait of the centurion. This particular occupier has earned the respect of the occupied. He also demonstrates tender and desperate concern for his sick slave. Furthermore, he demonstrates respect for Jesus and Jewish culture, by approaching Jesus through a Jewish intermediary and by suggesting that Jesus does not need to enter his home, "only speak the word, and my servant will be healed." This Roman knows that merely entering the home of a Gentile would render Jesus ritually unclean.

This man's love for his slave and for the Jewish people, both of whom are his subordinates, is the backdrop for the centurion's speech to Jesus about the true nature of authority. He speaks of his authority over his slaves, yet here he is petitioning Jesus to save a slave who is dying. The centurion's actions speak much more loudly than the fact he has been labeled as enemy. Compassion dissolves the boundaries between friend and enemy.

If we look at the centurion through Jesus' eyes, we can see how God responds with compassion to those who demonstrate compassion. It is not too much of a stretch for us to imagine ourselves as U.S. citizens in the role of a foreign army trying to impose order in a land not our own. In this way, we might be moved to reconsider our behavior toward those who see us as enemies, as well as towards those whom we have labeled as "terrorist suspects," "insurgents," or "enemy combatants."

A sermon on this text could challenge worshipers to consider whether such labels make it easier to justify harsh treatment and indefinite detention of detainees at facilities such as Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Remind listeners that, while some of the detainees may be guilty of serious crimes even acts of terror, most have not yet been charged, let alone convicted, and many who are still being held have been exonerated.

How can we emulate the centurion's faithfulness and witness to God's grace? Perhaps by calling out to Jesus on behalf of those who are at our mercy, even as the centurion called out to Jesus on behalf of his slave, for certainly those held as prisoners in our detention centers are at our mercy. We can also challenge dehumanizing labels that attempt to justify sub-human treatment. In addition, we can witness to God's love and justice by calling out to those in power to uphold established standards of due process and humane treatment for all who are in our custody.

Prayer

God who is the source of all life, we pray for our sisters and brothers.

... for those affected by torture, whether physical or mental.

... for those who suffer brutal violence.

... for those who are mocked and humiliated and disempowered.

... for those who are shown no mercy.

... for those who are forced to exist in a state of perpetual terror, and who experience life-long trauma.

... for those whose precious humanity is taken away.

... for those who are not give the chance to live the gift of life, but instead fear for that life every moment.

Provide signs of your presence. Grant strength and courage and all that is needed for the living of these days. Guide the nations and peoples of the world to turn from policies and practices that violate one another. Move us to act in that cause. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Written by Katie J. Anderson, Young Adult Intern, Racial Ethnic Young Women Together and National Network of Presbyterian College Women, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

June 17, Luke 7.36-8.3, "Subversive Mercy"

Inviting congregations to consider the issue of torture can be overwhelming. It is not a "feel good" issue. Preachers should be aware that this topic might be particularly painful for any in the congregation who have been abused in any way. They should be prepared to offer pastoral care as needed. It is also important to anticipate that once hearts are moved, people will want to do something to help heal the horror. In addition to providing resources for addressing public policy concerns (see Presbyterian Legislative Action Center at www.capwiz.com/pcusa/home for example), individuals and churches can get involved with organizations that work to help heal the physical, emotional and spiritual wounds of torture. There are such organizations in every region of the country, such as the

Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis (www.cvt.org) and the Program for Victims of Torture in Los Angeles (www.ptvla.org).

When specific stories about torture are told, tears often follow. This gospel story about the sinful woman suggests a use for our tears: we might use them to care for others. In the other three gospels, this story clearly prefigures Jesus' death, with the sinful woman anointing Jesus' tortured body for burial. In Luke's gospel, the woman's tears serve a different purpose: to expose the extravagant subversive nature of God's mercy.

Simon the Pharisee represents the way the world sees the situation: this woman is a sinner and deserves punishment. By allowing her to minister to him, Jesus says that her sins matter less than her love, and her love is an indication of God's mercy. He reinforces this message with a mini-parable and by contrasting her generosity with Simon's stinginess. God's intention shown through Jesus is to forgive and reconcile, not to seek retribution.

There are several ways to connect this issue to the reality of torture. First, we need to remember that the tortured yet risen Jesus is at the center of the Christian faith. By anointing Jesus' body, this woman reminds us that those who are flesh and blood need physical care. When Jesus chastises Simon for his neglect, his words may sting us and encourage us to find ways to help heal those who have been tortured.

Second, when the woman bathes Jesus feet with her tears, she is putting her grief to good use. We, too, might use our sadness and outrage to motivate us to action. We are invited by this story to help heal our broken hearts by caring for those whose bodies have been broken by torture.

Third, we do not know what this woman's sin is. Perhaps Jesus does not know the details either, but he does not ask. In any case, he makes it clear that God's mercy is not about the woman, but God. Those who are currently being detained in U.S. custody are at our mercy. No matter what crimes they have been charged with or whether they are innocent or guilty, as people of faith we must insist that they are treated humanely. This includes access to a fair trial. Any time someone is tortured there are multiple victims, including the families and communities of the survivors. Soldiers who are explicitly or implicitly ordered to "take the gloves off" and torture others may also suffer spiritual, psychological, and legal repercussions. This is why the PC(USA) General Assembly has asked for an investigation of torture up the chain of command. If we intend to support our troops, we will never ask them to operate contrary to established law and conscience.

And finally, at the end of the story, Jesus moves on to other cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. On his way he is accompanied not only by the twelve disciples, but also by some other "subversive" women, including Mary Magdalene who had formerly been possessed by seven demons. These women minister to Jesus in a most practical way, by providing material resources—fundraising, we'd call it today. Sometimes Jesus performed miracles to get his bread, but most of the time he bought it. The work of healing the victims of torture and ending torture itself is expensive. Generous financial support is another faithful response.

Prayer

Leader: Jesus, our Tortured Brother,
In this world, so many are forced to walk your path today – the
suffering and pain, the humiliation, sense of betrayal and abandonment,

for those with power, the Romans of today, continue to condemn others to modern crosses.

People: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Leader: You said that what was done to the least of these was done to you, and so each day, you are tortured anew.

People: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Leader: Jesus, our Guardian of the Wounded and Tortured,
Bid us to look into the secret prisons – the unmarked graves – the hearts and minds of torture survivors,
Bid us to wipe the tears of the families of those who decapitated bodies were cast into the open sea,
Bid us to embrace the open wounds of the tortured.

People: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Leader: Jesus Guiding Spirit, Teach us to be in solidarity with those who hang from these crosses,
Call out to those who torture,
“Know the evil you have done and repent.”
Call out to the rest of us,
“What meaning does love have if you allow torture to continue unopposed?”

People: Lord, grant us courage; Lord, grant us love.

Leader: In the name of all the tortured of the world, give us the strength, give us the courage, give us the will to bring this horror to an end, in the name of love, justice and the God of us all. Amen.

(Source: adapted from a by Sr. Dianna Ortiz, OSU, Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition)

June 24, Luke 8.26-39, “Demons On a Leash”

Demons are not something that popular culture takes seriously. They are likely to be depicted as imps with wee horns and fangs. Exorcism is caricatured as shining a flashlight under a child's bed to prove there is nothing to fear, but maybe we should reconsider.

When we consider torture from a Christian perspective, we should realize that we have language to understand to describe this evil: torture is demonic. Demons are not cartoon devils. They are spiritual forces (Eph. 6.12) or powers (Rom. 8.38). Demons are forces that have the power to undo a person's humanity if unchecked. The man in the land of the Gerasenes was driven out of his mind by the demons that possessed him. Torture is designed to undo the sanity, even the humanity of the victim. But the victim is not the only one affected. Torture ignites hatred not only in the one tortured, but also in their families and communities. Torture can also traumatize those who inflict it. All of this contributes to undermining the morality and security of any nation that embraces torture as a legitimate practice.

The story of the Gerasene (Gadarene) man shows how Jesus deals with demons. He does not negotiate or compromise, rather he expels them. It also shows how the crowd reacts to this exorcism. Fred Craddock states it this way,

“If it is surprising that there was not unanimous joy at the arrival of a power greater than

evil, a moment's reflection will cause the surprise to subside. In the case of the Gadarene demoniac, the people knew the locus of the evil, knew where the man lived, and devoted considerable time and expense trying to guard and to control him (v. 29). A community thus learns to live with demonic forces, isolating and partially controlling them. If it is not 'spiritualizing' the story too much to say so, the partially successful balance of tolerance and management of the demonic among them also allowed the people to keep attention off their own lives. But now the power of God for good comes to their community and it disturbs a way of life they had come to accept. Even when it is for good, power that can neither be calculated nor managed is frightening. What will God do next in our community?"¹

There is much in this story that illuminates the relative lack of public reaction to revelations that detainees in U.S. custody have been tortured. Until recently, the laws and practice of the United States unequivocally condemned and forbade torture. Since the tragedy of 9/11, however, the U.S. stance has been less clear. Some in authority have stated that the United States is justified in using interrogation techniques that clearly go beyond the commonly recognized boundaries of humane treatment—in other words, torture. Torture has begun to seem normal. It is depicted in popular TV shows, such as *24*, as how the “good guys” do business.

It seems we believe that because we are good, uncommonly good, we can use torture without damage to ourselves, but that is not the case. Demons cannot be tamed and kept on a leash. Demons will attack everything with which they come in contact. They cannot be accommodated but must be cast out, lest they destroy the innocent upon whom they prey. The powerful good news is that this is exactly what Jesus does and what we must witness to, knowing full well that to do so will disrupt the uneasy truce we as a people have made with torture.

“A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” #260 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* could be sung as an affirmation of faith following the sermon.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), p. 117.