



A Note from the Pastor's Corner

The foundational claim upon which Christianity and Judaism makes sense is that all persons are created in God's image. Without that at the core of what we believe, all we would have left is a philosophy for living. A truly great philosophy, but nothing more. Because of that claim, we understand why Jesus wants us to love God with all our being. His requirement that we love our neighbors – and even love our enemy – goes beyond just being nice people. At the very least, it's a display of respect not only for God's creation, but also a display of respect for God Himself.

I really don't expect the rest of humanity to care about any of this. What I find disappointing is that the Church doesn't seem to care enough to make this claim absolutely central to its identity. Even more disappointing is that the Church in our own nation seems to just pay lip service to it! This is particularly annoying because that disregard (among other things) reveals that statements such as our's is a nation "under God" are pretty empty. It makes me wonder what kind of impression about Jesus this makes on others.

There are some things we can do about this blemish on the reputation of the Church. If you were at our Annual Meeting in January, you heard me announce that I have begun working with our neighbors in the Unitarian-Universalist Church on what we believe to be an appropriate, faith-based response to the fact that human beings – persons created in the image of God – have been tortured in our name. And I invited all who are interested, from our congregation and from other faith communities, to participate with us.

Even though torture is no longer in the news, and even though President Obama has said such practices will no longer be pursued by the United States, this can only be the case as long as he is President. We have no idea what any future President might decide to do.

Whether you see those who have been tortured as being neighbor or enemy, it does not matter. The requirement set for us by Jesus himself is the same – that we love them. And, if you recall, revenge is something we are told is in God's arena of action, not ours.

Of course, there are those who will say that we need to torture certain captives in order to get whatever intelligence information from them they may have. However, from all I have read in the newspaper and heard over the airwaves during interviews of people with expertise, torture simply does not yield the information its proponents claim that it will. Consider the case of the early church for a moment – before Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Many of you are aware that it was pretty dangerous to be a Christ-follower back in those days. Depending who was emperor, the persecution of Christians went from routine to horrendous. Followers of Jesus were sewn into animal skins and thrown to wild dogs; their clothing was soaked in wax and they were set on fire as party torches; they were beheaded; they were thrown into arenas with lions as a sporting event; they were boiled alive and burned at the stake; they were poisoned, starved to death, butchered alive, scourged, and drawn and quartered. Among other methods.

In many instances, they did have a way out. They were given the opportunity to renounce Jesus and embrace the emperor. Even in the midst of their torture, they had the chance to save their own skin. Perhaps some did. But countless hundreds of thousands did not. They chose instead to die a horrendous death rather than to say the words that would save their life.

So, does torture work? It surely didn't for the Romans. As Christians, we even celebrate that fact. By all accounts, instead of snuffing out those troublesome Christ-followers, torture resulted in Christianity spreading like wildfire. Shockingly, though, 55% of Christians in America are in support of allowing torture to be inflicted upon "our enemies" in their name.

My invitation is open to you all. On Saturday, March 20th, we will gather in our Fellowship Hall to pursue this matter. I am under no illusion that our little group will impact our government – at least not any time soon. However, we can impact our local community. And our community could influence Central New York.

But whether or not our local community responds is not the issue – at least not for me. Being a follower of Jesus is a commitment that means much more than being in church on Sunday morning. We are charged with being salt and light to the world. It is not our calling to remain seated when standing with Jesus is unpopular. When he asked us follow him, he did not mean to do so only when it was easy, or non-controversial, or only when it fits with the prevailing attitudes of society. He made it pretty clear that standing with him would not be easy. Besides, Jesus never ducked the difficult issues or tested the winds of popular opinion to see what position he should stake out.

I hope to see you on the 20th.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud