

## You Must Be Perfect

Matthew 5: 43-48

Question: What do you think is the Christian response to the use of torture by our government? Is torture ever acceptable?

What do you think of this sermon title – *You Must Be Perfect*? It's pretty daunting, isn't it? These words, "be perfect as God is perfect, are actually from today's scripture lesson. What does that mean to you when the Bible says "be perfect"?

This passage from Matthew's gospel is from Jesus' familiar *Sermon on the Mount*. Matthew's gospel has been called the most Jewish of the biblical Gospels because it is organized around five major teachings of Jesus, analogous to the five books of the Torah. The Sermon on the Mountain contains foundational teachings about life and values. It contains simple and challenging interpretations of the Jewish Law.

Many religious leaders in Jesus' time interpreted the Law to say "love your neighbor and hate your enemy" with a very narrow definition of "neighbor". Jesus taught a more radical and inclusive ethic: "Love your enemies, too." Let us each take a moment and ponder this: Who is your enemy? What will it mean to love them?

It seems inevitable that we will have enemies, but we must treat them with love. That doesn't mean to give in to your enemies, to coddle or acquiesce. To love doesn't mean to be naïve or pretend your enemies have your best interest at heart. Love is not always warm and fuzzy, but it is always humane. It always has at heart the best interest of the one who is loved.

This is the connection to today's question: "What do you think is the Christian response to the use of torture by our government? Is torture ever acceptable? The Gospel teaches, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Your behavior reveals your nature, that you are children of your Father in heaven.

The United States is engaged in a War on Terror, a war against Islamic extremism. I imagine if you were to ask Islamic extremists, they would probably say that they're engaged in a war against Western imperial expansionism, secularism, and economic and political exploitation. It all depends on your perspective. A generation ago, we fought a war against expanding Communism in Vietnam. Before that, it was in Korea – and we're still there. Before that, it was the threat of expanding fascism primarily from Nazi Germany.

These wars all produced stories of atrocities: torture, murder, rape, and a great deal of fear. Each time, as our nation adopted the tactics and attitudes of hatred to match our enemy, we have become more like them, more like the ones we hated. The moral high ground is now hard to find and quickly becomes a slippery slope that causes us to look around and wonder, as a society, who we are and what we've become.

The issue of torture easily becomes a foil for partisan politics -- Republicans blaming Democrats and liberals blaming conservatives with just a few exceptions. We cannot afford to play the blame game if we are serious about solving problems as a nation. We can't afford it if we are seriously wanting to reconsider how we act as a society, what behaviors we aspire to encourage, and what we won't tolerate from our government.

If we continue playing politics with such issues, we are doomed to a self-manufactured oblivion. If we insist on condemning *scapegoats* of our own creation, the most chilling consequence will be our failure to address the larger issue of which a policy condoning torture is but a symptom. We will miss the transformational potential of this question and this moment.

The issue of torture is a symptom of a larger issue. Calling it a symptom is not to minimize it. Our policy regarding the practice of torture, and our personal attitudes about this, are extremely important and must be addressed. One good way is to organize. You might consider joining Spotlight on Torture, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (860/216-7972, [spotlight@nrcat.org](mailto:spotlight@nrcat.org), [www.nrcat.org/spotlight.aspx](http://www.nrcat.org/spotlight.aspx))

The use of torture is inherently inconsistent with Jesus' message. It is inconsistent with today's message from Matthew's gospel. It is inconsistent with my vision of this world within the Spirit. It won't lead to the kind of world Jesus described as the Kingdom of God, the world of *Shalom*.

If so many of us feel that way, why is it happening? Why are we permitting our government's use of torture? Why are Christian people condoning the use of torture? It is a response to fear. The use of torture is rooted in fear whether we practice it or some terrorist organization practices it. We are afraid of each other -- afraid for our own security. We both fear for the future of our children and grandchildren. We fear each other and dehumanizing violence is the symptom of that fear.

I declare clearly and unequivocally that torture and its companion war are absolutely inconsistent with the message of Jesus and the mission of the Christian Church. Their use is a clear sign that we have failed as a society and as a church in our quest to bring justice and freedom to other people. It is a warning that we are in danger of losing them for ourselves.

Today, in this place and time, the Spirit challenges us to choose meaning of our own lives. How will we respond to the fear that seems to be an inevitable part of our lives? How do we perceive God to be present in our world? Will fear or faith shape our choices?

Will fear lead me to live with an attitude of scarcity grabbing to keep what's mine and get more -- all I can? Or will faith lead me to embrace the awesome opportunity of being a partner with God and to live with an attitude of abundance? In the musical *The Sound of Music*, the Mother Abbess challenges Maria to decide how she will spend her love -- how she will serve God in the best way for her life. That same challenge faces each of us -- how will we spend our love, our gifts, our moments, days, and the years of our lives?

Today, the specific focus of this challenge is how we will respond to what we see going on with our country's current practice of condoning torture in places such as Guantanamo, Colombia, and the School of the Americas. How we respond is not a matter of our feelings about terrorists or their hatred toward us. It is a matter of our own integrity, of what it means to be who we say we are: "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty, and justice for all."

Our own Crossroads Theatre Company is currently presenting *The Sound of Music*. The character I play, Capt. Von Trapp, is a retired naval officer for a mountainous and landlocked country. He is an aristocrat representing the vestiges of wealth, privilege, and prestige of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. He is a widower whose denied grief leads him to cut himself off emotionally from his children. There is much to suspect in this man as a candidate to be a hero in this story, yet he stands virtually alone among his peers opposing the invading armies of Hitler's Germany. What he brings to the hero's role is a clarity regarding what he values -- home, family, and music that are stronger than his fear.

That is what Jesus challenges us to be and to do with these words from Matthew's Gospel. Let your values and faith overcome your fears. Let your love overcome your hatred. How will we respond to that challenge? How will we respond to Jesus' words and example?

We are in need of imaginative responses to the challenges of torture, racism, religious intolerance, and consuming materialism because we tend to see only what we look for. We tend to look for what we've always seen in the past. Today we stand at a place and time of new

beginning and new possibility. You stand with a congregation of people who are taking seriously and creatively Jesus' challenge to "love your enemies." Hear today's scripture passage from *The Message* translation. Read it carefully because it's really good!

You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. "In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you. (Matthew 5: 43-48, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, NAVPRESS)

If your idea of being perfect is the Greek ideal of no flaws and no mistakes, then I wish you good luck, but if it is the Hebrew concept of wholeness and connectedness in relationship -- a matter of "coming to terms with wounds and disabilities..., the integration of all we are..., and being generous with what we are," (from *Invitations* by Francis Dewar, p. 67) then Crossroads Church may well be a very good place for you.

I invite you to walk with us and deepen your commitment to our journey together. Let us walk side by side on a journey of growing up, of living generously in relationship with each other. That's what we mean by living with a sense of abundance.

"[This] is [perfection], the wholeness of giving the gift of all your self, not waiting till that self is fine and moral and healthy and balanced enough to expose. If there *is* healing or growth toward integration, perhaps it can only come *in* the giving" (Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*)

Teach us, Christ Jesus, so to live and so to love. Amen.