

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
21 March 2008**

Good Friday: Ps 22:1-11(12-21); Isa 52:13—53:12; Jn 18:1—19:37

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In the name of our God, who is in us, and for us, and with us always, Amen.

One of the more peculiar scholarly articles I read in seminary had pictures. A British biblical scholar who writes very quirky stuff, thought it important to have a cross-section diagram of the anatomy of the wrist, showing exactly what muscles, tendons, and bone the nail of crucifixion would pass through. I don't remember whether it was in that article or another one, but somewhere along the way I also learned that when you're crucified, the cause of death is not blood loss, or starvation, or the unrelenting pain, but rather suffocation. Hanging on the cross, your body's weight in that unnatural position ever so slowly puts more and more pressure on your lungs so that eventually—it will take hours—you are unable to breathe.

Please forgive me for being so graphic, and even pornographic, but one of the things I wonder about most concerning our faith is how we can build it around the reality of the most obscene torture. What does it say about us that we can even contemplate such brutality, that we come back to it year after year in Holy Week, and Sunday after Sunday in the short form? It's not only that we ask ourselves to imagine the worst kind of suffering, but that we imagine that suffering as having been caused by human motivation, human intention, and human actions.

You would think that one thing our Christian story would teach us is not to repeat that scene. You would think that contemplating the worst physical agony that human beings can inflict on one another would teach us that that kind of behavior is exactly the opposite of God's intention for us, exactly the opposite of what it means to live as children of God, made in the image of God. You would think that, and apparently you would be wrong.

In the current issue of the New Yorker, there's a long article on the young woman soldier on military police duty at Abu Ghraib who took many of the pictures that repulsed us and the rest of the world. She's apparently a cheerful, likable, upbeat woman. The article attempts to help us understand how she made sense of the situation she was in. I don't know how the article could have succeeded, because I don't know how there is sense to be made of such bizarre brutality by people we would normally greet as friends and fellow citizens, the cheerful, likable, upbeat daughters and sons of our next-door neighbors.

The [Military Police] knew very little about their Iraqi prisoners or the culture they came from, [says the article] but at Fort Lee, before being deployed, they were given a session of 'cultural awareness' training from which they'd taken away the understanding—constantly reinforced by [military intelligence] handlers—that Arab men were sexual prudes, with a particular hangup about being seen naked in public, especially by women. What better way to break an Arab, then, than to strip him, tie him up, and have a woman laugh at him?

The article devotes a good deal of its attention to the image that we will all remember forever, the hooded and otherwise naked man, standing on a carton, arms outstretched with wires dangling from them. The article explains how the man was in

fact not physically brutalized in the way we assume, and once it was discovered that he was not the person the U.S. forces had suspected him of being, he became one of the favored prisoners with special privileges. And yet that picture, the article tells us, has become the symbol of Abu Ghraib, of all the inhumanity into which our misbegotten venture into that manufactured war has led our people.

All the while I was reading, I could not help thinking of its relation to our central image of torture, the image that forms part of the center of our faith. And as I reached the end of the article, the writers made the comparison explicit:

Of course [they say], the dominant symbol of Western civilization is the figure of a nearly naked man, tortured to death—or, more simply, the torture implement itself, the cross. But our pictures of the savage death of Jesus are the product of religious imagination and idealization. In reality, he must have been ghastly to behold. Had there been cameras at Calvary, would twenty centuries of believers have been moved to hang photographs of the scene on their altarpieces and in their homes?

So let us contemplate with honesty the torture at the center of our faith story. Let us not forget that the crucifixion did not just happen. Our passion story makes it clear that specific people made it happen for specific reasons that they thought were legitimate and justified. So too, it is apparent from the article that even though no one above the rank of staff sergeant has been convicted of any wrongdoing at Abu Ghraib, even though these common soldiers bore the brunt of the investigation, trials, and punishment, they were not operating as rogues, as independently depraved individuals. They were acting as they understood they were ordered to act. We know that our administration still refuses to renounce the practice of torture in the treatment of prisoners, and we know there are enough connected dots to understand that brutalizing of prisoners has been consistent with policy set at the highest levels.

All of this has supposedly done to protect us; it has been done in our name, in the name of a people that poll after poll identifies as people who claim to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. What is wrong with this picture? How much longer are we going to try to tell ourselves and the world that we are a Christian people, interested in human dignity, justice and freedom? How many more times are we going to say to ourselves and the world, as the general said in Vietnam, “We had to destroy the village in order to save it?” How much cognitive dissonance are we going to allow ourselves?

Our God did not offer his only Son to be killed in such a brutal humiliating way so that we could give ourselves permission to go on killing in even more brutal ways, so that we could wantonly erase the dignity of anyone we choose. Our God offered his only Son to be killed in such a brutal humiliating way to show us that human dignity is not something that can be trampled to death; to show us that we each must persist in laying claim to the dignity of our divine brother, and that we must claim that dignity also for every other human being with whom we share the planet.

We ask ourselves to contemplate our gruesome founding story of betrayal, torture, and death—I believe—so that we can contemplate truly and without sentimentality the worst we are capable of, the absolute worst realities that we sinful human beings can conjure up and make real. Because it is over against the depth and magnitude of that evil that God arms us with the will and the Spirit to overcome it. To uncover the best in ourselves, we must first acknowledge honestly the worst in ourselves. To do anything

else is simply to look away, to play around with smoke and mirrors and delude ourselves that we are actually ok, and not so much in need of God's redemptive grace after all.

But to get to that grace, we must first contemplate the deep abyss of evil—the evil done to our Lord that we read in Scripture, and the evil persisting to this day that we read about in newspapers and magazines. If our faith means anything at all, it must mean that God has shown us a way out of the abyss, that God's grace, God's love, God's compassion are powerful enough to turn us away from our age-old habits of wickedness.

And so pray for the strength that Christ died to show us. Pray for the power of our moral imagination. Pray for the grace to rouse ourselves to the work of justice. Pray for the strength to resist evil—to name it, confess it, and fight it. Pray for the will to envision the kingdom and bring it into being. Pray,

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.