

On the Other Side of War by The Rev. Carol Wickersham

**Presented at the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq:
Washington, DC on March 16, 2007**

Let's do a little time travel tonight. Let's imagine for a moment that we are on the other side of the war in Iraq. The fighting has stopped, the soldiers have gone home. It will happen, and tonight we are here to make that "sooner rather than later."

But there will still not be peace. There will not be peace because of what we are doing right now in our detention centers, both known and secret, in Cuba, Iraq and Afghanistan. Detention without charge, rendition without rights, tribunals without justice. Interrogations that are cruel, unusual, degrading and dehumanizing. Torture.

Now, let's be honest: torture is not new. What is new is that we are in the process of normalizing torture. Instead of due process, we are making torture the way we do business. Before the passage of the Military Commissions Act last fall, many of us believed that exposing torture would bring justice. But now, torture is the law of the land, making a mockery of all we hold dear as Americans and Christians. The Military Commissions Act gives power and force to our terrified and paranoid conviction that this whole world that God loves is a ticking bomb. It made credible the delusion that life and death depend on our willingness to torture those who are currently at our mercy. In this Act, we have forgotten that in life and death we belong to God alone who is our only source of security. In this Act, we have forgotten that the One who was tortured, not the torturer, is our only strength. It is Jesus Christ, not Jack Bauer, who will save us.

Torture cannot save us from the ticking bomb, because torture *is* the ticking time bomb, and it has a disastrously short fuse. Look into the eyes of a child whose father has been tortured and you will see how hatred is ignited. Look into the eyes of our own soldiers who have been ordered, with a wink and a nod, to take the gloves off and to torture another human being, and you will see how quickly we can bring about our own destruction. Every time torture is committed, there are two victims, the tortured and the torturer, both perversely damaged to the core of their being. And when humans are damaged so fundamentally, it tears at the fabric of all of the communities they touch – families, churches, countries.

Right now, our soldiers are given conflicting and confusing orders, told to both follow and ignore the “quaint” restraints of international law. If we truly want to support the troops, we will never put them in a position to act against these laws or their consciences. We will investigate torture up the chain of command, and hold accountable those who set the stage and give the orders.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, that means us, as well, for we are complicit. We are here tonight as a Christian group, in part because these atrocities have been perpetrated by those in power who claim to act in the name of Jesus. We are here to say “no, they don’t.” We are here in this season of Lent to repent for actions taken in our name. If we are to say No! to torture successfully, we must confess our intentional ignorance, our willful denial and our desire to scapegoat. We must confess what we have done, and not done, that has allowed this horror to breed in dank, hidden corners.

Let's not fool ourselves. As Christians we know what this is about. We have language, powerful language. We can call torture by its rightful name. Torture is demonic. And the terrible temptation to which we have succumbed is to believe, because we are good, exceptionally good, we can keep this demon on a leash. As a nation, the United States has routinely condemned others for practices that we now – in law and the light of day – embrace. We claim that we alone are moral and can decide when these evil means justify the ends. In other words, we claim the right to stand above law and apart from humanity. People of faith have a word for this too; it is idolatry, claiming for Caesar powers that belong to God alone. Brothers and sisters in Christ, demons cannot be domesticated like a lap dog. They will destroy those who pretend to be their master. Demons cannot be accommodated; they must be cast out, in order to save the innocent upon whom they prey.

We who follow Jesus Christ know there are other rules of engagement. We are called to love even our enemies, for everyone, without exception is made in the image of God. Does this mean we won't have enemies? No. Does this mean we have to be naïve or weak, or that we must sacrifice the innocent and jeopardize security? No. It means we have be brutally honest about what the real threats are, so that we can once again embrace what is best in our nation and our faith. If we do not say No! to torture, torture will destroy us.

Therefore, we say No! to torture, so that we may say Yes! to God's mercy.

We say No! to torture, so that we may say Yes! to God's hope.

We say No! to torture, so we may say Yes! to God's power.

We say No! to torture, so that we may say Yes! to God, and to God alone.