

Sermon from 03/18/2007

Everlasting Longings

Texts: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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A couple of weeks ago NPR radio features a story about the increase of torture scenes in shows like "24" or "Law and Order: SVU (Sexual Victims Unit)."

The radio panel debated how *many* viewers are absolutely abhorred to see torture enacted on their TV screens.

And then they discussed how some people actually may enjoy seeing women or terrorists tortured.

That some still believe in the myth that women deserve to be treated violently (when they don't behave) and that people of darker, olive-coloured complexion are a race of dangerously scheming, plotting people...and deserve vilification and torture.

Like Christians treated Jewish people in Europe during the Medieval Period...

Like the Nazis treated the Jews during WW2...

Like the Soviets treated Eastern Europeans (like my father) in the aftermath of that war...

...And like we treated the Japanese.

[Following the conclusion of this sermon, a parishioner indicated that the Japanese had likewise tortured American soldiers. This point is not in dispute].

Sometimes we forget that an Arab living in Bethlehem can be an Arab Christian.

Sometimes we forget that an Iraqi can be a Jew.

And sometimes we forget that a Jew can be a Messianic Jew who believes that Jesus is the Messiah.

And sometimes we forget that when the Towers tumbled on 9/11, Christians, Arabs, Orientals (and many other nations), men, women and children all died, side by side, in one imploding heap of concrete, metal and steel.

And we forget that grief doesn't have a skin colour.

It doesn't have a race.

It doesn't have a religion or a sex.

Grief is just grief!

If you were to contemplate what could be the worst imaginable form of torture, you might be inclined to say...

“The Chinese Water Torture” where you are forced to lie down, face up, while a whole barrel of water is dripped onto your forehead—one drip at a time!

[Internet readers may be interested to know that there is no direct evidence linking this torture with the Chinese]

You might be tempted to say...

“Surely it is when insurgents, under the orders of the notorious Khalid Shaikh Mohammed or KSM (as he is known in anti-terror circles) captured the American Jew and journalist, Daniel Pearl, of *The Wall Street Journal*...and who emotionally tortured his wife who was expecting their first child, with his impending death...and then beheaded him 1 minute and 55 seconds into a videotape...and then tossed his headless body into a ditch in Karachi, Pakistan.”

Hmm. Yes, maybe that’s the worst imaginable form of torture.

But if this is not enough, then perhaps it is the degrading and embarrassing scenes of torture and intimidation perpetrated by U.S. soldiers upon Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib Prison.

Yes, that might do it.

And then some of you might say, “Daniel, ‘Forget it. That’s in the past.’”

But my Dad, who’s almost 80, still remembers his torture, nearly 60 years ago, at the hands of Marshall Tito’s partisans.

Hmm? I wonder how long it will take those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib to forgive and to forget?

Or perhaps you might say to me, “Pastor, the worst form of torture (leading to death) must be the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus by those animals called, the soldiers of Rome.

(By the way, they were just doing their duty, too!)

We’ve all seen Mel Gibson’s 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*...and I must admit that when I previewed this film, along with other British Pastors, you could openly hear people weeping aloud in the theatre.

I was so moved by this movie that I took a church group of normally reserved Brits to see it...and all my teens walked out stunned, shocked and in tears!

But even as I sat there flinching at this accurate portrayal of Jesus' torture and then death, there is still a torture that exists that is even worse than Jesus' crucifixion...and worse than all these named tortures put together.

It is the torture of being lost!

Oh, there is no fate worse!

There is no pain crueller!

There is no agony of the human body, mind or soul that even comes close!

As a part of our puppy's obedience training, we learned from our trainer, Nicole, that there is no fate worse in a dog's life than being put out of the pack!

I think she called it "social exclusion."

And if you think we're better, smarter and more sophisticated than dogs...guess what?

Humans do it, too!

We put people out of our packs all the time.

Kids are kicked out; elderly parents are isolated and contained in "Retirement Communities."

We just do it better, smarter and are more sophisticated than our four-legged friends, right!?

In fact, whole nations can be "socially excluded."

That's why the Jews were unable to sing because during the Babylonian Captivity, they were "socially excluded" from Judah to a foreign land (see Jeremiah 52:28-30, the Book of Lamentations and Ps. 137:4).

When I was taking my CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) at the University of Rochester, our CPE Advisor said, "*You can always tell how much healing a congregation needs by the way they sing.*" (not a choir, but a congregation).

There is nothing worse than the torment and torture of "social exclusion."

My maternal grandmother—my Oma—suffered this grief as she was forcibly "socially excluded" for 10 years from her sole surviving son (my father) by the Communists.

He escaped to Britain and she was held in Yugoslavia.

There is nothing worse than a Berlin Wall or, as Churchill said, an "Iron Curtain."

Where people are forced—against their will—put on one side or kept on the other.

Make no mistake: walls do not make good neighbours be they in Gaza...or along the Mexican border.

They separate, they isolate, they breakdown.

It is within human nature to build walls and to torture others by social exclusion.

But it is within the heart of God to strategically fight...with great determination and unbridled enthusiasm—with every weapon in His heavenly arsenal—the building of walls!

That's why 2 Corinthians 10:4 says, *"For though we live in the world, we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly, but have divine power to destroy strongholds."*

How many of you think that creating church growth here at Zion all comes down to the genius of your newly called pastor? [Please don't show me your hands].

Well, if you think that, you've got the wrong view of me altogether.

Here's the right view of me.

I'm in a spiritual battle for this church.

My soul sighs and intercedes for this church in prayer everyday!

Churches decline not because they lack wit and charm, but because there are spiritual forces arrayed against the church to get it to go out of business like Salem UCC up the road...and St. Pete's R.C. did.

See, friends, Satan doesn't bother with the sleepy churches. Amen?

Satan only bothers with the church's that are willing to put up a fight against "spiritual wickedness" says Eph. 6:12.

Friends, I'm not here to tinker and to tweak—although you're all keeping me busy enough doing that.

I'm here to kick the Devil out! Now can I get an Amen?

"Oh, Pastor, now you're sounding loopy."

Am I?

We're in Lent. Didn't Jesus do battle with the Devil in the wilderness?

All His disciples did battle with the Devil.

Every Celtic Saint, including Patrick, did battle with the Devil.

And it isn't any different for you and I.

If you ain't fightin' the Devil, in Jesus' name, then you're under his spell.

Ain't nothing worse than a mamby-pamby, benign believer!

Friends, our churches are stocked to the rafters with benign believers.

The phrase "middle-of-the-road" Christian ought to grate in our ears!

No, we need a few more viral Christians—Christians that are willing to infect others with the love of God!

You wanna know what my "leadership style" is all about?

It's this: (staying on my knees).

If I ain't on my knees, I ain't doing you no good.

Too many Pastors wannabe telling everybody what to do and rare is it a congregation will listen anyway! Amen.

No, staying on your knees is tried, true and proven.

Staying on your knees represents your everlasting longing.

And don't think, for one second, not for one—that the Father of this Lost Son, in Jesus' parable, ever got up off his knees.

You see, what's worse than "exclusion" is "self-exclusion" where you put yourself in isolation!

Oh, I've known literally dozens and dozens of people to do this during my ministerial career:

"Ain't gonna take this anymore...it's better out there—without you—than it is in here with you!"

O, is it really?

So, "go ahead put yourself in isolation...see what I care...don't care if you're lost!"

Oh, that's what others might say to you, you know.

But quietly—oh, so quietly—there is a Father—a BIG DADDY—who is kneeling by His bed all day and all night begging God for your return!

"What's the matter with Dad?"

"O, he won't come out of his bedroom."

"Why not?"

“He’s praying.”

“Praying for what?”

“That his son will come home.”

“Doesn’t he know that the farm’s going to rack and ruin? Doesn’t he know the elder son’s picking up all the slack?”

“Yeah. I know, but nobody can convince him to pull himself together...to get himself back to normal.”

“His whole life seems wrapped up in the fact that his son is gone!”

There is no worse torture than this!

When I was separated from Janet and Brittany, I cried a flood of tears.

I’d look at their pictures that I had put up all around our empty house and I’d talk to them—out loud—as if they could hear me—as if they could talk back.

I was in grief!

And that’s what God is *in* without you in His arms!

I was a needle stuck in the same groove of an old LP—going around and around and around!

I had a bad case of everlasting longings.

And so does God.

When you’re off His property...when you’re outta His household...when you’re out there “doing your thing”...spreading your wings...and “finding” yourself...God’s at His bedside crying and waiting for you and I to come home.

Luke 15:20-24 (The Message)

17-20"That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father.

20-21"When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

22-24"But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

Bonus for Internet Readers

Preaching on the feelings attached to human exclusion whether perpetrated upon a person by others or inflicted upon one by themselves, is particularly poignant in the life of St. Patrick for Patrick himself was the victim of several years of slavery and had an arduous escape in which God led him to freedom. Throughout his entire ministry, Patrick was a vocal opponent of slavery within the British Isles. Patrick would have known, first hand, what it would have been like to have been excluded from society and deprived of a whole sense of personhood. It is one of the reasons why Celtic Christian theology is so embracing and welcoming of others. It is interesting to note that Patrick was not born in Ireland, but England—and only made Ireland his home upon God's command to reach the people there.

*May the strength of God pilot us;
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the word of God direct us.
Be always ours this day and for evermore.
-- St. Patrick*